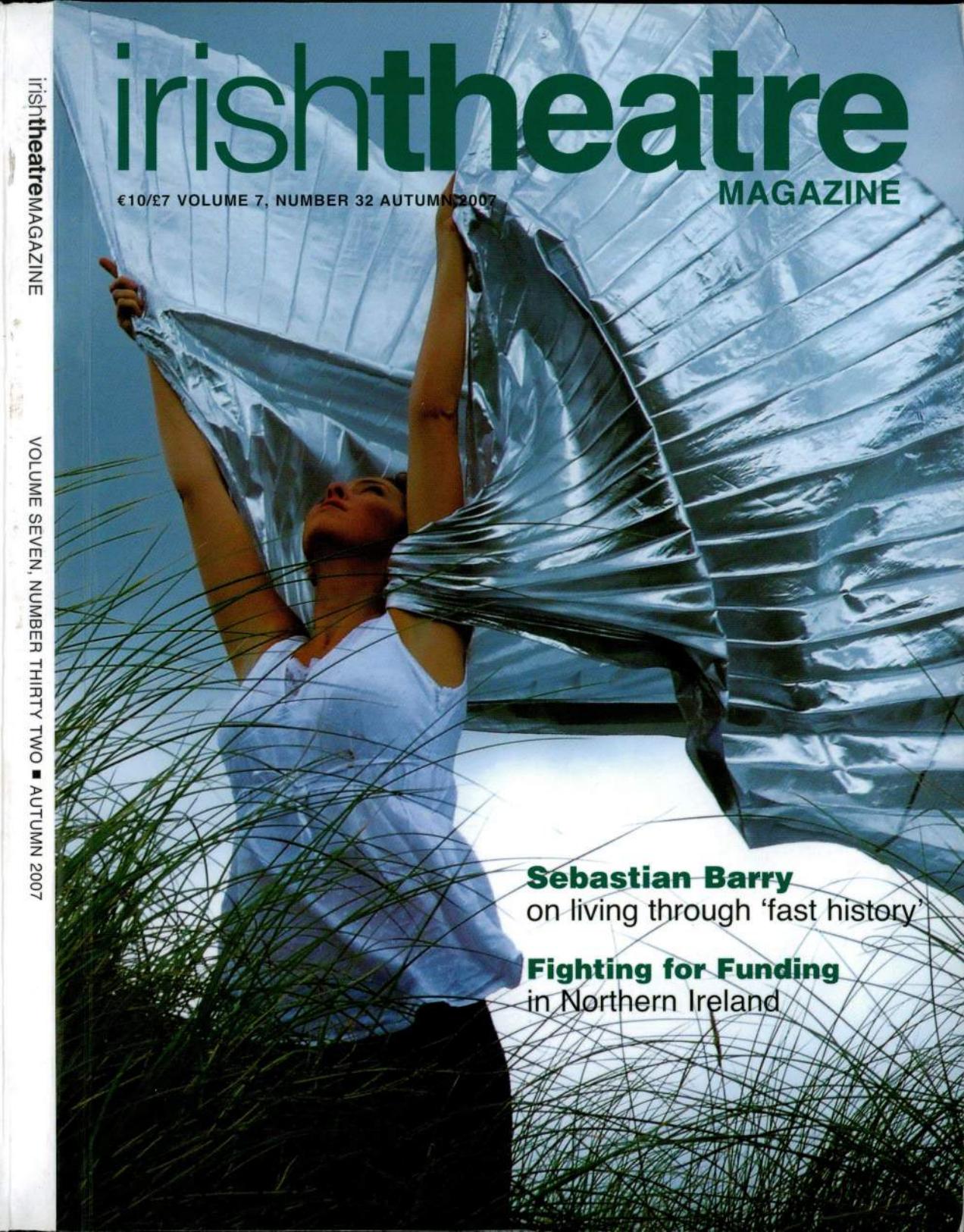


irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

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Sebastian Barry
on living through 'fast history'

Fighting for Funding
in Northern Ireland

IRISH THEATRE HANDBOOK

4th edition



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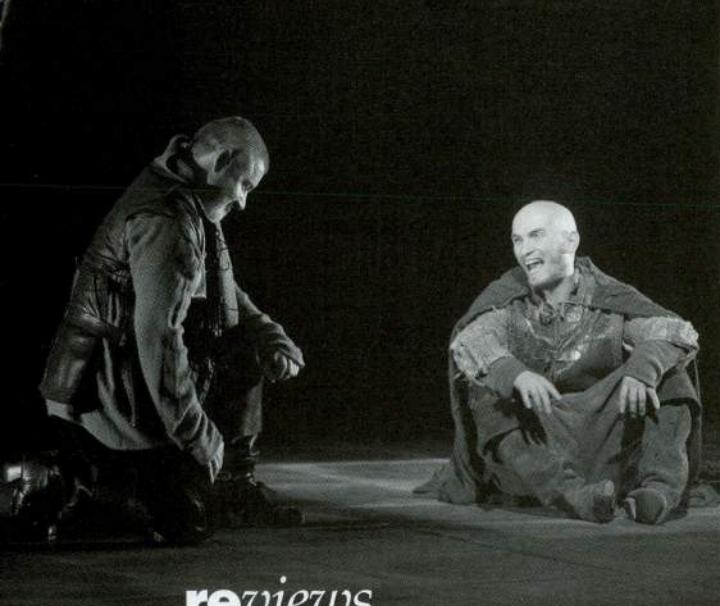
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Refining the Fringe

WHERE IS THE NEW WRITING? One answer to that frequently posed question is offered at the moment by the Dublin Fringe Festival, which features twenty-six new Irish plays or devised works. For the eighty Irish companies (theatre, dance, music, performance) participating in this year's Festival, it's a huge opportunity to gain experience and to be noticed. In a move away from the Darwinian sink-or-swim ethos of most Fringe festivals, this year the companies (selected from 282 applicants) were given workshops and guidance by the Festival team in everything from production to publicity. It will be interesting to see whether this support has a discernible impact on the quality of work on offer.

For overnight reviews of every theatre production on the Fringe, see www.irishthemagazine.ie. We'll al-

In a move away from the sink-or-swim ethos of most Fringe festivals, this year companies were given workshops.

so carry online reviews of a selection of shows from next month's Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, and on October 11th we'll be hosting the eighth annual International Critics' Forum. This panel discussion of Festival productions will be chaired by Dr Patrick Lonergan of NUI Galway (and our former Reviews Editor) and it kicks off at 4 p.m. in Project Cube. Admission is free and audience response is welcome.

Thanks to everyone who gave us feedback on Sara Keating's article in the last issue about student drama: it's clearly alive and well. We apologise to the Drama Studies Department at the University of Ulster for inadvertently omitting its courses from the list of Drama Studies degree programmes available in Ireland.

Comments on anything in this issue may be sent to admin@irishthemagazine.ie.

A Year on the Inside

ALTHOUGH JIMMY FAY, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF BEDROCK Theatre Company, may have seemed like a permanent fixture in the Abbey Theatre for the past two years, that is not literally the case. By the end of the year he will have directed three productions – Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle's adaptation of *The Playboy of The Western World* and Edward Bond's *Saved*,

as well as *The School For Scandal*, which ran on from the end of last year. But from November, when Fay steps into the position of Acting Literary Director at the theatre (to cover Aideen Howard's maternity leave) he will become at least a temporary fixture. The question is, where does this leave Bedrock?

"I was looking for – not exactly a

way out of directing - but a way of not directing quite so much. I like working with scripts and I like working with writers, so this just seemed ideal." He is quick to add: "I'm not going to do it if it jeopardises Bedrock in any way. Hopefully it doesn't really look like it's going to, because I was going to take a sabbatical anyway. I've done fourteen years





ROBERTO ZUCCO (BEDROCK).

of this gig and things are changing, which is good".

Given that Fay's career as a freelance director seems to have gone into overdrive, it is not surprising he should look for some respite. Beyond his presence on both stages of the Abbey, his associations extend from the Lyric Theatre, Belfast to being Theatre Curator of this year's Kilkenny Arts Festival, to upcoming productions for Landmark and Opera Theatre Company.

"You need a lot of time to prepare," he says of directing. "The older you get, the more you need." *Roberto Zucco*, Bedrock's most recent production and its biggest to date, had been ten years in the planning, he points out. Fay is less specific about Bedrock's future plans, however, although he alludes to intentions of staging co-productions and new plays.

The news of his Abbey appointment inevitably raises concerns about Bedrock's momentum, which,

like Barabbas, was founded in 1993, and has progressed fitfully since then as members came and left. Founder member Debbie Ledding, manager Irene Kernan and most recently producer Sarah Ling have all left the company along the way; Cian O'Brien was recently appointed the new General Manager and Producer. Momentum is important for every company, particularly to its stakeholders and funders, and with Fay's attentions divided it is unclear what phase the company is now moving towards. Is Bedrock being put into a hiatus?

"No," Fay says. "I think Alex [Johnston, the company's Literary Manager and most frequently produced playwright] is going to become deputy Artistic Director, that's the term he likes. Cian is very much producing. We've had long, long talks about it. The shake-up has been very good and very useful. The way companies are set up, the whole idea is if somebody gets run over by a horse, you're still supposed to be able to get on with it."

Taking the reins at the Abbey's literary department is not something that daunts Fay either. "Well, I've worked with writers all my life," he says. The



JIMMY FAY

principle difference is that "there won't be a production necessarily directed by me at the end of it". Fay has directed thirteen new plays and three new adaptations thus far – the lion's share written by Alex Johnston – and is used to having writers in the rehearsal room. Whether that qualifies him to nurture existing Abbey commissions, from Sebastian Barry to Elizabeth Kuti, or to initiate new ones, remains to be seen.

"Someone like Mark O'Rowe doesn't want any input at all, which is his prerogative," says Fay. "Somebody else would be grateful for it. Having directed some new work and worked with writers in the room, I have some idea of it. I don't think it's quite a leap of the imagination."

The contract is due to last for one year, which Fay describes with characteristic self-deprecation: "I'm bridging a gap, for lack of a better term. You know, if it all goes pear-shaped, I get fired at the end of the year and nobody loses face".

A HIGH-WIRE ACT

AS THE INDEPENDENT IRISH THEATRE sector matures, a company these days is less likely to be considered an individual's baby, and more likely to re-

FORTY SONGS OF GREEN (BARABBAS)



semble an organisation stretching into middle age, outliving its founders. In the case of Barabbas... the Company, the organisation could be experiencing a mid-life crisis. In June it was announced that co-Artistic Director Veronica Coburn would leave, the second founder member to leave, following Mikel Murfi's departure in 2001. (Soon after, company manager Triona Ní Dhuibhir went to the Dublin Theatre Festival; Maria Fleming has since stepped into the position.)

Such flux might prompt an in-



evitable re-evaluation of the fourteen-year-old project, but according to Raymond Keane, now sole proprietor, that process had already begun. "We're going into a whole new phase of change," he says. "The only way it can go on is for it to be a new Barabbas."

Keane's agenda for the company is no less than a reinvention, prompted in large part by the Arts Council. A sense of disquiet had already emerged late last year when the Council's grant allocation for 2007

placed Barabbas on a standstill budget of €270,000. The Arts Council, not always an organisation to freely elaborate its thought-processes, generally lets the figures do the talking; although in Barabbas's case there is a clearer channel of communication. The company was called in for a meeting shortly after the decision and asked to conduct an internal artistic review, one that has since grown into a more substantial inquiry involving feedback from the Council, together with input from its drama specialist Enid Reid Whyte, herself a one-time producer of Barabbas.

Keane also enlisted Helen Carey as a professional facilitator of the review, interviewing several arts practitioners about their perceptions of the company. "Now we're at a more critical juncture," says Keane. "It's either sink or swim, I suppose. The things [the arts councillors] were saying were very good and very true. Of course, I can say that now. It's a huge thing to investigate the reasons to go on."

Criticism is never easy to take for a theatre company, but the questions asked of Barabbas went deeper: Had the company been resting on past successes? Did its artistic policy and direction suffer following the loss of Murfi? Was it stylistically consistent? And did the notion of a co-Artistic Directorship – something enshrined in the company's policy from the beginning – best serve its interests?

Fourteen years on, Barabbas... the Company might now be more accurately termed Barabbas... the Solo Project. "If I were to be completely honest, it's something I've finally admitted to," says Keane. As Coburn's energies were increasingly directed into writing, and Keane's into devising, there was a clear split in the company's aesthetic. "That, maybe, was where the company lost its identity," concedes Keane. "Because we were growing as individual artists, but we had different needs."

The first steps towards the reinvention of Barabbas will soon be with us. *Circus*, Keane's adaptation of Fellini's film *La Strada*, has been the subject of a rigorous dramaturgical process with Jocelyn Clarke – honouring an emphasis on considered development highlighted by the inquiry – and stems from an idea Keane has been nursing for three years. It has been reconceived "from road movie to road play" and will be performed by three circus performers and one musician. "What I'm calling it now is a circus play," says Keane. "And what is circus theatre?"

The inquiry continues, then. From clown to circus, the reinvention of Barabbas may finally lead the company back to itself.

THE MISSING HALF

BETWEEN THE ACCOLADES AND AWARDS bestowed on Druid Theatre Compa-

THE WALWORTH FARCE (DRUID)



ny's production of *The Walworth Farce* at the Edinburgh Fringe last month (which took a much-coveted, box-of-fice friendly Scotsman Fringe First award) there was something missing. Namely, *The New Electric Ballroom*. Conceived of as a companion piece to Enda Walsh's corrosive farce about an Irish family in London, *The New Electric Ballroom* was originally developed for the Kammerspiele in Munich.

Last November *ITM* reported that it was to receive its English language premiere in a production directed by Walsh himself, which would débüt at the Galway Arts Festival. Walsh had also said that he hoped to see both productions staged together, and there was wide speculation that the two would subsequently be united in

The Traverse, as a 'DruidEvent'. Somewhere along the line, though, *The New Electric Ballroom* slipped quietly out of view.

"For a combination of reasons it wasn't the right time for us to do *Electric Ballroom*," Druid's producer Felicity O'Brien says. "We made a decision at the time and are happy that we did." She added, "*The New Electric Ballroom* is in our plans for next year. It wasn't cancelled, just postponed".

The decision, she says, gave *The Walworth Farce* its due focus at this year's Fringe, where it attracted interest from British theatres and, like most successful Irish productions in Edinburgh, prompted speculation about a London transfer. "Everything's up for grabs", is all that

THE NEXT STAGE 29 SEPTEMBER - 11 OCTOBER 2007

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For more details on the programme and how to apply see www.theatreformireland.com or www.dublintheatrefestival.com/50theevents



O'Brien would say on the subject. "There's nothing tied down."

With Druid producing *The Wallsworth Farce* in Edinburgh and readying *A Long Day's Journey into Night* for Galway's Town Hall Theatre before its participation in the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, it seems possible that Druid had become over-extended.

"In the end of the day I guess you would say [the decision is] financial," says O'Brien, "but it just makes for better planning to do it the way we're doing it now." O'Brien has since left the company to work with Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, which is preparing *James Son of James*, the third part of Michael Keegan-Dolan's midlands trilogy, for the festival.

THE ART OF SCHEDULING

News that a new weekly theatre programme is "being devised around arts presenter Páraic Breathnach" on RTÉ Radio 1, according to an RTÉ press release in early July - stirs up memories of the national broadcaster's last shake-up of arts on the airwaves. When Anna Leddy, head of RTÉ Radio 1, explained her decision to axe the mid-afternoon arts show magazine, *Rattlebag* last year, she de-

fended its replacement as an opportunity for the station "to explore the arts in an edgy and more experimental way". Cancelled after barely a year on air, *The Eleventh Hour* was many things - wide-ranging, fleetingly intriguing, inaccessible to anyone who needs about eight hours sleep before the morning - but edgy and experimental it was not.

It may be a good thing that no such forecasts have been made for an as-yet-untitled replacement, to be hosted by the playwright, poet and broadcaster, Vincent Woods, scheduled for 8 p.m. Interestingly, the arts schedule on

RTÉ has now come full circle - 8 p.m. was the original slot held by Mike Murphy's *The Arts Show* and, such was its familiarity, that *Rattlebag's* move to 2.45 p.m. was originally considered a grave threat to arts discussion.

Although *ITM* was most interested in the inclusion of a new weekly programme devoted to theatre, as we went to press RTÉ's press department could furnish us with no details about the show's place in the schedule, its producing team or, indeed, its edginess. Unfortunate, perhaps, or a hunch that arts coverage on the national broadcaster's airwave does better without raising expectations?



opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks key diary dates for the autumn months ahead.

Yew Tree Theatre presents **FR. MATH-EW** by Sean McCarthy, touring from 30 August – 13 October, opening at the Hawkswell, Sligo, and finishing at Half Moon Theatre, Cork.

Meridian Theatre Company presents **KNOCK 3 TIMES** by Gaye Shortland and **LOVE, PEACE & ROBBERY** by Liam Heylin at the Granary Theatre, Cork from 6—22 September.

Gare St Lazare Players present **THE GOOD THIEF** by Conor McPherson touring from 6 – 27 September, opening at Wexford Arts Centre and finishing at The Source Arts Centre, Thurles.

Prime Cut Productions present **SCENES FROM THE BIG PICTURE** by Owen McCafferty at the Waterfront Hall Studio, Belfast from 7—29 September.

Molière's **THE HYPOCHONDRIAC** will play at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast from 7 September – 13 October.

Skylight Productions in association with Everyman Palace Theatre present **SURVIVORS** by Declan Hassett at

the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork from 12 —22 September.

Opera Theatre Company presents Handel's **ORLANDO**, on tour from 22 September – 13 October, opening at The Source Arts Centre, Thurles and finishing at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway.

Druid presents **LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT** by Eugene O'Neill at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, from 14 – 29 September.

Performing at the Old Museum Arts Centre from 18 – 25 September, and then on tour across Ireland North and South until 21 October, Bruiser Theatre Company presents **BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS** by Dennis Potter.

Green Shoot Productions present **NEW YORK STATE OF MIND** by Sam McCready at the Baby Grand, Grand Opera House, Belfast, from 19 – 29 September, and then on tour from 1 – 6 October.

Opera 2005 presents Mozart's **DON GIOVANNI** at Cork Opera House on 3, 5 and 6 October.

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Blue Raincoat Theatre Company presents **THE THIRD POLICEMAN** by Flann O'Brien (adapted by Jocelyn Clarke) at The Factory Performance Space, Sligo from 9 – 20 October, and at The Town Hall Theatre, Galway from 25 – 27 October.

SKY ROAD by Jim Nolan plays at the Theatre Royal, Waterford from 12 – 20 October.

Púca Puppets in association with Éigse Carlow Arts Festival presents **CORALINE** (adapted by the company from Neil Gaiman's novella) at The Helix, Dublin, 15 – 19 October; The Alley, Strabane, 22 – 23 October; and The Pavilion, Dún Laoghaire, 14 – 15 November.

Second Age Theatre Company presents Brian Friel's **PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!**, on tour from 17 October – 31 November, encompassing An Grianán, Letterkenny; Glór Music Centre, Ennis; Helix Theatre, Dublin; Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork; and the Pavilion, Dun Laoghaire.

Tinderbox Theatre Company presents **THE DUKE OF HOPE** by Conor Grimes and Alan McKee, touring from 18 October – 24 November, encompassing the Drama & Film Centre at Queen's (as part of Belfast Festival at Queen's) and finishing at Island Arts, Lisburn.

Paul Bosco McEneaney's **THE FLEA PIT** plays at The Little Pavilion, Botanic Gardens, Belfast from 19 – 28 October, courtesy of Cahoots NI.

Gúna Nua and Plan B Productions present **UNRAVELLING THE RIBBON** by Mary Kelly and Maureen White at the Cube, Project Arts Centre, Dublin from 23 October – 10 November.

TRASNA, the International Festival of Inclusive Theatre, takes place in Callan, Co. Kilkenny from 25 – 28 October.

Barabbas presents **CIRCUS** by Raymond Keane at Project Arts Centre from 30 October – 10 November.

The Third Year Bachelor in Acting Studies, TCD Department of Drama, will perform **THE HOSTAGE** by Brendan Behan in the Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College from 5 – 10 November.

PurpleHeart Theatre Company presents **BUG** by Tracy Letts at The New Theatre, Dublin, from 5 – 24 November.

DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL

MorWax Productions present **HOW THE WEST WAS WON!** by Peadar de Burca at Back Loft from 10 – 15 September.

Turas Theatre's **LENKA'S WARDROBE** by

Joanne Beirne runs at Bewley's Café Theatre, from 10–15 September.

WAYS OF MAKING YOU TALK from Geronimo! Theatre Company plays at the International Bar from 10 – 15 September.

Flipside in association with Chab Abductions present **HAIRY BOTTOM AND THE JOCK STRAP OF DESTINY** by Simon Toal and Robert Murtagh at International Bar from 10 – 23 September.

Wonderland Productions present **THE MISER** by Alice Coughlan at James Joyce Centre from 10 – 23 September.

Junk Ensemble presents **THE RAIN PARTY** from 10 – 22 September. (Site-specific. Meeting Point: Project Arts Centre)

At the Carmelite Community Centre from 10 – 15 September, D.A.R.K. Productions present **TITUS** by Aidan Harney.

Dragonfly Company presents **MARRIED TO THE SEA** by Shona McCarthy at T36 from 10 – 16 September.

Mephisto Theatre Company presents **LA CASA AZUL** by Sophie Faucher in a translation by Neil Bartlett at Players Theatre, from 10 – 16 September.

Volta presents **GERRY & THE PEACE PROCESS** by Liam Hourican and

David Crann at Players Theatre from 11 – 16 September.

Calipo Theatre presents **ALL OVER TOWN** by Phillip McMahon at Project Cube from 11 – 15 September.

THE BABELFISH TARTUFFE from Mangare Theatre Company plays at SS Michael + John from 11 – 16 September.

Traveller Wagon Wheel presents **MOBILE** by Michael Collins at T36, from 11 – 23 September.

Playgroup's **THE ART OF SWIMMING** by Lynda Radley runs at The New Theatre from 11 – 16 September.

Once Off productions present **THE REP EXPERIMENT: METAMORPHOSIS** by Franz Kafka (adapted by Stephen Berkoff) at Smock Alley from 12 – 20 September; **THE REP EXPERIMENT: MR KOLPERT** by David Gieselman (translated by David Tushingham) at Smock Alley from 12 – 22 September; and **THE REP EXPERIMENT: PLATONOV** by Anton Chekhov (adapted by Susan Coyne and Laszlo Marton) at Smock Alley from 8 – 18 September.

FROZEN MUSIC from Ember Productions plays at St. Mary's Abbey from 13 – 23 September.

Whiplash Productions present **WAR OF**

THE ROSES: THE RISEN outside Chester Beatty Library, Dublin Castle on 14 September.

Gavin Kostick presents **HEART OF DARKNESS** by Joseph Conrad from 14 – 16 September. (Site-specific. Meeting Point: Fringe Box Office at Spiegeltent.)

GROUNDED by Róise Goan plays at The Ark on the 15, 22 September.

Wicked Angels present **WAITING FOR IKEA** by Georgina McKevitt and Jacinta Sheerin at Bewley's Café Theatre from 17 – 22 September.

Snackbox Productions present **THE LICKY RAKE SHOW** by Tracey Martin at Bewley's Café Theatre, from 17 – 22 September.

The Performance Lab and Tower of Babel present **BUS PROJECT** by from 17 – 23 September. (Site Specific. Meeting Point: T36, Parnell Square.)

City Theatre Dublin presents **TROJAN WOMEN** at Empty Space, Smock Alley from 17 – 22 September.

Monkeyshine Theatre present **GRIMM JAM** at Smock Alley from 17 – 23 September.

Upstate Theatre Project present **AT PEACE** by Declan Gorman at O'Reilly

Theatre from 18 – 23 September.

GoLightly Productions present Mark Ravenhill's **SOME EXPLICIT POLAROIDS** at Players Theatre from 18-23 September.

Rough Magic SEEDS3 presents **CALIGULA** by Albert Camus (translated by David Greig) and **PILGRIMS OF THE NIGHT** by Len Jenkin at Project Cube from 18 – 22 September.

Ríonach Ní Néill present **CIOTÓG - HOW DID WE GET HERE?** at Project Upstairs from 18 – 22 September.

Panti and thisispopbaby present **ALL DOLLED UP** by Panti at Project Upstairs from 18 – 22 September.

Peer Pressure Productions present **DOG SHOW: FIDO** by Garrett Keogh at Samuel Beckett Theatre, from 18 – 23 September.

Gentle Giant Theatre Company present **DUBLIN CITY COUNSELLING** by Neil Watkins at The New Theatre from 18 – 23 September.

COME UP AND SEE ME: A PEEK AT MAE WEST plays at The New Theatre from 18 – 23 September, from Ageless Productions.

DEFAULT productions present **GENERIC?** at thisisnotashop from 21 – 23 September.

ALL DOLLED UP (PANTI)



Rough Magic SEEDS3 Play Readings present **SEVEN YEARS AND SEVEN HOURS** by Lisa McGee, **THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE** by Fintan O'Higgins, and **THE GRAND TOUR** by Stacey Gregg at Project Cube from 22 – 23 September.

Dance Theatre of Ireland present **BLOCK PARTY**, choreographed by Loretta Yurick and Robert Connor at Meeting House Square on 23 Sept.

CruX Dance Theatre presents **HER-MAPHRODITE + INDIVIDUAL MYTH** choreographed by Jane Kelleghan at Dance

House from 8 – 9 September.

ULSTER BANK DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL 2007

Druid Theatre Company presents **LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT** by Eugene O'Neill in the Gaiety Theatre from 2 – 13 October.

Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre presents **JAMES SON OF JAMES**, created by Michael Keegan Dolan in collaboration with the cast, at the Samuel Beckett Theatre from 28 September – 13 October.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD** by Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle (after J.M. Synge) from 29 September – 13 October.

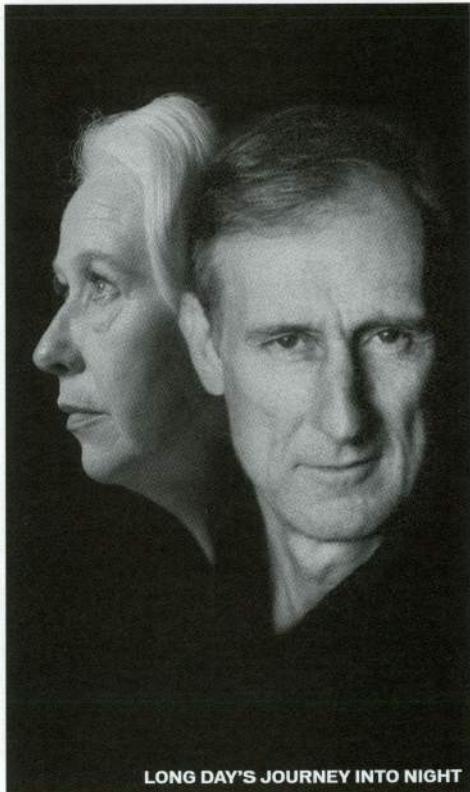
The Gate Theatre presents **UNCLE VANYA** by Anton Chekhov, in a version by Brian Friel, from 27 September – 13 October.

Rough Magic with Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire presents **IS THIS ABOUT SEX?** by Christian O'Reilly from 1 – 13 October.

WOMAN AND SCARECROW by Marina Carr plays in a new production at the Peacock Theatre from 6 – 13 October.

Pan Pan presents **THE IDIOTS** by Lars von Trier at Project Arts Centre from 9 – 13 October.

Re-Reading the Festival, in association with Irish Theatre Institute's Irish Playography present rehearsed readings of five plays from the past fifty years: **KING OF THE CASTLE** by Eugene McCabe, 29 September; **SUMMER** by Hugh Leonard, 29 September; **SPOKESONG** by Stewart Parker, 30 September; **THE LAMENT FOR ARTHUR** by Dermot Bolger, 30 Septem-



LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

ber; and **KITCHENSINK** by Paul Mercier, 1 October. All at The New Theatre.

A rehearsed reading of **THE CASE OF THE ROSE TATTOO** by Jocelyn Clarke will be performed on 6 and 7 October at The New Theatre.

The Abbey Theatre presents public readings of three of Sean O'Casey's plays: **THE BISHOP'S BONFIRE** on 11 October, **COCK-A-DOODLE DANDY** on 12 October, and **THE DRUMS OF FATHER NED** on 13 October.

entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre.

TRÍONA NÍ DHUIBHIR has joined the Dublin Theatre Festival as General Manager. She is replaced as General Manager of Barabbas by **MARIA FLEMING** (following **SELINA O'REILLY**, who was Acting General Manager).

MARKETA PUZMAN has left Dance Theatre of Ireland as to take up the post of Acting General Manager at Fishamble Theatre Company. She replaces **ORLA FLANAGAN**, who is participating in a Fellowship in arts management at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C.,

KARL WALLACE is leaving the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick to become Artistic Director of Northampton Theatre... University College Dublin has appointed **FRANK McGUINNESS** as the new Professor of Creative Writing... Everyman Palace Theatre's Artistic Director, **PAT TALBOT**, will step down in February 2008 to set up an independent production company. The position is being advertised... **FELICITY O'BRIEN** has left Druid Theatre Company to work as Producer with Fabu-



lous Beast Dance Theatre.

RÓISÍN McGARR has stepped down as Programme Manager at the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun to take up the position of General Manager, Learning and Participation, in the Southbank Centre,

London... **TARA FURLONG** has joined Gúna Nua as Company Administrator.

Opera Theatre Company is seeking a new Director of Education & Outreach, following the departure of **ROSA SOLINAS**... Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company has appointed **JP MURTAGH** as Company Manager and a new Technical Manager, **EDDIE CASH**.

DAVID HORAN is the new Artistic Director of Bewley's Café Theatre, replacing **ALAN KING**, who is pursuing freelance work as an actor and director.

PATRICK LONERGAN has stepped down as Reviews Editor of *Irish Theatre Magazine*, and has been succeeded by **FÍONA NÍ CHINNÉIDE**.

sounding board

The Bigger Picture

SUSAN CONLEY urges theatre companies to work on their image.

AS IF YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TO think about: you've found a script, obtained the rights, found a venue, assembled a cast, begun the arduous process of rehearsals—and suddenly it's necessary to produce photos of a show that's barely on its feet. You (yes you, theatre-maker) of course want photographic evidence of your hard work, the commonest of common sense, given the ephemeral nature of the medium. And yet, taking photos that do justice to the work often falls way down on the list of priorities.

I speak from experience, of course. In the normal run of designing *Irish Theatre Magazine*, there are routinely a number of images that make my art directing heart bleed. Images that are out of focus, images that still bear the digital camera's time stamp, images that make their subjects look as though they were caught mid-spasm... images that, in short, do the production, and by extension, any publication in which they appear, no good whatsoever.

I'm certainly not asking you to think of us every time you set up a



shoot. But perhaps you could keep the following tips in mind.

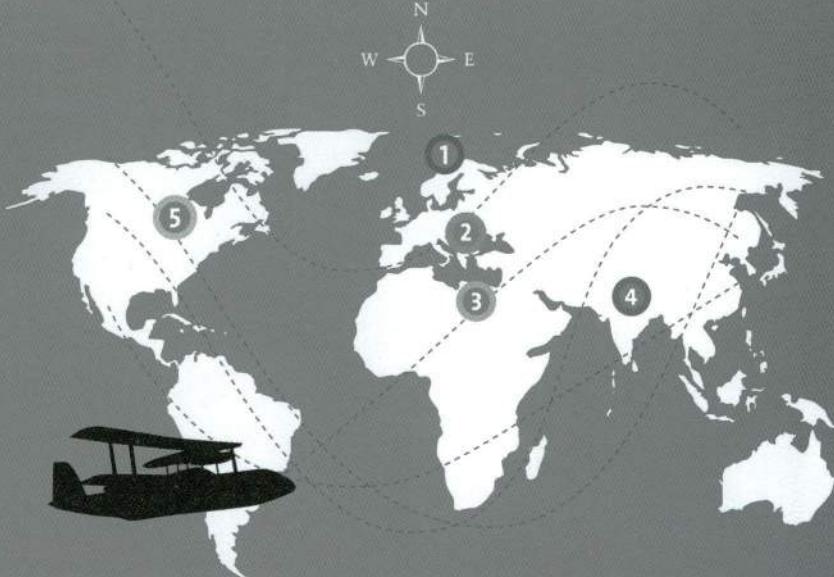
- Publications need high resolution images; if you're using your own digital camera, it will shoot at a lower resolution. This is okay, just don't reduce the size of the image—if you do, then it will be unusable.
- It's fine to send colour images, and may result in your production ending

up on the cover. However, a landscape (horizontal) orientation will generally not be terribly useful, so think about shooting some portrait (vertical) versions, if you've got your eye on the prize.

- If you can't hire a professional, perhaps you've got a talented friend. Or, it might be worthwhile bartering with a photography student. The quality of theatrical photography doesn't have to be the sole domain of the big guns—and ultimately, your work will be taken more seriously if it can be effectively represented offstage as well as on. 

Susan Conley is Art Director of Irish Theatre Magazine.

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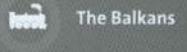
The Americas



Asia



Africa



The Balkans



Scandinavia

All Raw in the Wind

SEBASTIAN BARRY's new play, *The Pride of Parnell Street*, gives voice to two inner-city Dubliners who, like many of his characters, have been left behind by history and the forces of change. Portraying domestic violence and its aftermath, it examines what survives from a total mess, he says.

PARNELL STREET HAS CHANGED EVEN MORE SINCE I started writing this play - we're living through 'fast history' now. But by setting the play in the 1990s I could give the characters some of my own memories. My wife and I lived in North Great George's Street for seven years, and were there for the 1990 World Cup. I was haunted by the fact that after the matches the women's shelters would be packed the next day. This was the starting point for a short play I wrote for Fishamble's Amnesty series, in which the central object is a green soccer jersey that the woman is wearing when she is beaten up by her husband. Working with the director, Jim Culleton, I then developed the character of the husband Joe, based on a man in Mountjoy Prison, who's thinking about the terrible things he'd done. It grew from there.

I've always been fascinated by the different Dublin voices and accents, and how you could catch the idiom of the place you were in, so you became a native. When you first live in this sort of district you see things from the outside – the addicted families on the street, the kids breaking into cars – but the more you get to know people, it becomes a different thing and by the time you leave, every molecule in you has changed. As Joe says, he doesn't think of his area as the inner-city, for him it's on the outside, exposed. 'The place where I come from is all raw in the wind', he says.

Audiences will probably resist the character of Joe at first, but I believe what Bishop Tutu says, that there's nothing a man could do, that I could not do my-

'It is not a naturalistic space, except in the last scene perhaps. It is all the places they have been and know, and describe, just as they embody all their ages and deeds.'

(*Stage directions, The Pride of Parnell Street*)



MANUELLE HARLAN

self. Male violence is a massive problem, you can't distance yourself from it. How do you accommodate the incompleteness, the murderousness of the male? And this is not a working-class thing. Janet comes from the same background, but she has a particular excellence. She's a thoughtful person, interested in life. Unlike most of the other women she knows, she won't go back to a violent husband.

Once we get to this stage of the process, the play belongs to the actors. I'm really interested in great acting – I grew up with it. I try to work with those people who are the full embodiment of the art of acting, and I'll bluff my way into the room to be with them. It's our job as writers to supply the right role for the actor, like Donal McCann's in *The Steward of Christendom*. I've been listening to Karl Sheils' and Mary Murray's instincts here and we've cut the play in rehearsal, to really focus on the stories of Joe and Janet, which are delivered as interwoven monologues.

The monologue seems to me to be the necessary form now. There are reasons why Mark O'Rowe and Conor McPherson use it: in the midst of all our instant forms of constant communication, our mobiles and e-mails, it brings everything back to the solitary presence on stage, the individual consciousness. And it's all about the actor's performance. As Conor McPherson puts it in his stage direction: 'this play takes place in a theatre'; it's not trying to be the real world.

Working with a small-scale enterprise like Fishamble suits me down to the ground; it reminds me of the Peacock in the 1980s – and of course, Jim Cullen was Assistant Director on *The Prayers of Sherkin* back then. It's hard to carry the reputation of great institutions; that can generate success anxiety and dread – though I am writing a play for the Abbey now. As a writer and a person, you are following a trail, on stepping stones, and you have to be brave enough to stand where you are.

The person who writes the play is the best part of you, the fiercest, most instinctive part, where it's possible not to be thinking. It shouldn't be penitential or fearful. For both this play and my last, *Whispering Psyche*, which ran at the Almeida in London, there was pleasure for me in the spontaneity of their writing. That's a great source of happiness and luck.

The Pride of Parnell Street runs at the Tricycle Theatre, London until September 22nd and in the Dublin Theatre Festival from September 26th to October 6th at the Tivoli Theatre. Directed by Jim Cullen, it is performed by Karl Sheils and Mary Murray.

Sebastian Barry was in conversation with Helen Meany.



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Exploding the Canon

Project's Artistic Director **WILLIE WHITE** wonders why the Irish theatrical canon is treated with reverence. Where are the contemporary versions of canonical texts, the new ways of presenting live performance?

F THE ABBEY WERE A RADIO STATION, WHAT WOULD its play-list be? Would it offer soothing orchestral music, and Country and Irish dirges, or present angstzeitgeisters like The Arcade Fire? Would Abbey FM roster classic hits and faithful cover versions or might it provide for the imaginative reinterpretation of the hits of yesteryear?

I ask this question not to have a pop (pun intended) at our national theatre but in the context of its custodianship of the canon — that oft asserted but ill-defined body of Irish writing for the theatre. What is the canon anyway? In my reckoning, if a text is no longer of interest to those producing plays today then it reverts to having an historical and literary status but should not be included in a survey of the canon. If you don't need to go to a theatre to experience a play, then it is not part of the canon. Even if we are able to constitute a canon of recently produced plays there could be questions as to the urgency and relevance of some of them.

I have often heard calls for a moratorium on producing Shakespeare. To the gasps of conference audiences the provocateurs have suggested that in relying too heavily on such canonical works we are avoiding finding theatrical responses to the experience of living in the here and now. The canon-supporters quickly counter with assertions of the timeless and universal qualities of the canon.

But what would the programmes of our theatres look like if there were a ban on productions, not only of Shakespeare, but of plays that were more than ten years old? We would have to deal with life as it is experienced now, as opposed to how it is mediated through an archaic form. Knowledge is distributed wide-

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06/07 Tue



Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle's new version of *Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey next month.

ly on the web rather than deeply in books; culture is now built on an accretion of narratives and parodies of those narratives, from *Northern Star* to *Scary Movie*. After a century of film and television, narrative has been broken up and rearranged into the quanta of still and moving images and streams of digital data. However, it appears that all of this has little impact on contemporary theatre or on contemporary productions of canonical plays.

The problem with 'saintly' plays – since that is where the term 'canon' comes

from - is that they get reverent productions. I wonder if we have a place for a list of saintly plays in a secular age and of what benefit is a rub of the relic to contemporary audiences who are independent of empire but in thrall to globalisation.

Notwithstanding our literary theatre culture, a play is not scripture - it is a set of dramaturgical opportunities. The more distance there is from its first production, the less necessary it should be to be faithful to an idea of how the text should be presented. Even when giving a classic text a faithful production, anachronism is inevitable.

When Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Hedda Gabler* was presented at last year's Dublin Theatre Festival it highlighted the apparent impossibility of a similarly contemporary version of an Irish canonical text emerging from our theatre environment. With the exception of *The Playboy of the Western World*: almost uniquely in the Irish canon this archetypal story is accommodating of different approaches to its production, ranging from transposition to (more rarely) deconstruction. Gavin Quinn's exciting production last year for Pan Pan located the action in a Beijing hairdressing salon and had Christy Mahon as an outsider from the Muslim west of China. Bisi Adigun, the co-writer with Roddy Doyle of a new *Playboy* for the Abbey in which Christy is a Nigerian refugee, has already produced an all-African version of Jimmy Murphy's *Kings of the Kilburn High Road* with his company, Arambe. It isn't hard to make the leap from Kilburn High Road to Parnell Street, as it wouldn't be to leap from the Carneys in 1960s Coventry to the Kaszynskis of contemporary Ireland, in a new version of Tom Murphy's *Whistle in the Dark*. These are instances where the action of one time that has been located in a traditional Irish scenario is transposed to another situation to include another group, pointing out that we are not the only ones who have a history of emigration and violence. Apart from such a literal message, there is an important gesture towards widening participation in Irish cultural discourse.

A more radical production called *play-boy*, created by artists Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy (Desperate Optimists), was commissioned by Fiach MacCongail and staged at Project Arts Centre in 1999. It dispensed with Synge's dialogue completely. While the artists spoke about South American revolutionaries of Irish heritage, the action of Synge's play was related intermittently on TV monitors. My experience of *play-boy* was that, like Synge's version, it was about violence, sex, power, language and romance, but this production was also urgently contemporary. The *Irish Times* reviewer of the day, however, "could discern little here of serious analysis, and nothing of induced revelation".

My question is whether our literary theatrical canon and the infrastructure

around it merely perpetuates more of the same, and whether this is a bad thing? It could be that the theatre establishment has hit on a sure-fire formula and this shouldn't be tinkered with. It has been argued to me before that the Irish psyche is predisposed to text-based theatre. Certainly the central tendency in Irish theatre is still towards the production of playwrights and the production of their plays. This is not unique to the National Theatre and is replicated in many independent companies.

I don't accept the insistence that you begin with the classics and that they have greater significance than more contemporary stories. Against the claim of universalism, there is also a case to be made for the immediate, the contingent, the disposable, and the relevant. In fact, if you get people interested in theatre then they may find their way to the classics. I'm for the canon, not as hierarchy or orthodoxy but for its potential as a focal point for shared heritage, intensive reflection and common purpose.

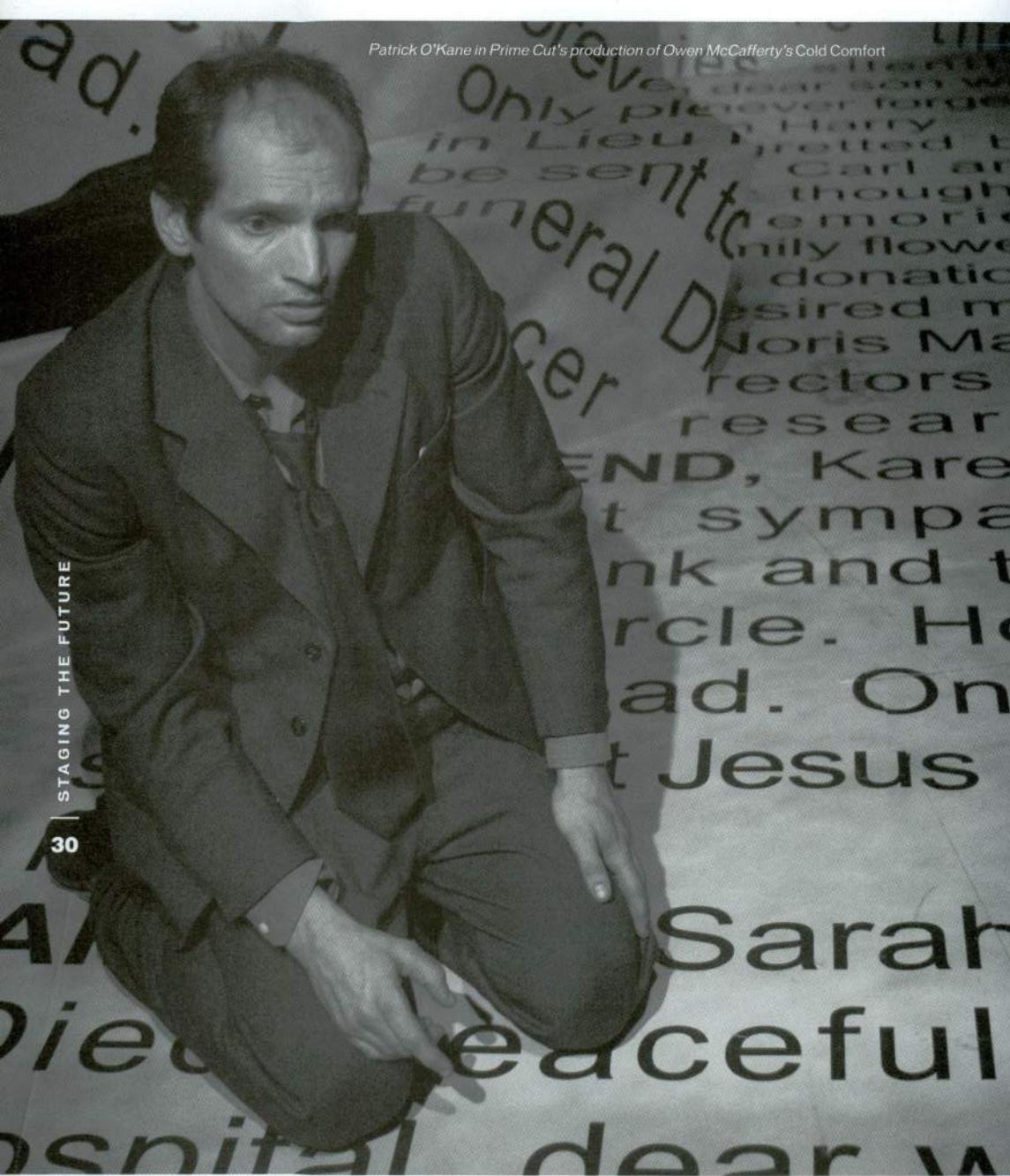
Theatre is a thriving minority pursuit. I consider it one of the enduring civic occasions, a coincidence of intimate and public discourses. Theatrical performances continue to offer a lively medium for the discussion of ideas that have to do with how we live, feel and think. While performance may not be the same proposition as a political speech or cryotherapy, it still provides an opportunity for reflection as well as for entertainment. If we are interested in incorporating the Twenty-first Century into theatre-making we cannot avoid looking at new ways of presenting ideas in live performance, with an enlarged sense of what plays can talk about. There's no escape, it seems, from The Flight of the Earls, 1916, the Civil War, the Troubles and so on. At the same time, where are the plays about migration, globalisation, energy security, peak oil, terrorism, extremism, suicide, gang warfare, and gridlock?

When I brought this up during a talk at the Abbey Theatre recently, the question arose as to how a writer can write outside his or her own knowledge and experience. I don't accept the maxim "write what you know", as it seems always to be interpreted too literally. I may "know" certain things but I am also influenced by larger social, political, economic and other forces.

Perhaps E.M. Foster's "only connect" would be a better entreaty than "write what you know". The challenge for theatre-makers is to connect the diurnal, the banal and the contemporary with the archetypal and transcendent. As Fluxus artist Robert Filliou said: 'Art is what makes life more interesting than art.' 

Willie White is Artistic Director of Project Arts Centre, Dublin. This article is based on a presentation he gave last month at the Abbey Theatre, as part of The Abbey Talks series.

Patrick O'Kane in Prime Cut's production of Owen McCafferty's Cold Comfort



Staging the future

A new strategy for theatre in Northern Ireland comes at a time when arts funding to the region is at an all-time low. Can theatre practitioners seize the opportunity to make culture a priority in the new political climate? **RACHEL ANDREWS** reports.

EIGHT MONTHS AGO, STAFF MEMBERS WORKING FOR the Belfast Festival could have been forgiven for believing they were out of a job. Northern Ireland's flagship festival, about to go into its 45th year, was on the verge of closing down after its primary funding body, Queen's University, announced that it could no longer prop up an event that had been steadily losing core financial support for the past five years. The problems – a thirty-two per cent reduction in public funding since 2002, a £150,000 loss in 2006 despite record box office takings and strong private sponsorship – were first reported in November of last year, and by January 2007, when the *Belfast Telegraph* launched its high profile Save Belfast Festival campaign, the issue had reached a crisis point. "Three weeks to save Belfast Festival," announced the newspaper dramatically, but the publicity, and the hundreds of emails and letters it garnered, had the desired effect.

By the middle of February, the Festival had won a reprieve, with a once-off £150,000 grant from the Department of Culture, and it will go ahead, albeit as a scaled-down version, this October. After that, its future remains insecure. Queen's has now insisted that all the partners must come together and "produce a three-year development plan to ensure the sustainability of the festival from 2008 onwards". The University has also called upon others in both the public and private sectors to "commit themselves to investing in [the Festival's] long-term future".

It's hard to see how this will be resolved. Although the Belfast Festival is frequently hailed as the largest in Ireland, and has attracted genuinely internation-

al artists such as Philip Glass, Bill Viola and Jose Cura, Northern Ireland has no great tradition of private sponsorship of the arts and, despite the financial support of organisations such as Ulster Bank, BT and more recently Bank of Ireland

The Northern Ireland arts sector has always struggled for survival against the backdrop of the Troubles and has battled to sustain an artistic 'scene' over an extended period.

and RTÉ Lyric FM, the Festival has had no major sponsor since Guinness pulled out two years ago. Meanwhile, public funding for the arts in Northern Ireland is in crisis, with per capita spending

running at £6.13m, less than England (£8.39m), Wales (£9.17m), Scotland (£11.93m) and a full fifty per cent less than the current arts investment in the Republic of Ireland, which is the equivalent of £12.61m(stg). The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) has been flat funded for five years now, and from next year onwards, will be actually losing money, as UK Lottery funding is diverted from the arts to the 2012 Olympic Games.

The financial insecurity only compounds wider problems, such as a perception of the NI Arts Council among practitioners as top-heavy and bureaucratic, and what some commentators describe as a lack of cultural self-confidence that, along with the obvious setbacks caused by political insecurity, has curbed the artistic scope of the Northern Ireland region.

Little of this is new. Although it has frequently punched above its weight, exporting actors such as Liam Neeson and Stephen Rea, theatre directors Mick Gordon, Lynne Parker and Conall Morrison, and fostering the ground-breaking Field Day theatre company, the region has battled to sustain an artistic 'scene' over an extended period of time. In an article written for Prime Cut Theatre Company, Ophelia Byrne, former curator of the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive at Belfast's Linen Hall Library, describes how the ambition put forward by Field Day of "independent theatre as a viable, professional entity achieving far more than basic survival was initially viewed as daring, almost foolhardy" in the early 1980s. Prime Cut, itself one of the most successful of contemporary theatre companies, was, she writes, born of a society characterised by "chronic introspection".

Other difficulties have included a dearth of theatrical venues, particularly in Belfast, which has led to a lack of touring 'product', meaning that Northern Irish audiences have had little exposure to even such high profile playwrights as Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson and Marina Carr. "When I wondered should we steer the [Lyric] theatre towards the type of work put on by the Abbey, or the Gate, or Rough Magic," says Michael Diskin, newly-installed Ex-



Pippa Nixon and Paul Mallon in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* by Naomi Wallace

ecutive Director of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, "it became clear that audiences didn't know what the repertoire of these organisations was."

A conviction that things can be better is beginning to emerge. A recent discussion paper by consultancy firm Scottish Cultural Enterprises, commissioned by the ACNI to help develop a new drama strategy for the North, notes that now is the time to move from a "focus on retrospection to giving greater emphasis to exploring and articulating what Northern Ireland can be in the future."

Such a statement is being echoed, increasingly vocally, by people within the arts community. 'Invest in Inspiration', an Internet campaign currently run by the Community Arts Forum (CAF) exhorts supporters to e-mail the Minister for Culture and demand greater investment in the arts – an indication that a culture of dependency is now being challenged. The NI Arts Council has stepped up to its role as advocate, and, to coincide with the launch of its new five-year strategy, has begun its own campaign for the arts, publicly decrying UK government plans to divert its Lottery proceeds.

Campaigning for the Belfast Festival, its director, Graeme Farrow, questioned what sort of image people want in the future for Northern Ireland. "Do we want Belfast to be a vibrant, modern European capital with cultural offerings," he asked, "Events like the Belfast Festival show that we are a region that is culturally mature".

The clamour has been heard outside Northern Ireland. Jane Daly, Producer

with the Dublin-based Irish Theatre Institute (ITI), left a meeting held to discuss the ACNI's drama strategy last May with a real sense of the "difficult circumstances our Northern colleagues are working under". Daly's participation

In the independent theatre sector, the constraints posed by a hand-to-mouth existence have not impacted adversely upon the generation of ideas.

was important. ITI, like other organisations such as Culture Ireland, is an all-Ireland body, and can make proactive decisions to encourage theatre development in the North. Daly

believes that the Arts Councils on either side of the border have a collaborative role in reigniting the North/South touring initiatives, which were active during the 1980s and 1990s.

Amidst all of this, there is concrete – and confident – activity within the sector. By 2011, the Old Museum Arts Centre (OMAC) will reside in a new, purpose-built arts centre in the Cathedral Quarter area of Belfast, its 90-seat studio replaced by a 350-seat auditorium and 120-seat studio space, designed by Belfast architects Hackett and Hall. Funding difficulties remain – to which a fundraising event with Meryl Streep last month helped draw attention – and OMAC's Director Gillian Mitchell has concerns that the shortfall will make it difficult to secure quality 'product' to fill the spaces, but the new building should, at the very least, indicate a statement of intent.

Meanwhile, the redesign of the Lyric Theatre, also due for completion in 2011, into a 400-seat auditorium and 150-seat studio space by the Stirling-prize nominated architects O'Donnell and Tuomey, was given an enormous boost over the summer with a £1million/€1.5m) donation from businessman Dr Martin Naughton and his wife Carmel. This, along with Michael Diskin's appointment bodes well for the future of the theatre. The former manager of the Town Hall Theatre in Galway is a fresh, ambitious presence, whose first move was to invite Mick Gordon, one of the brighter stars on the London theatrical scene, back to his native city to direct *Dancing at Lughnasa* this summer.

In the independent theatre sector, the constraints posed by a hand-to-mouth existence have not impacted adversely upon ideas. This month, Prime Cut is staging the Irish premiere of Owen McCafferty's award-winning *Scenes From The Big Picture*, which has already played in London's National Theatre and in Washington. Directed by Conall Morrison, it's an enormous undertaking that requires twenty-one actors to play in forty scenes and has needed twelve months of planning and fundraising by the company to put together, but is already being viewed as a confidence-boosting event by those observing the sector.





Architects' impression of the Old Museum Arts Centre's new home in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter.

Equally proactive is Tinderbox Theatre Company, which threw its weight behind the recent 'Pic 'n' Mix' work-in-progress festival, aimed at bringing new and established companies together. It is constantly seeking ways of helping new writers and directors by creating mentoring schemes, providing networking opportunities and work-shopping new writing. "The new Arts Council drama strategy will only be positive if it goes somewhere," said Michael Duke, Artistic Director of Tinderbox. "It's our job to test the strategy and to come up with initiatives we think will work."

It's clear that the arts in Northern Ireland have reached a crossroads. The Belfast Festival at Queen's is the most high profile casualty of a sector in great difficulty, but what happens to that event specifically, and to the wider arts community generally, will surely be seen as indicative of the attitude of the new political decision-makers to the position of culture in a Northern Ireland clamoring to promote itself to the outside world.

"I feel a great deal is at stake right now," says Prof. Anna McMullan, Chair of Drama at Queen's. "We really owe it to the theatre community to seize this opportunity to put in place economic and infrastructural support systems that can take Northern Irish theatre to a new stage. If we don't, the potential here will dissipate, and that would be a lost opportunity and a disaster for theatre here." 

Rachel Andrews is an arts journalist and critic based in Cork.

Wexford Festival Opera's production of Arlecchino

SHADOWS ON THE LAWN

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SHADOWS ON THE LAWN

Held in the summer for the first time, in a temporary auditorium in the grounds of Johnstown Castle, **WEXFORD FESTIVAL OPERA 2007** had audiences talking in stage whispers – and not always about the operas. **KAREN DERVAN** takes stock of the productions and the abrupt departure of the Festival's Chief Executive.

HAVING RECENTLY FOUND ITSELF MIRED IN PUBLIC controversy, Wexford Festival Opera will surely be eager to put the year 2007 behind it. That the company's artistic season was almost overshadowed by the legal battle with its now former Chief Executive, Michael Hunt, is as unsurprising as it is unfortunate; this is what happens when off-stage politics forces its way into the spotlight. Before the final curtain had fallen on this year's festival in June, the *Irish Times* reported that Michael Hunt's contract with Wexford Festival Opera was to be terminated in its relative infancy.

The Chief Executive began in June 2006 what he understood to be a seven-year contract with the prestigious organisation, with a review of that contract after three years. Hunt was granted a High Court injunction on 22 June 2007 to prevent his employers from removing him immediately from the post, an action that could significantly mar his national and international reputation. To date his employers have not clarified their reasons for the dismissal, but in early July, the case and injunction were struck out when the High Court heard that Hunt would be departing the job "on agreed terms", the details of which neither party disclosed.

With neither party disclosing specifics, it is difficult to ascertain the facts. The Board claims that Hunt's contract had been subject to a six-month probationary period, though Hunt apparently wasn't informed of this. He has asserted that certain lifestyle choices — his commuting from his family home in Galway and his personal dress sense — were factors in the decision taken by the Board.

The termination of his services came in advance of a landmark in the history of the Festival: the opening next year of the new €33 million purpose-built opera house in Wexford. During his brief tenure, Hunt not only mended the Festival's relationship with the Arts Council following the last political scandal over the employment of Eastern European orchestras for the Festival, but also oversaw two logically nightmarish festivals, with the difficulties of this year's event far outweighing those posed in 2006.

The erection of the €1 million temporary 750-seat theatre in the grounds of Johnstown Castle must surely have topped the list of challenges for the June event. The sixty-six-meter long, fourteen-meter high venue was a sight to behold for the visitor, though space was limited, temperatures volatile and the screeching peacocks in the surrounds uncontrollable — all part of an altogether

Alessandro Riga in Pulcinella

IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE NO 32

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The Weill File

Der Silbersee remains a piece between genres, as the composer Kurt Weill once described it to his publisher. A collaboration between Weill and Germany's leading Expressionist playwright, Georg Kaiser, it was written in 1932-33 and given three simultaneous premieres in Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt on 18 February 1933. These were self-contained productions, each with its own director, designer and critical reception (the Leipzig director was Detlef Sierck, who later made a career in Hollywood as the film director Douglas Sirk). This approach was not unusual, at least for Kaiser: he was adept at maintaining his profile through multiple openings. Nor was *Der Silbersee* the first collaboration between Weill and Kaiser – their one-act operas *Der Protagonist* and *Zar lässt sich photographieren* had their premieres in 1926 and 1928 respectively – but it represented a departure in its combination of words and music. With a running time of approximately three hours, only sixty-five - seventy minutes are made up of Weill's music. This was an odd distribution of labour by any standards, but Weill had great respect for the older Kaiser and enjoyed an untroubled relationship with him (unlike with Brecht, his better known collaborator).

Der Silbersee is subtitled 'A Winter's Fairytale', and among its fairytale elements are the silver lake of the title, which freezes over despite spring having arrived, and the witch-like character Frau von Luber, who seizes ownership of a castle from the lottery winner Olim. In his earlier role as a po-



liceman, Olim shoots Severin, a poor outcast who raids a grocery shop out of hunger and desperation. After discovering that Severin has only stolen a pineapple, Olim suffers a crisis of conscience and decides to devote his lottery gains to improving Severin's life.

The Silver Lake that freezes over seems to offer a means of escape to the characters at the end, as well as hope. This hope is part of an unmistakably political commentary that runs through the work: Fennimore (Frau von Luber's niece) sings a ballad that denounces tyranny; theft by the poor is represented as understandable; the aristocracy (as personified by Frau von Luber) will stop at nothing to restore its wealth; and the forces of order are inhumane and draconian.

ian. As a police colleague of Olim pronounces, the poor should be rounded up and put in concentration camps.

This reference to concentration camps is chilling in a piece first seen weeks after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. In fact the second performance in Magdeburg was disrupted by Nazi protesters, who regarded *Der Silbersee* as a tendentious, Bolshevik piece. As a Jew, Weill had much to fear from the National Socialist regime, especially when the Reichstag burned down days after the *Silbersee* premieres. Performances of the piece were abandoned, Weill's works were subsequently banned and the composer went into exile, first in France and later in America. Kaiser fared little better: in 1933 he was expelled from the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1938 he went into exile in Switzerland.

Der Silbersee slipped into obscurity and was not performed again in Germany during the authors' lifetimes. Productions in the meantime have been infrequent, not least because of the hybrid nature of the work. Although the piece appears to require a cast of singing actors, it also involves a full orchestra, and the musical demands are many. Solutions have involved a reduced orchestration and score (Berlin, 1955), concert versions with musical numbers linked by narrations and semi-staged dialogue (Holland Festival, 1971; BBC Proms, 1996) and free adaptations with extra music (New York City Opera, 1980). London has seen two staged versions of *Der Silbersee* in English (Camden Festival, 1987; Broomhill Opera, 1999).

-ÁINE SHEIL

different kind of charm than the Wexford clientele is accustomed to. The Festival's three main operas were staged in this temporary theatre, and opera fans flocked in their thousands to Johnstown Castle over the course of eighteen June days.

Overall, it was the work performed in English (*Der Silbersee/The Silver Lake*) that was the bone of contention of this year's festival. Funded to the tune of \$25,000 by the New York-based Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, the "play with music" consists of far more "play" than "music" (see panel). But in both respects, the production was below par, apart from the contributions of the festival orchestra and the voice of Nina Bernsteiner in her portrayal of Fennimore.

The translation of the libretto from German to English, in a special festival commission by Rory Bremner, seemed to encourage a tendency towards a pantomime style, while director Keith Warner played down the vast psychological possibilities of the original libretto in favour of visual and grotesque comedy.

Overacting was the dominant mode, so that even the two main characters, Olim (Nigel Richards) and Severin (Simon Glesson) remained one-dimensional. In general, the bridge between musical theatre and theatre that this work negotiates was the production's downfall, with many roles miscast — and not only in terms of their singing

ability. Whether this work, where no music or song takes place for periods of up to forty minutes in the second and third acts, had a place in the festival programme at all was the most important, but perhaps rhetorical, question posed by many who attended it.

The double-bill of Stravinsky's "ballet with song", *Pulcinella*, and Ferruccio

With a reputation for flying in the face of conformity, Dalla made his intention to ruffle a few feathers apparent from the outset, as his Arlecchino, Marco Alemanno, stalked through the crowd in a generally intimidating fashion.

third operatic venture, was made in Dalla's native Bologna and premiered at the Teatro Communale there in March. With a reputation for flying in the face of conformity, Dalla made his intention to ruffle a few feathers apparent from the outset, as his Arlecchino, Marco Alemanno, stalked his way through the crowd in a generally intimidating fashion while the audience made their way to their seats. Alemanno performed this role to the point that reports of upset audience members calling for stewards to remove this irritating individual from the auditorium were regularly heard. One might also suspect that the gigantic mirror onstage served as another vehicle for Dalla to encourage the audience to reflect on their role in the operatic process.

News of the abilities of Alessandro Riga, the first dancer in Stravinsky's ballet, *Pulcinella*, had already reached Irish shores before he set a poised foot on the stage in the opening performance of the festival on 31 May. Choreographer Luciano Cannito devised a wonderfully humorous and often sexually fired composition with Riga and his colleagues, while the orchestra's performance of Stravinsky's unique neo-classical score, as conducted by Wexford's Artistic Director, David Agler, assisted greatly in the poised but fast-paced entertainment.

The latter performance of the evening was frenetic also. Garishly-colourful, punk costumes, much in keeping with elements of Dalla's own persona, lent themselves to and inspired a modernist take on the anarchic spirit of Busoni's work, itself an intriguing examination of questions of morality and immorality. Though there were strong acting performances from Alemanno and Sabina Willeit as Colombina, whose vocal abilities also impressed, there was a certain underdevelopment in Dalla's direction in this work, albeit most likely a deliberate one: he neglected to dwell in any conspicuous manner on the possibilities of emotion or psychology in Busoni's libretto. But what was presented was fantas-

truly odd adventure and feverishly charming. The production, as conceived and directed by the enormously successful Italian singer-songwriter, Lucio Dalla, in his



Rusalka (above) and The Tragedy of Carmen (below)



tically entertaining, like a glitz pop concert. By appealing to a different kind of audience in this way, Dalla has a real potential to contribute something significant to the field of opera.

Dvorák's *Rusalka* was always going to be the highlight at Johnstown Castle, if only because it was the only full-scale traditional opera staged there.

Brook's re-working of *Carmen* poses dramaturgical problems for directors, but in an entirely original staging, Steggall and designer Sarah Bacon skirted many of these.

The young Yorkshire director, Lee Blakeley, presented a carefully constructed and cohesive piece and in doing so, far surpassed the efforts of the other directors at John-

stown Castle. The most obvious triumph of the production was the imaginative personification of the Moon, to which set and costume designer Joe Vaněk contributed significantly. It is to the moon that *Rusalka* directs her woes and hopes, and the moon oversees the tragedy of the love story. Acrobat David Greeves wove himself in, out and around white cloths, which were suspended from the rafters. Far from a mere visual stunt, his pervasive presence and elegant movements and gestures emphasized a sense of space — physical and symbolical — between murky depths and dreamy heights. More than commenting subtly on the theme of the fragile balance of nature versus man, Greeves was an important vehicle for emotional expression.

Other memorable moments of insight and suggestion from Blakeley included a grotesque wedding banquet scene, where a slow-motion background technique emphasised the unbridgeable divide between *Rusalka*, a nymph, and her beloved human prince. The witch Jezibaba's equally grotesque colonnade of trapped souls provided an appropriate closing to the tale of the ultimate sacrifice made by *Rusalka*. The best vocal talents of the festival were reserved for this opera, namely Helena Kaupová (*Rusalka*), Bryan Hymel (Prince) and Kateřina Jalovcová (Jezibaba) and the chorus was at its best in the lyrical score.

One of the biggest talking points of the festival was the work of the British director, Andrew Steggall, in his presentation of Peter Brook's adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen*, *La Tragédie de Carmen*, which appeared as one of the trio of 'Shortworks' at the Dun Mhuire Theatre. Brook's re-working poses many dramaturgical problems for directors and in an entirely original staging, Steggall and designer Sarah Bacon skirted many of them. Shadow plays, extensive silence and the use of a tracked narration, all heirs to the *film-noir* format from which Steggall took his inspiration, infused the performance with a tense stillness.

Assured of the Wexford audience's familiarity with the tale of *Carmen*, the

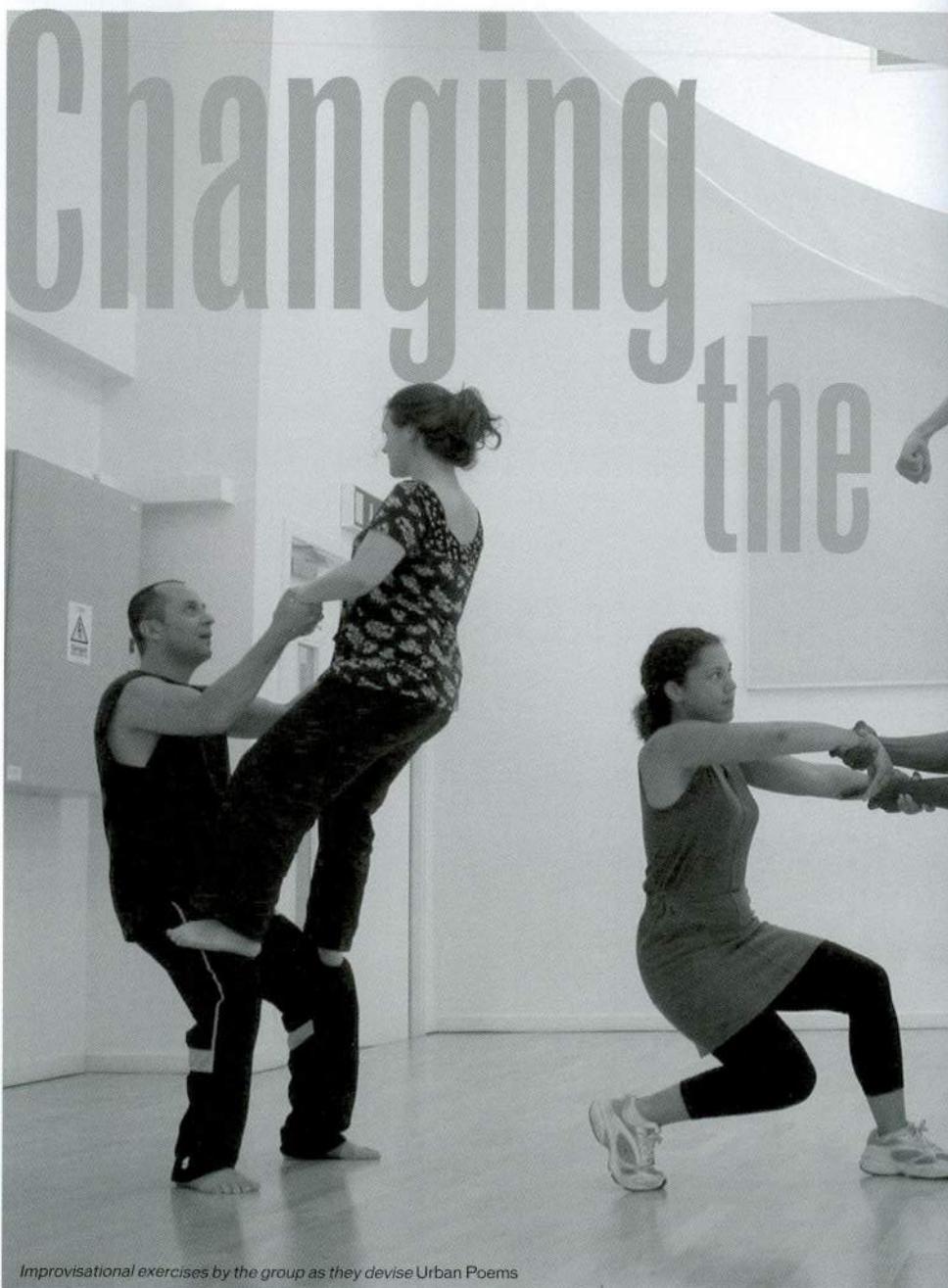


Wexford's new opera house takes shape.

director risked much by a clear casting against type and the exploration of a new characterisation of the volatile gypsy Carmen. All well and good and absolutely commendable, but some inconsistencies in this character development were unconvincing. Lina Markeby (Carmen) veered too quickly and erratically from a fiery, reckless woman, a sassy, cheery flirt and a feeble, vulnerable girl to convey any kind of clear picture. Within the constraints of a one-hour time frame Steggall perhaps wished for too much — an ambition that ought not to be criticised, of course. With a notch less contrivance and more awareness of the abilities of his cast, this would have been an indisputable success. Of the other Shortworks, Donizetti's *Rita* was a typically riotous piece of light entertainment, but Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* was a more serious look at human suffering through the experience of one woman, here performed admirably by Lauren Curnow. Sarah Bacon's minimalist monochrome set could have been matched by a less active Curnow, who might have portrayed the unrest of her heart-broken character in a less physical way.

For a variety of reasons Wexford Festival Opera will be eagerly awaiting its next chapter, which promises to be a milestone. It almost requires a suspension of disbelief to think that the doors of Ireland's first opera house will soon open. But some requisite smoothing of the pathway to those doors is still to be done.

Karen Dervan is Music Critic with the Sunday Tribune. Aine Sheil is Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Department of Drama, Trinity College Dublin.



Improvisational exercises by the group as they devise Urban Poems

Rhythm

Gúna Nua wanted to see what happened when six non-Irish actors got together to devise a piece reflecting their new lives in Dublin.

Director **DAVID PARNELL** describes how **URBAN POEMS** began to emerge from three weeks' improvisation with music, sound and verse.

SINCE WE SET UP GÚNA NUA THEATRE, PAUL MEADE and I have been interested in creating new work through collaboration, with theatre artists from different disciplines coming together to create a piece of work from scratch, exploring new forms. We had become excited about writing a play in verse, so we approached Gavin Kostick, playwright, Literary Manager with Fishamble Theatre Company, and also a fine poet. We asked him to take us through the rudiments of writing in verse, and then to become involved in developing a verse drama. Meanwhile we had developed a working relationship with composer and sound designer Paul McDonnell. We had discussed the idea of creating a soundscape for a play that would be integral to the script – something which could be performed live by the cast, even if they were not necessarily trained musicians, and which not only sounded good, but was essential to create the story.

Parallel to this was an idea for a play about the new generation of immigrants who have decided to make Ireland their home. We were interested in the way the culture of Dublin has altered over the last five to ten years, and the way the city has changed architecturally to meet the new demands of contemporary, single, urban living. We wanted to ask how we as theatre artists can challenge audiences accustomed to Ireland's largely homogenous theatre culture to engage with our new multi-cultural reality. The idea, nebulous as it was, centred around a group of strangers from different parts of the world living in an apartment building in the centre of Dublin, but not necessarily knowing each other, or anything about each others' cultures. We felt certain that there was great dramatic potential in this.

We set about auditioning actors based in Ireland but born of non-Irish parents. From this process, which involved movement, singing, rhythm exercises,

Solomon Ijigade and Eva Docolomanska in rehearsal.





The full cast working with poet/dramaturg Gavin Kostick (right).

verse-speaking and improvisation, we selected six actors and invited them to take part in our devising process in the Dublin City Council Lab on Foley Street. The six were Boris Cremene, Moldova; Eva Docolomanska, Slovakia; Shadaan Felfeli, India; Solomon Ijigade, Nigeria; Donna Nikolaisen, Ireland of West-Indian descent; Olivia Pouyanne, France. All are resident and working in Ireland. To this six we added Emma Colohan, an Irish actor we have worked

with in the past, and whose mix of improvisational and movement skill we felt would be a good addition to our team. We also wanted to have an Irish voice in the room, to

We were keen however, that it would not become an 'issue' play about race or racism. Better, we felt, simply to present the stories we came up with through the devising process.

act as a balance and reflection through which the non-Irish actors could respond.

We were keen however, that it would not become an 'issue' play about race or racism. Better, we felt, simply to present the stories we came up with through the devising process, and let the actors' nationalities say what they would about identity, culture and present-day Ireland.

We began in the first week with very general and relatively simple warm-up



exercises, in order to foster a feeling of trust among the participants. Each morning we would take the company through a physical warm-up, followed by a singing and rhythm warm-up with Paul McDonnell and then Gavin would work with them on the rudiments of verse speaking, and – more interestingly – verse writing, which would become an integral part of the work as the project evolved. One exercise we did was called 'naming' and was simply a case of giving everyday objects their name: The Chair. The Window. The Coat. The Door. From this we would set up different kinds of rhythms, for example an iambic pentameter: The door, the coat, the wall, the floor, the light. We would then work on swapping these words around the group (and sometimes translating words into other languages) and use them to set up polyrhythms. In this way we were able to familiarise the company with the idea of speaking and ultimately improvising in verse. And not only that, but speaking in verse in opposition to someone else speaking verse in a different rhythm.

Then each afternoon Paul Meade would take the actors through some improvisation exercises, but with very specific rules, so that the improvisations would not become free-form and endless. The company stands in a circle, then one actor approaches another actor and says a line. It can be something very simple: Have you got the time? Does the 32 bus leave from here? – or some-

thing more profound: I'm dying, don't leave me. The other actor must respond with one, and only one line. This can be as logical, reasonable, or completely mad as the actor likes, as long as it is said in response to what has been offered. Then we add the rule that each actor must carry one of four broad emotional states; happy, sad, angry, frightened. Again, each actor must respond to what

they are given with one line, and with one strict emotion. In this way we were able to build up a repertoire of quick-fire scenes, springing entirely from the actors' imaginations, but limited to the rules of the exercise. By

In the second week some of the actors' own cultural and ethnic backgrounds came into play, as we asked them to talk about childhood memories, and events which had shaped their lives. We did not ask that the stories be true.

limiting the actors to one line each, it means they had to really concentrate on their choice of words. It's astonishing the kind of ideas that can emerge out of this process.

In the second week, we began to concentrate on developing characters, and creating back-stories which would give them dimensions and motivations. This is where some of the actors' own cultural and ethnic backgrounds came into play, as we asked them to talk about childhood memories, and events which had shaped their lives. We did not ask that the stories necessarily be true, only that they reflect as closely as possible their own backgrounds – so that any characters we created through the process subsequently would resemble the actors who had created them. We continued to practice writing in verse, sometimes nonsense, just for the exercise of using rhythm in speech, sometimes cogent poems offering insights into the characters' thoughts and feelings. At the same time we continued to explore rhythm and sound, and experiment with creating a soundtrack live on stage. This could range from something as simple as rattling a set of keys or sweeping the floor, to performing a complicated rhythm on a djembe drum.

In our character building exercises we started with 'status' exercises, whereby an actor takes either a high or a low status and interacts with another actor to determine which of them is higher or lower in status. This sounds very simple in theory until you start to strip away the obvious clichés that people have about status. For example, does the head of a major bank have more or less status than a young overseas-aid volunteer? Does the status of a successful artist from Romania change when she can no longer speak the language of a new country? Could a nun in a silent order have high status? Also, from a theatrical point of view, how do we demonstrate status without relying on easy tricks?

To this process we then added the exercises from week one, where each actor would take on a broad emotional state. We then began to give them random lines of dialogue, which Paul Meade and I would write on the spot, and ask them to give them their own unique voice. Using these techniques we were slowly able to build up a database of characters, scenarios and themes.

Throughout the process, lunch-breaks became as fertile a ground for creative dialogue as the rehearsal room. Most of us would bring in our sandwiches and sit in the Lab's green room and discuss the work that was in progress – among other things – and general conversations would unfold about world history, politics, religion, the Irish asylum process and other matters. Each lunch break became a mini United Nations forum for artistic and general debate.

In the final week, we were joined by designer Laura Howe, who brought a visual sense to the process, thinking about staging in physical terms, and in terms of props and images that might be useful. We wanted to involve as many artists as possible from the earliest creative stage of a project. So often, actors and designers don't meet until the first day of rehearsals for a production, by which time most of the creative decisions have already been made.

We began to look more closely at story – how characters might interact, and how their actions might affect or influence other characters. This was among the most interesting parts of the process, as the characters began to come to life in front of our eyes. However, there was one very strict rule in all of this: everything they did had to have the specific rhythm of verse. It did not have to scan like a Shakespearean sonnet, but it had to have its own internal logic and sense of unified rhythm.

By the end of the third week we were in a position to perform a short piece of theatre, just for our own benefit. What came out was an almost Brechtian fusion of styles and ideas, moving from disciplined musical rhythms, to verse monologues, to naturalistic dialogue, to movement, mime and song. What was particularly gratifying was the way the individual personalities of the actors – more than simply their nationality – shone through and gave the piece an extra dimension and force.

We have now parted company with the actors for a while, and Paul Meade and I will continue to work with Paul Mac, Gavin and Laura, to sift through the many, many ideas that emerged, and to put some kind of theatrical shape on everything. The plan is for Paul Meade and I to write a script and to find a co-producer for next year. So *Urban Poems* could soon be taking over an apartment building near you.



David Parnell is the Co-Artistic Director of Gúna Nua Theatre Company.

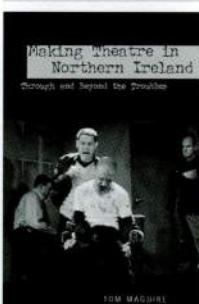
Making it Real

A ground-breaking new book examines the extent to which the gravitational pull of the Troubles has informed the making of theatre in Northern Ireland, writes

THOMAS CONWAY.

WRITING IN THE TIMES Literary Supplement in March 1972, four weeks before the publication of the Widgery Report on the events of Bloody Sunday, Brian Friel is clear what the Northern crisis means for the Irish playwright. "Matter is our concern, not form." Writers would have to address what exactly happened, confront the versions of events which power underwrites, and not get caught up in Postmodern niceties of whether it can be said to have happened at all. Indeed the whole of the postmodern arsenal and much of Modernism's (which Friel lists as: "Artaud, Peter

**MAKING THEATRE
IN NORTHERN
IRELAND:
Through and Beyond
the Troubles**
BY TOM MAGUIRE
University of Exeter
Press, 2007



Brook, Roger Planchon, Brecht, theatre of the absurd, happenings ...") is deemed unavailable to the Irish playwright. He warns, don't get caught up in the aesthetics of the metropolitan centres. Given the imbalances of power and incompatibilities operating here, the playwright has particular work to do: "we are still too busy with beginnings".

To read Tom Maguire's illuminating, groundbreaking study *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, you begin to understand to what degree Northern Ireland's writers have been hemmed in and corralled by the Troubles. You get less of a sense of what resistances

writers put up to the gravitational pull of the Troubles, but more on that later.

The almost total reliance on narrative drama has been theatre-makers' sole resort, such has been the force of the situation. Indeed the funding context has also contributed to delimitating the kinds of theatre being made. Maguire finds among his conclusions that "the Arts Council [of Northern Ireland] and other Arts funders have policed the representation of the conflict on behalf of the state. The cumulative effect is that ... most work which has staged the Troubles can be regarded at best as political plays rather than political theatre. The radical potential of performance has been blunted." Given this historical (and funding) context, theatre-makers have been overwhelmed, it seems, by an imperative to deal in actualities, in 'authenticity'. They have felt a need to be relevant, bear witness, testify and so to deal in realism, to draw on oral testimonies, to take on the single, subjective viewpoint of direct address and monodramas. They have also explored the Troubles as a conflict between two communal identities, a reading of the Troubles with which Maguire determinedly takes issue, eliding as it does, the structural arrangements of the Northern Ireland statelet and the responsibility, in particular, of the British state.

If *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland* is the authoritative study on Northern Ireland's theatre that it appears to be, its authority rests in good measure on its structural innovations and its theoretical scope. Chapters are organised around themes not plays, and the chapters themselves proceed in three steps: theoretical discussion around a theme; a delineation of representative plays in their performance context; and a theoretical appraisal of the meanings and resonances elicited from these plays in performance.

This structural framework provides an enviable clarity. The impression is that of a panning shot, a widening of the critical aperture to encompass all forms of political plays as they were performed in the province throughout the conflict and into the present. Beginning with plays that refer to their immediate context – in realist and documentary modes – the study goes on to consider plays that look to historical precedents for the present; then to plays that mediate the present through myth; plays that look at the experience of the Troubles through the filter of gender; plays that are created for and within specific communities; and finally plays that confront the challenge of the ceasefires.

Maguire even discerns broad trends in the chronological development of Northern Irish playwriting: initial rep-

resentations of the potential for cross-community unity later coalesce into the Romeo and Juliet, love-across-the-barricades type of play, to be replaced altogether by plays taking up the viewpoint of one community alone.

Maguire focuses on strategies in playwriting rather than on great plays. This is new. He seems to have seen everything that has been performed in Northern Ireland in over thirty years. This, too, is new. He tests his responses to the plays against contemporary theory. His study ably advances recent achievements in Irish Theatre Studies that place performance at their centre and have contemporary theory as a frame. He never fails to take account of what the plays achieve in performance and where they fall short. He never fails to see in that shortfall evidence of the kinds of theatrical failure contingent on a society in crisis.

Interestingly, Maguire sees a shortfall in each of the plays he brings under discussion, a shortfall from what is truly illuminating of the dynamics of the Troubles and so has a liberating potential. He is tough-minded in his political assessments, avowedly asserting that the Troubles owe their form to the structure and operation of a state in which the London government has played the critical part. (Maguire is forthcoming about his own angle of vision, coming as he does from a working-class, national-

ist background.)

Maguire has, I would argue, missed out on the degree to which the plays are in tension with this situation, are subversive thereby and so gesture towards what defeats the situation – for the theatremakers if not for the audience. For instance, he gives no account of the efficacy of stereotypes in performance, or has missed out on those nuances by which stereotypes are undercut by performance and exploded from within to give new living contours, as is true of Anne Devlin's and Gary Mitchell's work, to name just two writers.

The plays are at all times tested against the 'real', i.e. the political backdrop, an outline of which is a feature of each chapter. In this way he brings into a new light the ending of Stewart Parker's *Pentecost*. He demonstrates how its rhetorical resolution — in which a lead character imagines a way out for Northern Ireland's inhabitants rather than effecting it through the play's action — articulates new arrangements through language that ramify in the way that deeds would in other, less conflicted societies. Maguire testifies to "the powers of language" in Northern Ireland to "bring realities into existence", citing in support the quality of listening a reviewer noted for the play's performances in Enniskillen.

However, he neglects those plays: Friel's *Translations* and McGuinness's

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, in which a shortfall is so much more difficult to account for, arguing that they've had too much critical attention already. But to concentrate, as he does, on *Freedom of the City* without reference to *Translations* is arguably to do both a disservice. *Freedom of the City* attempts and self-avowedly fails where *Translations* succeeds, in finding an image for the distance between the coloniser and colonised and so to signify the power imbalance which regulates the space between. *Translations* accounts for the impossibility of 'interpreting between privacies' so much more convincingly that it might be considered to be *Freedom of the City's* second draft.

Maguire's study examines, but is itself conditioned by, the gravitational pull of the Troubles, arguably in limiting ways, focussing as he does, solely on "plays in which the political conflict is a dominant given". He perceives in the work of Northern Ireland's theatremakers what Friel had forecast in that 1972 article – "What the future of the Irish drama will be must ... shape and be shaped by political events" – without examining such pressures as Friel tellingly yields to here. Is there therefore a circularity to Maguire's discussion, in that what is a priori in the study is also its conclusion, that he sees what he has been predisposed to see? Is it a true account of the diversity of the-

atre practices in Northern Ireland such as he aspires to?

Does his study miss out on a tension within the plays he brings under discussion: a tension between the pressures the Troubles bring to bear on the writer's consciousness and what that consciousness tries to mould for itself? A tension born of an exasperation that the horizons of consciousness should be circumscribed by polarities and loyalties that their commonsense is leaving behind?

A refusal is perceptibly at work in all these plays: a refusal to subscribe to the modes of thought that perpetuate the Troubles. A growing complexity is being achieved in the efficacy by which that refusal is put to use in these plays. Perhaps a study that tracks what exactly is being refused at a given time might be worth attempting, to advance the findings here. In saying that, this is a nuanced, resonant study that contains within it enough grounds to meet the very challenges I have tried to put to it; a measure of its calibre is the complexity with which you find yourself arguing back. It brings the discussion of theatre in Northern Ireland to a new level and will prove indispensable for practitioners, students and the public from now on.

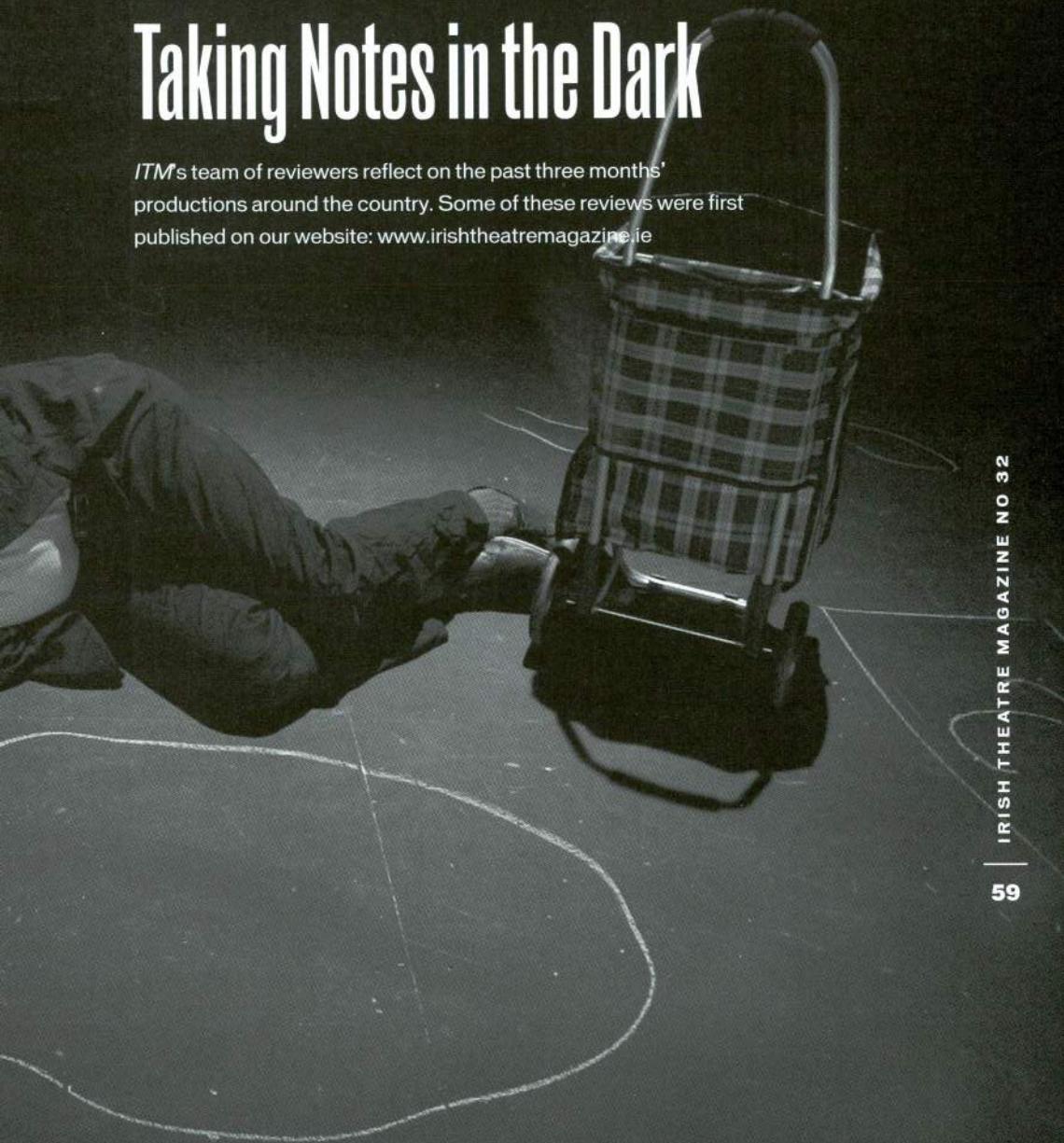
Thomas Conway is Literary Manager with Druid Theatre Company and a freelance director.





Taking Notes in the Dark

ITM's team of reviewers reflect on the past three months' productions around the country. Some of these reviews were first published on our website: www.irishthemagazine.ie



Peter Trant in *The Revenant*

Let's Try it with Rhyme

New writing from seasoned and emerging Irish playwrights has brought some familiar faces and forms back onto the stage recently. Our critics explore what was new in Irish writing this season.

TERMINUS

by Mark O'Rowe

Peacock Theatre

Directed by Mark O'Rowe

Set and Costume design: Jon Bauser

Lighting: Philip Gladwell

Original Score: Philip Stewart

With: Andrea Irvine, Aidan Kelly

and Eileen Walsh.

9 June - 7 July 2007

Reviewed 4 July

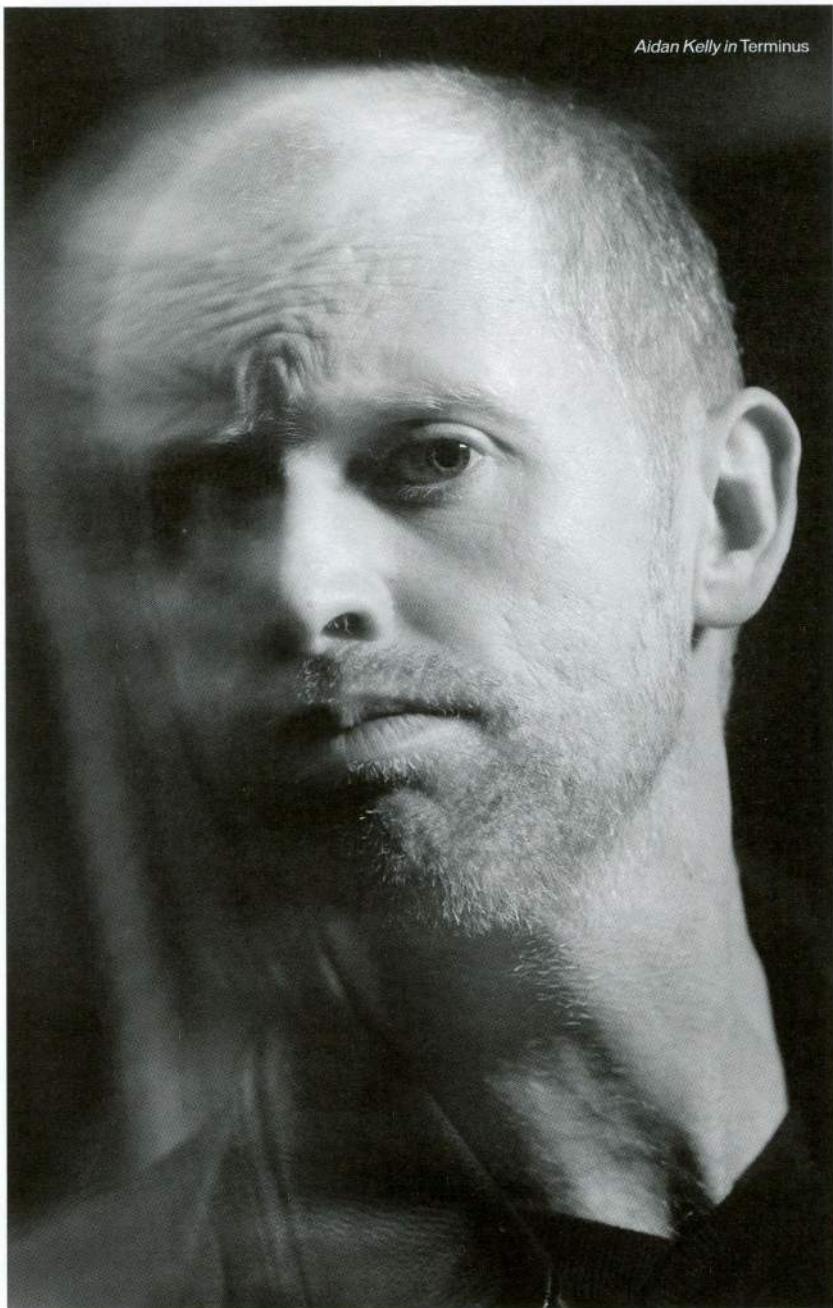
BY BRIAN SINGLETON

of vile instincts including bestiality, and male violence. *Terminus* revisits the character-types of its predecessors.

O'Rowe divides up his one hour and forty-five minute play into three cycles of monologues delivered by three characters, A, B and C (two women and a man). No other information is given in the programme or text apart from the characters' ages and thus we are forced to pay particular attention to the oral communication. The most striking thing about the text, despite its prose-like appearance on the page, is its unrelenting rhyming from sentence to sentence and phrase to phrase. It has a Joycean quality and O'Rowe appears to revel in the stricture that he has set himself. Some of the rhyming appears self-consciously absurd and occasionally he sets up sentences that appear to have no rhyming possibility at all, but every time he manages to extricate himself from the convolution. O'Rowe directs the whole thing with a great sensitivity to the rhythms provided by the rhyming. At times the

MARK O'ROWE'S RE-ADOPTION OF THE monologue was not without risks, given his previous mixed fortunes with the form. His first monologue play *Howie the Rookie*, featuring back-to-back monologues by two suburban Dublin thugs, has enjoyed enormous success since its premiere in 1999 and was revived last year in the Peacock's 4 x 4 season. His monologue play for women (*Crestfall*), however, produced by the Gate Theatre and directed by Garry Hynes in 2003 played to poor houses and critical ire. In it, three rural Irish women succumb unremittingly to the basest

Aidan Kelly in Terminus



language assaults; at others it draws us in, plays with us and spits at us with invective. But at all times the author's mastery and skill is on display. Listening to it, one perhaps needs to adopt musical terminology to make sense of its theatrical power, sensing at times that it has the qualities of both cantata and fugue.

It is not just the mastery of the author/conductor, though, that is on display. The three actors (Andrea Irvine, Eileen Walsh and Aidan Kelly) give virtuoso performances, to continue the musical analogy. They are both instruments and players through which this musical text is interpreted. Performing such a text appears extraordinarily difficult as it demands of the actors to recover at times from moments of recounted violence that creep up out of nowhere and send the audience reeling. For instance, character C, played by Kelly, ingratiates himself Howie-the-Rookie-like with his hapless bravado until the point that he reveals he is a sadistic serial killer and recounts one instance of his heinous crime in graphic detail. The audience is stunned into silence. At his next outing, Kelly, however, manages to hook us back into a quasi-sympathy for his own analogous devil of a character. Similarly Andrea Irvine (as character A) starts out as the victim of violence before recounting an incident in which she too lashes out, seemingly unchar-

acteristically, with a savagery for which we have not been prepared. Eileen Walsh, who turns out to be character A's daughter, is spared those transitions and is able to sustain our sympathy throughout with a performance of the utmost sensitivity. Thus, O'Rowe provides these actors with a script that permits them to display their talent and skill without the clutter of dialogue and realism.

The production, designed by Jon Hauser, is set inside a gilt stage frame with shards of glass still attached. Some of those shards on the floor act as platforms for the three actors. It is a clearly violent metaphor for the world of savagery they recount. Philip Gladwell's lighting design is sparse and illuminates the three characters to instigate in turn their storytelling. The cues are timed to coincide with each of the shared sentences that link the three sets of monologues. As a theatrical experience, one is never fully drawn into the stories, as they are all written in the past tense. Instead our principal focus is on the virtuosity of the practitioner, with O'Rowe jolting us out of his mesmerising narrative with two graphically violent tales that set us squirming in our seats. We can only marvel at the author's craft and the consummate skills of his interpreters.

Brian Singleton is Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

THE REVENANT

by Patrick McCabe

Galway Arts Festival Production

Directed and designed by Joe O'Byrne

Music by Gavin Friday

and Herbie Macken with Peter Trant

Druid Lane Theatre

Reviewed July 22 2007

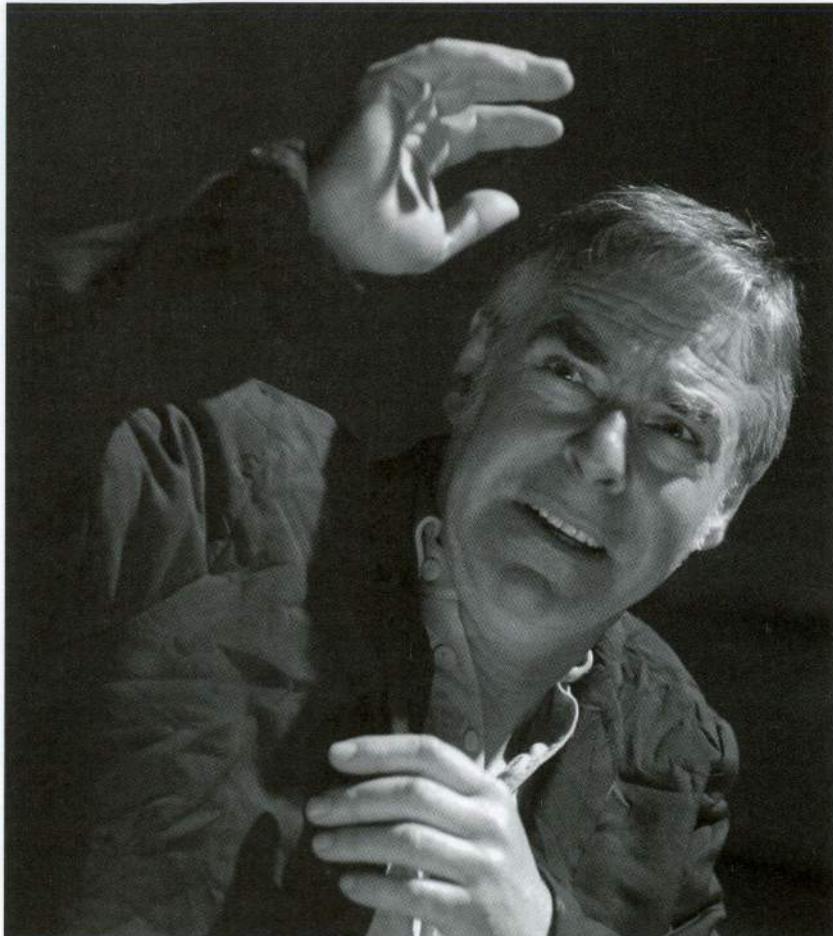
BY BELINDA McKEON

IT'S HARD NOT TO FEEL PITY FOR THOSE who are clearly in pain. Or not to flinch with empathy as the world of the other glides too closely, too sharply, to the store of memories and losses that makes up the self. Because they are at the heart of being human, these emotions are fiercely powerful – but they are fleeting, they are felt in jabs and in pangs. They can be sustained only if they are complex enough to take root beyond the shallow territory of reaction and reflex.

Theatre, at its best, allows for such a taking root; indeed, it compels it. But when emotion seems slapdash or is thinly spread, there is no art form less forgiving. In Patrick McCabe's play *The Revenant*, which received its world premiere at the Galway Arts Festival this year, Francie Brady is already a character crushed and degraded by the turns of his world. To see him further flattened by the machinations of McCabe's writing, and of Joe O'Byrne's staging, is dispiriting, and disturbing, but in all the wrong ways. What's stirred up by

this return to the narrator of McCabe's superb novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and the title character of his play of the same year, *Frank Pig Says Hello*, is not sympathy, or empathy, or any emotion more lasting than a flicker of vague disquiet; what it stirs, rather, is a growing impatience, a restlessness, finally a bafflement. In middle age, in a shadowy purgatory that may be the endpoint of madness or of death, Francie Brady is suffering, is sorry, is frightened; that much McCabe's script hammers home, again and again.

But to inform an audience of these states is one thing; to make that audience feel for, and care about, these states is another. In the nightmare to which he is condemned, Francie (now Frank) must wander through the small town of his 1950s childhood, tripping and laughing and weeping over snatches of memory from that time as he goes; pop songs, flashbacks to the schoolyard, the names of the friends and neighbours and enemies who have long left him behind. As Frank, a grey-faced man with a haunted, hesitant gait, Peter Trant gives a masterful performance, summoning the ghosts of Brady's past so that he can plead and remonstrate with them on a suitably bleak, empty stage; only a tomb-like structure watches over him, only the ragged chalk lines of a hopscotch game offer him guidance underfoot. There is a bare intensity to



Peter Trant in *The Revenant*

Joe O'Byrne's staging, and to Trant's possession of the dark space, and this is matched by McCabe's language, weaving the grim poetry of a once-insolent voice strained through countless punishing years. Frank is sorry: for the murder he committed, for the pain he has caused, for the evil he fears he has added to the world. Frank

is lonely: for the childhood pals who turned from him, for the community he once moved through so fluently, for the mother he lost and the father he scarcely had. Frank is frightened: of the past, of the present, of the future, of the shadows and threats which flit nightly through his body and through his mind.

Frank Brady says all of these things, but he says little more; beyond his evident suffering, there is little else to his tale, and while this might make sense within the narrow frame of his worldview - the worldview of a shrunken, fretful man - within the frame of the creations of O'Byrne and McCabe, it makes for an unfeasibly narrow vision. A comparison to the Moors killer Ian Brady may torment Frank, and may make for a horror on his part which is, at first, genuinely moving, but to foist this comparison on the audience again and again, in the same, undiluted form, makes not for a compounded power, but for a sense of shallow, even dull monotony.

The appearance onstage of headless, trench coat-clad figures who circle around Frank, driving him deeper into his despair, should have an eerie effect and bring the drama to an unbearably poignant climax - that Frank has no escape from his own darkness becomes at this point horribly clear. But, thanks in no small part to astonishingly pedestrian lighting and to Gavin Friday's cheaply maudlin score, it brings it instead to a sense of caricature, of farce, and of lunacy, which surely is far from the effect McCabe had in mind.

Belinda McKeon is a critic and journalist based in New York, where she teaches writing at Columbia University.

TXTS - A SEASON OF THREE NEW IRISH

PLAYS WRITTEN BY WOMEN

Tall Tales Theatre Company

Bewley's Café Theatre

20 June – 18 August 2007

HUE AND CRY

by Deirdre Kinahan

Directed by David Horan.

With Karl Shiels and

Will O'Connell.

20 June – 7 July

Reviewed 3 July

FIREWORKS

by Isseult Golden

Directed by Alan King.

With Dorothy Cotter, John Cronin

and Neil Watkins.

11 – 28 July

Reviewed 17 July

TIC

by Elizabeth Moynihan

Directed by Geoff Gould.

With Aoife Duffin, Denis Foley,

Alison McKenna and

Russell Smith.

1 – 18 August

Reviewed 2 August

BY SARA KEATING

TALL TALES THEATRE COMPANY, whose work is dedicated to producing plays by female writers, marked their tenth anniversary this year by commissioning three one-act plays from three Irish women writers. The



Karl Shiels and Will O'Connell in *Hue and Cry*

work was performed at Bewley's Café Theatre as the *Txts* series. From the marketing of the *Txts* project to the all-female writing workshops being run in conjunction with it, Tall Tales appeared to be asking for their work to be read as an empowerment of the Irish female writer. Positioned in a climate where women writers are traditionally under-represented, the *Txts* series can be understood as a social intervention of sorts; an attempt to showcase talent that is neglected by the arguably patriarchal infrastructures of Irish theatre.

However, such a deliberate positioning poses a series of questions; most important of which is what kind of writing do we expect from Irish women playwrights at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Unfortunately, the answers that the *Txts* series yields are deeply problematic. From seriously conservative representations of the modern woman to the under-representation of women altogether; from the fact that the three plays in the *Txts* series were all directed by men to the fact that the three plays provided twice as many roles for male actors as for women; there was something deeply unsettling about the execution of Tall Tales' project. An analysis of the individual plays helps to throw light on the different levels of responsibility that each writer, and that Tall Tales' as a production company, must take.

Deirdre Kinahan's *Hue and Cry* opened the nine-week programme. Kinahan, the Artistic Director of Tall Tales, has had seven plays performed under the company's name, and *Hue and Cry* showcased her skill for social observation and her flair for physical comedy. A simple story of two estranged cousins brought together by a family funeral, *Hue and Cry* explores family conflict through the lens of grief. Kevin (Will O'Connell) and Damian (Karl Shiels) are positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum of social stereotypes. Kevin is a well-spoken, middle-class, effeminate choreographer, with a tendency to patronise although his heart is in the right place. Damian is a clumsy boorish ex-junkie who has no interest in, or understanding of the arts. As the brothers thrash out their differences they somehow manage to find forgiveness in dance.

On the small stage at Bewley's Café Theatre, Steve Neale's fractured walls evoked the broken home at the heart of Kinahan's story. Shiels' vulnerability as the abandoned Damian was underscored rather than undermined by his strong physical presence on the tiny stage, although the lean and edgy O'Connell never managed to find corporeal assurance despite his character's career as a performance artist.

Although Kinahan's script is peppered with local humour and



Dorothy Cotter and John Cronin in *Fireworks*

poignant physical comedy - especially in the scenes when Shiels is left alone on stage - the forty-minute time-frame for the play never really allowed the writing to get beyond the clichés of the emotionally inexpressive male and the "new man" that the characters represent. Furthermore, underlying *Hue and Cry*'s central interest in masculinity compromised by circumstance, there is a deeper sense of cliché, one made more unsettling by the feminist thrust of the *Txts* series. As Kinahan's script evokes the absent mothers of the cousins' stories, she seems to position women both as idealised spectres of the men's potential salvation and as fig-

ures on whom the entire subtext of their spiritual crises can be blamed. In *Hue and Cry* it's the men who do the crying; the women cause the tears and must also wipe them away.

In Iseult Golden's play *Fireworks* there is no question that the female character is responsible for the frustrated fate of her partner's current situation. *Fireworks* is Golden's first original play, although her work with Inis Theatre has involved collaborative devising and textual adaptation. *Fireworks'* delightful opening - a silent film of sorts, scored by Marion McEvoy's sound design - showcases Golden's own background as an actress. However, her attempt to marry

Alison McKenna in Tic



camp physical comedy with a serious diagnosis of a dysfunctional relationship proved difficult to sustain.

Set in a café struggling to make ends meet (the site-specific ironies are more distracting than convincing), *Fireworks* takes place during the midnight-to-morning shift of a security guard who has been snubbed by his boyfriend for having bad hair. As the security guard frets and frowns and makes up with his lover, a different drama is unfolding under his nose: a double burglary and a romantic reunion. Daniel (John Cronin) and Laura (Dorothy Cotter) are ex-lovers who find themselves breaking into the café for different reasons. By the time the three o'clock watch comes around, they have figured out a way to steal from the safe together. It is a typical resolution: reconciliation through cooperation.

However, the tiny Bewley's stage stretches the absurdities of Golden's plot beyond the ridiculous. The suspense and physical comedy just cannot work on the cramped set, which has been redesigned by Steve Neale for *Fireworks* but fails to use what little space there is on the stage to full effect. Even more unbelievable than the unfolding plot, however, are the characters, who are confined by stereotype. Cotter's Laura is the "needy girlfriend" type, whose whimpering, simpering, attention-seeking irrationality is devoid of any sympathy. Combined with the sexu-

ally-objectified step-mother/rival, *Firework's* representation of women is almost offensive: the modern woman might be socially emancipated, but she seems determined to defy any empowered position within the microcosm of Golden's fictional world.

Neil Watkins' camp and cartoonish performance as the unnamed security guard comes closest to convincingly embodying the script's stereotypes. When Watkins' self-conscious performance is placed against the naturalistic performances of Cronin, and Cotter, in particular, the tone of *Fireworks* collapses into confusion. Perhaps Alan King's direction is at fault, then. Perhaps *Fireworks* was not meant to be a realist social comedy but a stylised sitcom driven by grotesquery: there is room for critique in caricature, but only when it displays a knowingness such as that embodied by Watkins' performance.

Collusion, rather than confusion, is the recurring theme of Elizabeth Moynihan's play *Tic*. Set in the late Nineteenth Century, *Tic* examines the place of women within Victorian society. Woman (Alison McKenna) has been confined to a remote tower on the outskirts of her husband's estate due to her aberrant and uncontrollable behaviour, which in its most awful manifestations reveals itself as a series of spontaneous verbal and physical tics. Through a series of interactions with her maid (Aoife Duffin),

her husband (Man played by Russell Smith) and her doctor (Denis Foley), we begin to see the emotional effects of captivity on McKenna's character.

Geoff Gould's direction places all four actors on stage throughout, each coming to life as if they too had been possessed by a tic, although McKenna's opening embodiments of her character provide the most scope for playing with this theatrically. Neale's set design, adapted anew again for this production, easily evokes the sense of claustrophobia necessary to sustain McKenna's growing agitation. Combined with the number of bodies on the stage and Woman's physical outbursts, the stage is as confined as the strict emotional space in which Woman is being forced to conform.

Unfortunately, Moynihan's decision to diagnose McKenna's disorder as Tourette's Syndrome takes away from what could have been a more interesting study of the social codes of behaviour of Victorian women. However, the attempted exorcism of her demons by the priest and the attempted exploitation of her by the doctor, are sufficient to demonstrate how Woman is merely a pawn in the man's world of the period, even if her reunion with her husband seems less an acceptance on his part of her 'difference' than an assurance on her part that she will try to control herself.

That *Tic* should at least raise such

issues within the limited format of the one-act play makes it by far the most interesting of the works in the *Txts* series. It also reminds us of how Tall Tales have failed to exploit the political issues that seem to lie at the heart of their project. The series undoubtedly succeeded in creating a platform for the voice of women writers to be heard. However, the frameworks in which these voices were heard, and their echoes, seemed to reinforce rather than interrogate the structures that have kept Irish female playwrights on the fringes of the theatrical canon for so long.

Sara Keating is a critic and journalist.

MUSHROOM

By Paul Meade

Storytellers Theatre Company

Directed by Liam Halligan

Set and Lighting Design: Marcus Costello

Costume Design: Catherine Fay

Sound design: Denis Clohessy

With: Cristina Catalina, Carl Kennedy,

Natalia Kostrzewska, Emmet Kirwin,

Janusz Sheagall, Dan Tudor

On tour 5 June – 7 July 2007

Reviewed on 4 July at the

Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray

BY DEREK WEST

TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO JOHN Crowley's *True Lines* articulated a new sense of Irishness, depicting a group of global wanderers, freed



Janusz Sheagall in Mushroom

from the taboos of the previous generations, which had been held in thrall by church and nationalism. While the umbilical cord was not altogether severed, the four twenty-somethings played out their lives in post-wall Berlin, Arizona, Africa and Australia, rather than Ballybeg, Boston or Belfast. It was a refreshing piece, novel in language and structure.

Paul Meade's *Mushroom* harks back to *True Lines*, but, by contrast, his work portrays four immigrants drawn to Ireland by the tiger-miracle, from Poland, Romania, Russia, and one young man of Irish birth who goes in search of his family origins in Bucharest. Like the characters in *True Lines*, they are restless, cut off from their roots, trapped in an alien culture, trying to connect, their stories unfolding through a series of parallel, criss-crossing and occasionally intersecting narratives.

The primary setting is a mushroom farm in County Monaghan: an enclosed, shadowy space in semi-darkness, detached from a community environment, where lives of not-so-quiet desperation (characterised by loneliness, incomprehension and isolation) are played out. At a literal level it conveys the underbelly of Irish affluence: illegal employees, underpaid and exploited, hiding from the glare of officialdom.

It would appear from his own account in the programme, that Meade has searched for the authentic and recorded with accuracy the lives he encountered in mushroom farms, chicken sheds, pubs, chippers and filling stations across the border counties. Immigration has become part of the Irish experience, linking it to a wider European context. Marina Lewycka has graphically trawled the equivalent territory in England in her vivid novel *Two Caravans*. Farm in the Cave Theatre Studio (Prague), which had a short tour in Ireland in July, has found in physical theatre and folk music a medium to viscerally express the emotional turmoil of the (returned) emigrant. The challenge is to convert the original happenings into a form (be it prose, dance or drama) that matches the emotional forces at play.

Despite the fact that Meade has engaged in a collaborative exercise with immigrants, director and actors, he struggles with the material, uncertain about an appropriate dramatic form and comes up, it appears, with three plays within the one. The first is about types – the young abroad, trapped within the verbal inadequacies of trying to communicate in a foreign language. So when Ewa (Natalia Kostrzewska) berates the Irishwoman who has seduced her husband, she is reduced to vehement, screaming obscenity;

Ion, a young Romanian (Emmet Kirwin) who is attracted to her, falters in his courtship because – with English as the *lingua franca* between them – he can only communicate a direct, blundering physical desire. Ewa and her colleague at the mushroom farm, Maria (Cristina Catalina) are left to develop a friendship through a kind of gruff, almost boorish, form of conversation.

This may represent the crossed-wires of inter-cultural communication, but by depriving the characters of their own language (or a dramatic equivalent) Meade denies them too much. (I am reminded of a friend from Seoul who speaks English in an abrupt, pragmatic tone but claims "you should hear me speak Korean - then I can be really poetic."

'Play Two' (or the second strand) focuses on Ewa's father, Andrzej (Janusz Sheagall), a lone free spirit who drifts from responsibility in search of the ancient and eternal. In soliloquies of some beauty – but also somewhat sententious – he scans the night skies or contemplates the mysteries of Newgrange. But somehow he's out on a limb, caught between being a character in the play and a choric dramatic device set apart from the others.

The third play, the most successful, is also the most conventional: it is about a father/uncle and a son

finding each other; it is derivative (drawing on the Irish-English sequences in *Translations*) in that it explores two individuals with no common language learning how to communicate and to love.

Like 'Play One', it is about breaking down barriers but it is warm and it is comic, because it is in the hands of two very fine actors – Carl Kennedy, a young man of emotional intelligence and theatrical sensitivity, and Dan Tudor from the National Theatre of Bucharest, a wonderful and warm master of the humanly humorous. This tale is the most individual and most affecting.

If the register of the dialogue falters, so does the structure – with so much to carry, the play becomes a series of barely connected episodes. The attempt to tie up the loose ends and find symmetry is artificial and unsatisfactory. The Storytellers collaboration should go on, in a search to match form and content, to find an appropriate language to express these new strands of experience. This is ground-breaking work, but in theatrical terms the going is still too rough.

Derek West is a member of the Arts and Education Committee advising the Arts Council and administers 'Creative Engagement', an arts-promotion scheme for secondary schools.

Taking It to the Streets

This summer Irish theatre companies broke out - onto sand dunes and naval bases - to find new spaces and new ways in which to present some timeless stories.

WOYZECK

by Georg Büchner

(translated by Gregory Motton)

Corcadorca

Directed by Pat Kiernan

Set and Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

Costume Design: Joan Hickson

Original Score: Mel Mercier

Sound Design: Matthew Padden

With: David Pearse, Frank O'Sullivan,

Lucianne McEvoy, Malcolm Adams, Anthony

Morris, Rory Nolan, Gina Moxley

The Naval Base, Haulbowline Island, Cork

June 18 – 1 July 2007

Reviewed 27 June

BY BERNADETTE CRONIN

SINCE IT FIRST STAGED AN ADAPTATION of *A Christmas Carol* in the Cork City Gaol in 1994, Corcadorca has become known for its use of novel sites in and around Cork city for its theatre productions. This has created an expectation among its audiences, which was not disappointed by the production of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* performed in the naval base on Haulbowline Island.

Based on a real murder case in

Leipzig in 1821, Büchner's Nineteenth Century dramatic fragment features the first working-class hero: the cuckolded Franz Woyzeck, a lowly fusilier who, maddened by sexual jealousy and his perpetual cycle of torturous philosophical reflections on questions of life and death, murders his lover Marie.

Hierarchical structures and economic pressures and inequalities are central to the piece: Woyzeck is a victim of his social standing, used as a scapegoat and guinea-pig by higher-ranking members of society. Ironically, those who exploit Woyzeck are confounded by his philosophical reflections and insights; in short, his superior mind. Yet Woyzeck, having internalized the values of the society of which he is a product, never questions his position in the social order. While most of the secondary figures are sketches of types with impersonal names such as Captain, Doctor and Drum Major, Woyzeck and Marie are more three-dimensional; we gain an insight into their inner processes through their monologues and the in-

Sebastian Thommen and Gina Moxley in Woyzeck

timate exchanges between them. These shifts between public and private spheres mark the unfolding of the human tragedy, which culminates in Woyzeck destroying the object of his devotion.

On certain levels, Corcadorca's concept for a promenade production in the military setting of Haulbowline naval base lent itself appropriately to Büchner's play, not just because the main protagonist is a military man but also because the play is episodic: as in the plays of Brecht, who was greatly influenced by Büchner, each scene is autonomous and yet taken together they form a whole. For each of the movements of Corcadorca's production, the audience was led through a series of very individual settings on

the naval base, creating the sense of many autonomous units of performance within the whole. The naval base offered a large selection of buildings, windows, courtyards, platforms, walls, of which ample use was made. A fairground scene, for example, took place in a large yard with a ready-made elevated platform for the various spectacles, and cellars served as fairground vignettes such as a fortune-telling booth. Quirky little innovations were created such as a wire spanning the entire courtyard between Marie's window and a supporting post at the other end, used by Woyzeck to pass money to Marie in a tin can over the heads of the spectators.

What the outdoor setting couldn't offer, however, was scope for the



staging of Woyzeck's and Marie's interior processes, which are central to the thematic concerns of the play, with the result that they did not acquire the three-dimensionality that makes Büchner's central figures stand out from the other characters. I often found myself straining to see and hear; voices were amplified electronically when the distance between actors and spectators made it absolutely necessary, yet the eye was frustrated by the distance to the figures. Even in the close-up scenes it was often difficult to see and hear the performers. In some respects the staging seemed like theatre re-mediating film, yet I found myself thinking that it needed to be either a film or a piece of indoor theatre, as the focalising effect of a camera was missing as were the possibilities of intimacy that an indoor space offers.

On occasion the site itself seemed to compete with rather than serve the needs of the performance: Cobh itself, resplendent under the star-lit June evening sky, jarred significantly with Woyzeck's pronouncement in the opening scene that the place was 'cursed' and Marie's reference in the final scene to the town looking 'so gloomy'.

Corcadorka's *Woyzeck* was another great event in the history of the company's interfacing with novel locations for staging plays in Cork; it took the public into an historic site that otherwise remains unknown territo-

ry to most. It boasted a wonderful team of performers that were superbly cast, with great costume and sound design. And yet I felt that a substantial amount of the actors' craft and the concerns of the play were sacrificed to the setting.

Bernadette Cronin is a performer and part-time lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at University College Cork.

**LIZZIE LAVELLE AND
THE VANISHING OF EMLYCLOUGH**

by Tom Swift

The Performance Corporation

Directed by Jo Mangan

Set Design: Sinead O'Hanlon

Costume Design: Sinead Cuthbert

and Teresa McKeone

Original Music: Sam Jackson

With Paul Connaughton, Niamh Daly, Noni

Stapleton, Stephen Swift, Lisa Lambe,

Cillian O'Donnachadha, Eamonn Hunt

Carne Golf Course, Belmullet

27 – 28 July, 3 – 4 August

Reviewed 5 August

BY TANYA DEAN

ONE OF THE FOIBLES OF SITE-SPECIFIC performances is that they are quite often beholden to the good will of the weather gods: deities that seem to be distinctly lacking in benevolence of late. The Performance Corporation optimistically chose the sand dunes of Carne Golf Course, Belmullet, Co.

Mayo as the (admittedly spectacular) setting for their latest theatrical road trip, *Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough*: unfortunately, its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean means this setting is more vulnerable than most to the casual spite of the Western weather. The performance on the Third of August had to be cancelled due to gale-force winds, and when we arrived on the evening of Saturday the Fourth of August, we were informed that the evening's performance would be delayed by half-an-hour while they waited for the rain to pass. Half-an-hour stretched longer and longer, until eventually it was announced that the evening's performance would – reluctantly – have to be cancelled. Come back tomorrow afternoon, they urged, and we'll try one last time. And on Sunday the Fifth of August? Blazing, almost mockingly perfect sunshine. Ah, the caprice of the weather gods.

As we tempted sunburn and settled ourselves on the sturdy benches set to the back of a vast natural amphitheatre carved into the sand dunes, we had time to notice that dotted across the performance space were mysterious sand-coloured chimneys and the odd church spire, symbolizing two villages swallowed up by the sand. This ingeniously simple set by Sinead O'Hanlon looked as if had been carved from the sand itself. Similarly, *Lizzie Lavelle*'s tale of

the two fictitious warring parishes of Emlyclough North and Emlyclough South has been sculpted from The Performance Corporation's research into the folklore of the Mullet peninsula, following an invitation from Mayo County Council to develop a new piece of theatre for the Erris region.

The performance kicked off with a jump as the grizzled narrator (a garrulous Eamonn Hunt) burst from the sands with a sputter, and began to tell the story of two lovers separated by the timeless and fathomless hatred between the divided parishes of Emlyclough South and Emlyclough North. The audience watched bemusedly as a giant ball soared in majestically from offstage, and silently bounced once – twice – then, with a roar, the two opposing factions erupted from either side of the dunes and scrambled across the sand to engage in a bloodthirsty ballgame, the battleground upon which the two villages play out their enmity. In a vicious tussle, the strongest players from each team – Lizzie Lavelle (Lisa Lambe) from Emlyclough South and Michael Meenaghan (Paul Connaughton) from Emlyclough North – locked eyes... and with a goofy smile and a flutter of eyelashes, they lost possession of the ball and their hearts, all in one fell swoop.

As befits a Gaeltacht area, a fair portion of the text was *as Gaeilge*. It's

Paul Connaughton in Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough



been a while since I dusted off my *cúpla focail*, but – rusty as they were – playwright Tom Swift's engaging style and the deft mingling of English and Irish (translated by Fíona Ní Dhuibhir) meant that the story was never lost in translation. However, the pace lagged somewhat when the two lovers were separated and forced to seek their individual fortunes in the big bad world. Just as Lizzie and Michael seemed to temporarily lose some of their drive and chutzpah when distanced from their birthplace, so too did the performance suffer from a temporary loss of the fierce energy and snappy storytelling that made the Emlyclough scenes (particularly the ballgame) so compulsively watchable. But love will always find a way. Re-united at last, the duo make their final exit together without pomp and fanfare, determined to find someplace in the world where their love can grow. Left to fester in its hatred, Emlyclough is eventually swallowed by time and sand.

Jo Mangan's adroit direction skillfully interweaves the Ur-narrative of star (sand?)-crossed lovers with the various elements that make this production unique: the stunning location; the colour, brio and inimitable *je ne sais quoi* of The Performance Corporation's distinctive story-telling style; and the energy of the cast and ensemble (made up of local community members). The result – much like its two protagonists

– manages to triumph over a hostile environment to create something unique and wonderful.

Tanya Dean is the General Manager of Irish Theatre Magazine and writes about theatre for Totally Dublin.

SLAT

Featherhead Productions

Director/Composer: Trevor Knight

Choreographer: Gyohei Zaitsu

Design and Installation: Alice Maher
and Paul Keogan

Performed by Maki Watanabe
Radisson SAS Hotel, Galway

16 – 21 July

Reviewed 20 July

LOVE AND OTHER DISGUISES

By Colm Maher

Catastrophe Theatre and Chrysalis Dance

Director: Paul Hayes

Choreographer: Judith Sibley

With: Duncan Lacroix, Judith Sibley, Leighton Morrison, Lucy Casson and Patrick O'Donnell

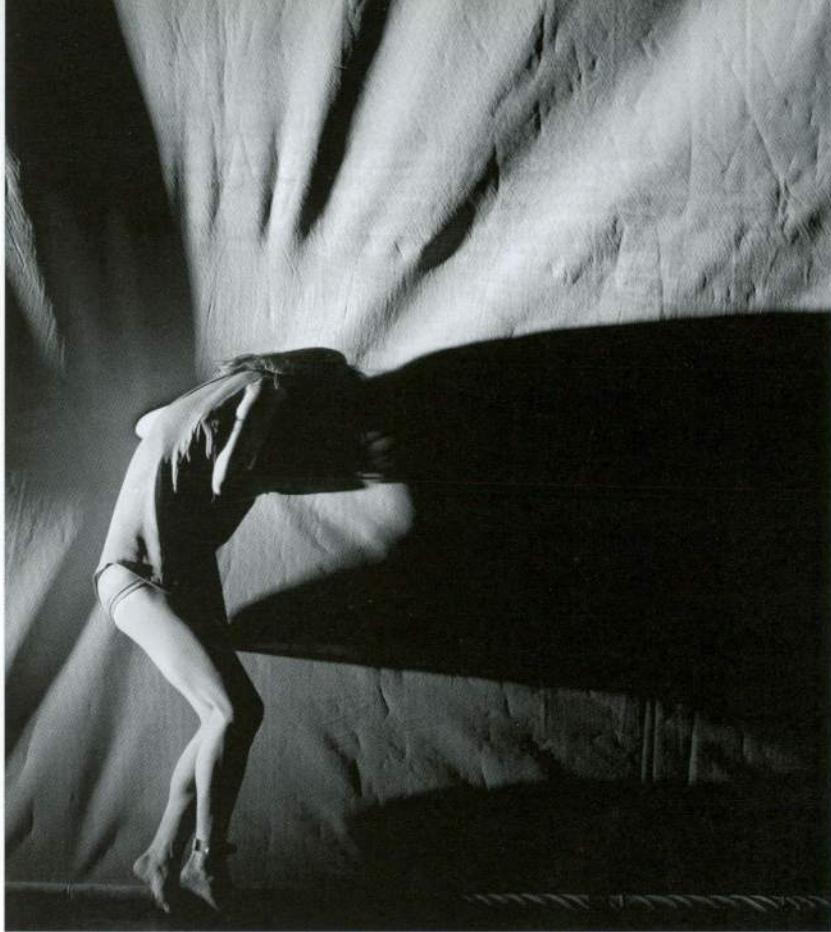
St Nicholas' Collegiate Church, Galway

16 – 28 July

Reviewed 25 July

BY CLAIRE-LOUISE BENNETT

AN AUDIENCE DEPRIVED OF SEATS is a curious mélange, a bemused disparate gathering, restless with anticipation and anxiety. Two productions in this year's Galway Arts Festival divested the spectator of the assurance and anonymity that allocated seating



Maki Watanabe in *Slat*

provides: *Slat*, by Featherhead, and *Love and Other Disguises*, a collaboration between Catastrophe Theatre and Chrysalis Dance.

The bewilderment experienced on entering the performance space of *Slat* is perhaps no more than awkward self-consciousness but it is also portentous; unease and disorientation are explored and evoked in this hour-long performance installation. Described as a "conceptual work" *Slat* is based on the phenomenon of feral children. However, knowing this re-

stricts its scope and significance and it is worth reminding oneself of a crucial distinction: *Slat* is based on, but is not about, feral children. Director and composer Trevor Knight admits to having an empathy with "the freedom of the wild child" and his success in transferring that affiliation, rather than feelings of pity or repugnancy, is, in part, caused by a refusal to portray a feral child as Other.

Performer Maki Watanabe uncurls with painstaking slowness. It is a gesture that embodies the interaction be-

tween primal human elements and civilized society, while at the same time blurring that duality. *Slat* goes further than asking moral questions that might, for example, focus on the right to intervene versus the right to run wild. Instead it asks what it is that human beings should be doing, since we seem to contain incompatible but, nevertheless, equally powerful drives: to learn and adapt; daring instinct; timid insularity.

The metaphysical tussle is made tangible by Butoh, a physical Japanese art form that itself seeks to explore the unknown within us and connect with dormant primordial forces. Butoh doesn't seek to mediate, however; rather than interpreting and expressing physically the ineffable, it aims towards something more intimate: the imagined manifested through the body. This principle accounts for the 'here and now' of the performance. Indeed it seems inappropriate to describe what Watanabe does as performance; it is perhaps more accurate to say that one observes her going through something, a profound crisis, a search towards being.

Alice Maher and Paul Keogan's set design highlights the act of looking and observing. Initially all that can be seen of Watanabe are flickering traces upon a gauze screen, her animal-like scuttle accompanied by discordant sounds. Strange but somehow familiar, this apparition creates an unset-

tling duality. On the one hand we see a human, on the other we sense an animal; an ambivalence which elicits both identification and detachment. The audience ascends metal stairs and jostles for a vantage point along the gantry. It's a disturbing arrangement, calling to mind lone grizzly-bears going demented in zoos, bawdy freak-shows and Victorian physicians slicing into stolen cadavers beneath the indecorous gape of students. By evoking dehumanising environments *Slat* poses the question: what attributes does a being need to display for us to consider her human, one of our own?

In addition to appealing to the audience's minds, *Slat* seeks to arouse an instinctive response. This undertaking is greatly abetted by singer Julie Feeney, percussion by Robbie Harris, and vocals and electric guitar by Rebecca Collins.

Choreographer Gyohei Zaitsu and performer Maki Watanabe should also be commended for providing a skilled and sensitive introduction to Butoh theatre, an exquisite form that was well matched to Knight's concept.

The initial concern for Catastrophe's audience was whether the rain would hold off. *Love and Other Disguises*, written by Colm Maher, is a promenade piece which commenced in the graveyard of St Nicholas' church.



Catastrophe Theatre's *Love and Other Disguises*

Catastrophe has a fondness for light-hearted scripts suitable for site-specific staging. Less psychological and more focussed on spectacle, this formula has allowed director Paul Hayes to highlight physical technique. In *Love and Other Disguises* he goes a step further by collaborating with Chrysalis Dance.

Maher's script tells the story of a sailor (played by Duncan Lacroix), who has jumped ship having been accused of murdering the captain. He's innocent, of course, and adamant that he's not going to prison. A disguise is what he needs, and after a drunken vicar passes out across a tomb, our hero helps himself to his robes. He soon realises that a wedding service is imminent, and so the caper begins.

It's a story that offers few surprises. In fact I wondered if I was sitting next to the prompt, such was the lady on my left's tendency to call out the ends of sentences. Predictable perhaps, but somehow this weakness was trans-

formed into something endearing. *Love and Other Disguises*, with a humdrum script and a not-too-seamless fusion of text and dance should have come unstuck. But it didn't.

The performances from both actors and dancers were consistently excellent, their enjoyment palpable. My fellow wedding-guests tapped their feet, clapped their hands and, occasionally, stole a few lines. It is a rare example of feel-good theatre, precisely the sort of production that a festival programme needs should it wish to avoid brow-beating its punters with a schedule of relentlessly heavy shows.

Cross-disciplinary productions frequently claim to be a treat for all the senses; these two wildly different shows reveal just how various and vital our corporeal palette is. One was outstanding, the other charming and I applaud them both for that.

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

Uncomfortable Histories

Key moments from real and imagined histories were played out in a number of recent productions, throwing light on their wider political and social contexts. Our critics take the long view.

THE CRUCIBLE

by Arthur Miller

The Abbey Theatre

Directed by Patrick Mason

Set and Costume Design: Conor Murphy

Lighting: Lucy Carter

Sound Design: Denis Clohessy

With: Cathy Belton, Declan Conlon, Des Cave,

Mark D'Aughton, Deirdre Donnelly,

Phelim Drew, Aoife Duffin, Laurietta Essien,

Peter Gowen, Peter Hanly, Tom Hickey, Eric

Higgins, Laura Jane Laughlin, Suzy Lawlor,

Chris McHaleem, Ruth Negga, Máire Ní

Ghráinne, Marion O'Dwyer, Derry Power,

Gemma Reeves, Christopher Saul

26 May—7 July 2007

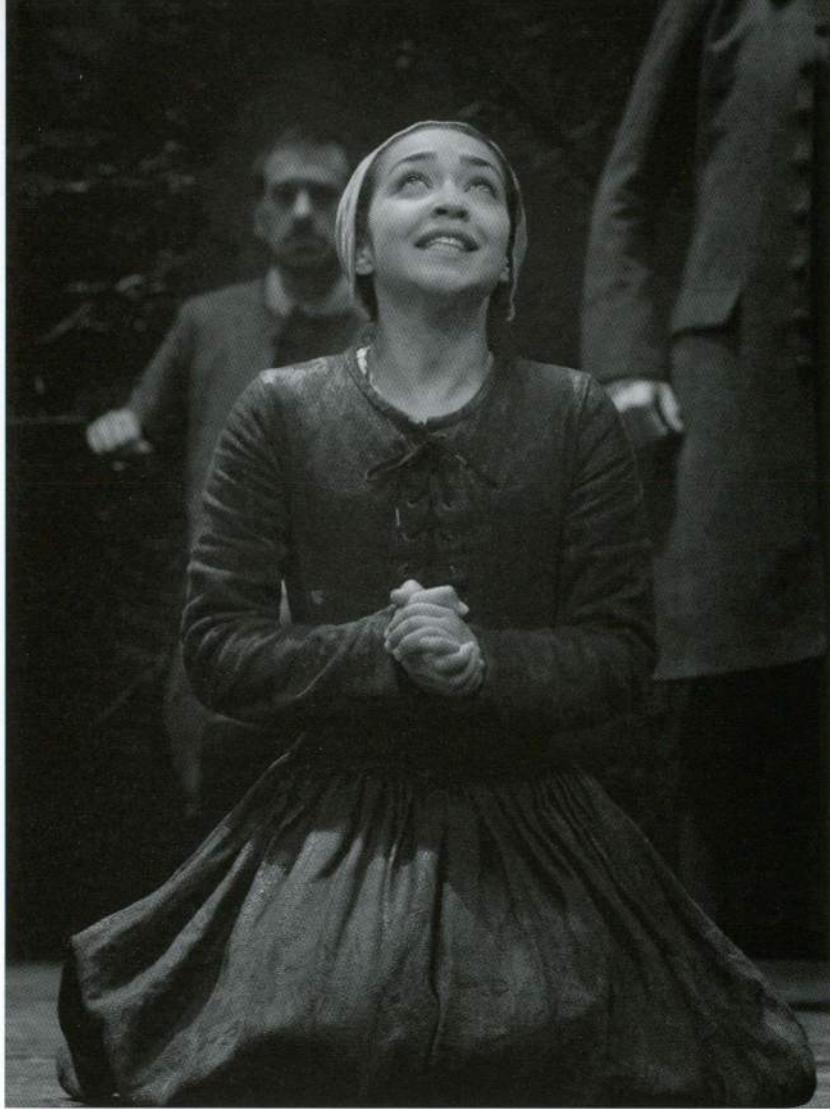
Reviewed 7 June

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

use of the term 'witch-hunt' to describe anti-communist panic. Hysteria is also at the core of the play on the level of performance, with the shrieking, shuddering teenage girls writhing, screaming and claiming possession by spirits serving both as a chilling theatrical set piece and, textually, as the flimsy but damning evidence of the guilt of those they have accused. The chaos that engulfs the community is again another kind of hysteria. As Freud himself might have it, that which is repressed finds a way to come to the surface: the lust, greed, pride, jealousy, and envy underlying the veneer of purity in Puritan America come crashing through the barriers of society and the law in a destructive frenzy.

Patrick Mason's tepid staging of *The Crucible* at the Abbey makes rather a lie of this reading. In what seems a conscious directorial choice, the production downplays the hysteria in favour of almost mellow even-handedness. Though balance is always required to prevent Deputy-Governor Danforth from turning into

THE WORD 'HYSTERIA' ALWAYS COMES to mind when speaking of *The Crucible*. In 1953 Arthur Miller cannily deployed hysteria both as a theme and as a device in a chillingly controlled response to the political climate of the time. His use of the historical Salem witch trials of 1692 as an allegory for contemporary American politics gave force to the popular



Ruth Negga in *The Crucible*

a moustache-twirling caricature, and John Proctor is an intentionally solid and unexcitable grounding force ranged against the wild passion of his nemesis, Abigail Williams. Mason seems determined to take the heat out of Miller's play and approach it in a more calm and composed tone. Restraint seems to be the watchword,

from Declan Conlon's low-key interpretation of Proctor as a mumbling farmer, through the remarkably fair-minded readings of all of the prosecutors and hangers-on driving the trials for their own reasons, to the deflating sense of anticlimax in the performances of the teenage girls, led by Ruth Negga in the role of Abigail.

The result is that this production has remarkably little force, never achieving the heights of emotional intensity that usually characterises this play. This immediately triggers much deeper questions about the difficulties increasingly inherent in the text itself. For one thing, when a play comes with so much baggage on the level of reading and interpretation that its place in history is firmly rooted (both in the play's subject and the metahistory of its writing), to what extent is it capable of evolving in the hands of any director? What meaning and relevance can the play have beyond its immediate and obvious themes and the almost required reading as allegory? On the level of allegory itself, to what extent can *The Crucible* be extended beyond 1950s' anticommunist hysteria? Are all witch-hunts equal? Could this be a play about wrongly-accused paedophiles, or torture in Abu Ghraib? Perhaps you shouldn't be asking these questions while this play is running. After all, Miller has given us a cracking drama beautifully expressed through ersatz period dialogue. But given the lack of heat on stage, thoughts over and beyond those prompted by the play seem to come unbidden. Conor Murphy's murky set gives the eye nothing much else to look at. The set suggests nothing more than an unimaginative sense of oppressive gloom, and cer-

tainly does nothing to help his own costume designs, which virtually merge with the set in a sort of dark grey nothingness that too quickly wears thin as a metaphor.

Patrick Mason directs with some eye for dramatic tableau, and he attempts to spread equal weight around the stage with his blocking, but again, the fire goes out of it in the face of this equanimity and equilibrium on the level of reading: when we are given one-on-one scenes between Cathy Belton and Declan Condon as the Proctors, they stand out — in a bad way. With only the two of them there, the lack of passion shows even more clearly and the scenes drag.

Apart from the necessity to satisfy public demand for a popular title, there seems no compelling reason for this production. A fleeting resonance in the 'you are either with us or against us' sentiment gives no great weight to a contemporary reading. Even George Lucas managed that much in *Revenge of the Sith*. This production of *The Crucible* lacks a vision, and it tells. Even Miller's dramatic fire is quelled by the muted greyness of the middle-ground staging and his political voice seems all too faint from the present perspective.

Dr. Harvey O'Brien lectures in the O'Kane Centre for Film Studies, University College Dublin.

THE O'NEILL**by Thomas Kilroy**

An Grianán Theatre

(with Donegal County Council, Earagail Arts Festival and The Flight of the Earls 1607-2007)

Directed by David Grant

Assisted by Matt Jennings

Lighting Design: Niall Cranney

Costume Design: Joanne Quigley

Musical Director: Lorna McLaughlin

With Andrew Roddy, April Robinson, Sean McCormack, Eddie Flanagan, Diarmuid O Gallchoir

Letterkenny 8–11 July 2007

Reviewed on 11 July

MAKING HISTORY**by Brian Friel**

Ouroboros

Directed by Geoff Gould

Costume Design: Sinéad Cuthbert

Lighting Design: Lizzie Powell

Sound Design: Liz Fitzgerald

Composer: Martin Nolan

With Denis Conway, Chris Moran, Conan

Sweeney, Martin Lucey, Laura Cameron,

Helene Henderson

Irish tour 8 July – 13 September, followed by performances in Italy, France and Belgium

Reviewed on 22 July at Donegal Castle

BY DEREK WEST

IN JULY IN DONEGAL, TO MARK THE four hundredth anniversary of the Flight of the Earls, the theatrical focus was on *The O'Neill* (1969) Kilroy's first play, and on the Ouroboros touring production of Friel's *Making History* (1988).

Both playwrights have challenges in common: dealing with scant and contradictory historical information, analysing the events in the light of the upheaval in Northern Ireland. Both are fascinated by O'Neill, caught at a pivotal point in Ireland's relationship with England, at the ending of the old Gaelic order and facing the tortuous path to nationhood. The interest lies in how each writer manages his speculations about O'Neill and how that is converted into theatrical experience.

Kilroy passes beyond the circumstances of O'Neill's times to suggest parallels with Ireland's unfolding history in the succeeding centuries. The relationship with "the old enemy", the swing between the armed struggle and the slower, surer diplomatic route are encapsulated in the exchanges O'Neill has with those around him. Kilroy portrays O'Neill at a pinnacle – immediately after his triumph at the Yellow Ford – and also at the moment of capitulation – on his knees to Mountjoy, the Lord Deputy. There is public enactment and debate, appropriate to platform as much as stage.

Friel's "take" is expressed by the final view of O'Neill in Rome, where he continues to posture as an Earl, when in fact he is a pauper. This scene addresses the central theme of the play: the making of history. Lombard (O'Neill's would-be biographer)



The full cast of *An Grianan's The O'Neill*

is all for the florid lie, the “story” written for the dispossessed Gael that must take precedence over mere truth and accuracy. History is to be like Gar (in *Philadelphia Here I Come*) reciting Edmund Burke – an incantation to keep unpalatable realities at bay. What is needed is a hero, but O’Neill does not wish to be “embalmed in piety”; he wants his version of the whole truth to be told, “bitter bastard” and all. Friel’s play mediates between these two extremes.

Kilroy pays close attention to O’Neill, at a cost to the representation of the other characters. Mabel Bagenal (O’Neill’s fourth bride) is por-

trayed as a fragile, fastidious puppet; Friel’s Mabel is a much more substantial creation. Friel gives us Hugh O’Donnell in all his brash, loud exuberance (a marvellous foil to the wiser, sardonic O’Neill) and Hoveden as loyalty incarnate; Kilroy offers us no such foils.

Where Kilroy’s play derives considerable strength is in his treatment of O’Neill’s dilemma, caught between being either a “man of metal”, warring leader of clansmen, or “modern” man, capable of looking beyond his green fields, tribal concerns and brute force to strategy, the wider context of Europe and the Holy Roman Empire. Kilroy’s O’Neill

seems both bemused and frustrated in an endless effort to get his point across.

David Grant's Grianán production of *The O'Neill* makes both the history and the issues clear, although he encounters three impediments: the acting (seen in the restricted experience and range of the cast, drawn largely from local talents) has more energy than finesse; the linear structure of the play, lacking in creative spark; and the utter dominance of the perplexed O'Neill. Andrew Roddy makes much of the imposing presence of O'Neill, but is at his most convincing when he conveys the self-questioning, ambivalent leader – more Hamlet than Macbeth.

Theatrical lift-off does seem possible when Mabel Bagenal asserts her repulsion at the clansmen's primitive habits and challenges O'Neill's sensuous resident mistress, Roisín. This was where the Grianán production faltered. Despite stamina and commitment, Roddy had already exhausted his repertoire of self doubt. April Robinson had the accent, looks and innocence of Mabel, the romantic and fastidious girl but could not find Mabel the assertive, emerging woman. Only Anne Gallagher, as Roisín, "the foul dirty creature that's in the house", seemed at ease and convincing in her role.

Grant's significant achievement, with a cast ranging from novice to

professional, was to find pace and clarity in the narration. It was a business-like, well-drilled approach. The tableaux at the commencement of each act impressed. A slow-motion sequence at the banquet was carried off with accuracy and skill.

Making History, on the other hand, is a more vivid and more complex piece of theatre, both in content and dramatic exposition of theme, a powerful example of an assured playwright in his maturity. As an analysis of the function and form of history, it refutes the "glorious chronicle" proposed by O'Neill's would-be biographer, Archbishop Lombard.

Friel pares the story right back, so that at its core it is a powerful domestic tragedy. He opts to place on the stage those most intimately bound up with each other, so that the emotions in their exchanges are immediate and uncluttered with formality. Where Kilroy places O'Neill's submission on the stage, in Friel it is conveyed in a duet rehearsed by the two chieftains – O'Donnell reading and O'Neill reciting – a heart-rending elegy at the edge of a thicket, "somewhere near the Sperrin Mountains".

Within the rich linguistic texture of the play, Friel is powerful in his manipulation of metaphor. The potency of Mary Bagenal's gift of seeds to her sister – Fennel, Lovage, Tarragon, Borage... – is magnified when O'Neill ascribes the character of each



Denis Conway and Conan Sweeney in *Making History*

to his companions and, in a subtle echo of Ophelia's flower scene, they reverberate poignantly in the dying moments of the play. As with the *Faith Healer*, Friel believes in the incantatory power of proper nouns, as his O'Donnell laments the fall of the Irish chieftains through his elegiac listing of names and places that mark the aftermath of Kinsale. The sounds and the music of these words become the vehicles of the emotions. Each

voice is distinctive (O'Donnell, Mabel, Hoveden), the turn of phrase seemingly casual but loaded: "You have an admirably tidy little mind" encapsulating the fundamental divide between the English and the Irish psyche.

This revival of the 2005 Ouroboros production, directed by Geoff Gould, manages so much of the nuance of Friel with a compelling competence. It is part of an exciting theatrical en-



terprise by which the company is touring *Making History* to key sites associated with the fall and flight of the Earls, among others Donegal Castle in July, Tara the following month; Rathmullen on the eve of the actual anniversary; Rome in 2008. There is a residual aura — an interweaving of the history and place — about these sites. This was palpable in Donegal: both characters and actors paced the oak boards from Armada wrecks. The audience was restricted to around fifty within the walls, and when they were moved out to the grounds, to sit almost as low as the fallen O'Neill and O'Donnell, the search for wider meaning was eclipsed by the sheer intimacy of the scene.

This closeness puts the performances under a microscope. Through involvement with this role over the past two years, Denis Conway (O'Neill) has acquired immense verbal confidence, both in tone and accent, range and authority. Among the richest of moments in his playing is his narration of O'Neill's final fostered night in the Sidney household — of the humiliation of being dubbed "the Fox O'Neill" and of English laughter — that sums up O'Neill's agonised ambivalence.

Conan Sweeney gives a cracking performance as O'Donnell — a Donegal "lad" — careless, full of life and flailing enthusiasm, happiest when he is dealing with the simplicities of

raid or revenge, a champion of localism, so that even "Kin-sal-a" is like a foreign country to him "wherever that is..." Martin Lucey gives a rendition of Archbishop Lombard that is solid, reliable, and earnest but falls short of the gravitas and guile evident in Niall Toibín's memorable playing in the original Field Day production.

Three English actors, LAMDA-trained, add authenticity and skills. Laura Cameron brings spirit and intelligence to the role of Mabel Bagenal and captures a sense of why O'Neill abandons caution to sweep her up. She is created by Friel as an alert and inquisitive young woman — all this Cameron superbly conveys. Her sister Mary is played by Helene Henderson, with similar accuracy and ease.

Chris Moran is a delight, brilliant and assured as Hoveden, bringing sensitivity and emotional power to the role and nowhere is he more moving than in Harry's recounting of the death of Mabel.

Geoff Gould orchestrates the gestures, silences and bombshell moments of intensity. He is strong on the clarity of the narrative — spare, economical of movement and locale, and draws out the immense poignancy of the piece.

Apart from performing the service of providing timely revivals of these two fine plays — Kilroy at his setting

out; Friel at the height of his powers – both An Grianán and Ouroboros present to Donegal and to Ireland an image of its past and an opportunity for reflection. Both merited longer exposure to a larger, wider audience.

Derek West is a member of the Arts and Education Committee (advising the Arts Council) and administers 'Creative Engagement', and arts-promotion scheme for secondary schools.

GUESTS OF THE NATION

By Frank O'Connor

Everyman Palace Theatre

Directed by Pat Talbot

Set Design: Cliff Dolliver

Lighting Design: Paul Denby

Costume Design: Sinéad Cuthbert

Sound Design: Cormac O'Connor

With Denis Conway

18 – 23 June 2007

Reviewed 22 June

BY BERNADETTE SWEENEY

AS PART OF THIS YEAR'S CORK Midsummer Festival the Everyman Palace staged *Guests of the Nation*, a short story by Frank O'Connor. This was performed by Denis Conway in 45 minutes without an interval. The audience, about 80-strong, had time to take in the set by Cliff Dolliver before the action began. We were presented with a convent or seminary-style reception room, two large shuttered windows upstage with light

creeping through the gaps, a large crucifix centred on grey wallpapered walls, an imposingly-garish religious statue wall-mounted stage left, with three hard-backed antique chairs on a polished wooden floor. Although the programme states that the action is set in 'a room somewhere' in the 1940s, this is not just any room, and it offers a very loaded context for the memory of a 20-year old atrocity that follows.

Conway enters and the action begins. As Bonaparte, he begins his story, addressing us directly. He sets out the three chairs as three characters, two Englishmen – Belcher and Hawkins ('Awkins') – and colleague Noble. As Bonaparte, he recollects a time years before when he and Noble guarded the two Englishmen at the behest of the 'Second Battalion'. Conway enacts an easy camaraderie between the men as they play cards in the evening. He follows O'Connor's template closely as he performs each of the men in turn, through the steady memory of Bonaparte. For the first few minutes, I'm waiting for a big theatrical gesture but begin to relax into the pleasure of a good story, simply but effectively told.

The story shifts as Conway enacts a conversation between Bonaparte and a fifth 'character', Jeremiah Donovan. Here Bonaparte learns that he and Noble are actually guarding the Englishmen as hostages, and that they

may be required to carry out reprisal executions on these 'guests' of the nation. And so the ending, and the attendant theatrical gesture, become inevitable.

Cormac O'Connor's soundscape marks the shift, sounding a curiously contemporary note. The back wall lifts to reveal a dark bog upstage evocatively lit by Paul Denby, with a lonely lantern swinging over a freshly-dug grave. Conway as Bonaparte leads the action and the audience's attention to this space which, given the architecture of the Everyman, seems at quite a distance, and Conway does well to hold his audience from here. The bog is familiar theatre

ground by now, from Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* to Fabulous Beast's *The Bull*. Here too, under Talbot's direction, the bog is a dark place, where uncomfortable histories are played out. The gunshots sound loudly in the echoing theatre, with a plaintive surge of bird-cry echoing as the shots die away (although the tell-tale indoors thud of the rifle as it is thrown on 'the bog' breaks the illusion for a moment).

In his programme note, Eoghan Harris describes O'Connor's as a 'lonely voice', one that the addition of actors to play the other characters would diminish. Such an almost anti-theatrical sentiment is in-keeping

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with an adaptation that works best when not imposing on the simplicity of O'Connor's original story.

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

SPLENDOUR

by Abi Morgan

Project Arts Centre

Directed by Rachel West

Set Design: Maree Kearns.

Costumes: Suzanne Cave

Lighting: Aedin Cosgrove.

Sound Design: Dennis Clohessy

With Ingrid Craigie, Jane Brennan, Amanda

Douge, Mary Murray

23 May – 09 June 2007

Reviewed 6 June

BY SUSAN CONLEY

CINEMATIC AND TELEVISUAL DEVICES have, in the last fifteen years or so, permeated theatrical writing, generally to its detriment. Multiple scene changes, and the spreading out of theatrical time across days, weeks, or months, all happening in fragments of real time, doesn't work as well live as it does at a distance, onscreen. Blame MTV – as we do for everything from short attention spans to Third World debt – but there's a narratorial laziness inherent in much new writing that attempts to mask itself through textual busyness. Keep moving things – literally – and the



audience may not notice that they're not really heading anywhere.

And then a play like *Splendour* comes along from abroad, a blast of fresh air on Ireland's relatively stagnant new writing scene; a play that is concise, rich, perfectly formed, structurally sound, and that plays with time the way that film does, in a way that has rarely been successfully executed onstage. While not actually a piece of new writing – seven years old, *Splendour* was first staged by Painesplough in 2000 – it is head and shoulders above much of what the Irish public has seen in the last several years.



Ingrid Craigie in *Splendour*

Four women inhabit not only a handful of hours, but also a place in time. Micheleine (Ingrid Craigie), signified in the cast list as The Wife, plays ebullient host to Kathryn (Amanda Douge), The Photographer, who is accompanied by Gilma (Mary Murray), The Interpreter. Additionally, Micheleine has begged for the company of her life-long friend Genevieve (Jane Brennan) whose signifier in the text is that of The Informer.

The play is essentially the repetition of one scene; from its first iteration,

each woman is given enough space and time to develop fully as a character. The behaviour of each - whether clacking around on expensive heels as does Micheleine, vibrating with annoyance and tension as does Kathryn, or robbing everything in sight as does Gilma - develops throughout the time of the play in superbly handled complexity. The handful of hours played out reflects the fall of the country's dictatorship, and as this state of affairs reveals itself, so do the complexities of the women's characters: that Micheleine

knows exactly what is going on and, so entrenched in the need to keep up appearances, does so despite the danger; that Gilma, as one of the ethnically oppressed, is undermining the system in the only way she knows how, out of total desperation and inexpressible rage; and that Kathryn, no matter the judgements she routinely makes throughout the play, has her price as well, and is willing to snatch a photograph of the despot's deposed wife, no matter the danger to herself, no matter the ghoulish opportunism, no matter what.

The play turns back upon itself relentlessly, always returning to that introductory moment of Genevieve entering from the snowy exterior, running dialogue back and forth as if we are listening to it on a Steenbeck (for all you young ones out there, that's a film editing machine) with the playwright cutting in more information with each repetition. The production uses amplification in an equally filmic sense, allowing the characters to express inner thoughts in the way that voiceover would in a film. The narrative unfolds like a fetid flower, revealing petal after petal of injustice, betrayal and grief, in such a way that, since we can sympathise with all these women, no matter their history, our perspective and our own convictions shift and change and shatter as the story tells itself, and tells itself again.

The production is stellar in all its aspects, and we can be delighted by Rachel West's commitment to bringing European works to the Irish stage. Set in three-quarter view, she moves her actors around Maree Kearns' simply elegant set with ease, inspiring, through their focussed physicality, truly excellent performances from her cast. Craigie and Brennan are at their very best here, fully embodying their characters in every respect, and are ably supported by Douge and Murray.

Brennan is especially interesting as Genevieve the dark horse, the mysterious centre of the play. We don't know, specifically, how she has informed, but we can extrapolate from her deeply tragic history that if anyone had reason to betray the powers that be, it was she. The facts as we are given them, or given to understand them, are never as baldly stated as thus – that her husband was murdered under the orders of his old friend, Micheleine's husband – but they are what we are given to know. If Genevieve is the root of the events that evening, then she is stronger than any of us can imagine, but, given her ability to not betray herself by word or deed, she is also more inured to deception and fear than any of us would want to be.

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

The Domestic Spyglass

Adultery, jealousy and violent private rituals came under the spotlight in recent productions. Upstairs and downstairs, our critics witnessed some home truths unfold onstage.

HONOUR

By Joanna Murray-Smith

b*speek Theatre Company

Directed by Claire Lovett

Set Design: Blaithin Sheerin

Costumes: Joan O'Clery

Lighting: Sinead McKenna

Sound Design and Composition: Ivan Birthistle
and Vincent Doherty

Featuring David Horovitch, Barbara Brennan,
Fiona O'Shaughnessy and Marcella Plunkett.
Samuel Beckett Theatre

3 – 21 July 2007

Reviewed 18 July

BY FINTAN WALSH

I THOUGHT WE ALL AGREED THAT THERE was nothing less interesting than a middle-class existential crisis, on or off stage. Apparently not. At least Australian writer Joanna Murray-Smith and homegrown b*speek Theatre Company do not seem to think so. In *Honour*, intellectual deconstruction gives way to marital dissolution and individual despair, and the play slopes towards its sorry end with everyone, including some spectators, grappling with the collapse of meaning. Replace 'Honour' with 'The

Lover's Guide to Deconstruction (for middle-class couples who think they have so much but really have so little)' and you will have a stronger sense of what the play is about. But one word packs more punch.

Honour also happens to be the name of the play's title character, played by Barbara Brennan. She has been married to George (David Horovitch) for thirty-two years, having given up her writing career to facilitate his. Although her early poetry was critically acclaimed, Honour stopped writing when her husband started his PhD and began building a reputation as a literary critic. As his star rose, Honour's faded, and she stayed in the background to look after their child (Plunkett) and to provide intellectual and emotional support for her husband.

Such has been George's success that when the play opens he is the subject of a book project led by attractive young academic, Claudia (Fiona O'Shaughnessy). She is invited into the family home to conduct research that soon involves a lot of prying into



Fiona O'Shaughnessy, Barbara Brennan, Marcella Plunkett and David Horovitch in Honour

the couple's relationship. It is not long before Claudia's pursuits turn sexual. She and George begin a relationship and eventually he leaves his wife for her. With a little perverse help from Claudia's probing, Honour eventually acknowledges that she has compromised her career for her man. Making the best out of a bad situation, she promptly resurrects a career that's been dead for thirty years while Claudia comes to believe that love is simply about 'undoing' someone. And George is her victim. If Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* is about constructing a man, *Honour* is about de-constructing him.

The play's gravest sin is its bland-

ness of context closely followed by a preponderance of trite intellectual rhetoric, presented as interesting, or even credible, dialogue. Who are these highly intelligent people who do not reflect on themselves in thirty years until a sexy slip of a researcher comes on the scene only to expose, matter-of-factly, the meaninglessness of their lives? Who do these academic automatons supposedly reflect in the real world? There are a lot of obstacles from the start, and they keep on piling up in this production.

The set is neat, but the tilting back wall is an unnecessarily pointed reminder of the post-structuralist context and it is out of kilter with the rel-

ative naturalism of the overall conception. At times the direction and blocking are plain painful, and the actors often swish about the set just to make it from A to B. At times you get the feeling that they are trying to physically compensate for the desiccant language, but it does not work.

A similar problem emerges in the delivery of lines. Not only do the accents include an unexplained mix of British (Brennan, Horovitch) and Irish (Plunkett) dialects – not to mention O'Shaughnessy's idiosyncratic roll that makes everything, including Derrida, sound like pillow-talk – but phoney confabulations like "I don't want to make this [break-up] degrading for either of us" and "Do you see your relationship in political terms?" bomb like bad jokes. Certainly, the action takes place within an educated milieu, but even the actors seem unable to affect ownership of the diarrhoeic discourse on love, truth and authenticity. The exchanges are most irritating when even the arguments strive to be poetic. The odd scream, expletive, or smashed plate would have injected the play and the performance with the kind of humanity it so desperately needed. Even middle-class intellectuals lose it. And that sense of devastation fails to break through here.

The fact that the scenes are short and framed as quasi-moral vignettes also divides the action in an awk-

ward way. The intermitting blackouts are about the most dramatic aspect of the production, but they also seem to invite a serious pause for thought on the preceding scene that is unwarranted.

Although her role was small, Marcella Plunkett plays with a relaxed naturalism that others might have learned from, especially the director. It is not enough to rescue the production, but it helps. Curiously enough, I did have a razor-sharp moment of identification at the end when, like the characters, I touched the void and wondered 'why'?

Fintan Walsh teaches and writes about theatre.

PRIVATE LIVES

by Noël Coward

Gate Theatre

Directed by Alan Stanford

Set Design: Eileen Diss

Costumes: Peter O'Brien

Lighting: Sinéad McKenna

With Katie Kirby, Stephen Brennan, Simon

O'Gorman, Paris Jefferson, Sonya Kelly.

12 July – 22 September 2007

Reviewed 6 August

BY TANYA DEAN

PLUMMY ACCENTS? ("ARE YOU heppy, dahling")? Check. Quick-fire witticisms? Check. Sumptuous gowns and elegant scenery? Double check. For the Gate's latest produc-

tion of Noël Coward's frothy comedy of marital infidelity, it is very much a case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". As the audience settle in their seats, murmurs of "...and such a beautiful set!" can be heard across the auditorium. Elaine Diss's opening design is suitably exquisite, a shimmering dark blue sky with full moon in situ forming the backdrop to the elegant lines of the gently curving twin balconies which will play host to the farcical comings and goings of the first act. From the outset, this production seeks to charm by aesthetics and seduce by wit.

Coward's opening plot device finds humour in its unlikeliness: five years after divorcing each other, Elyot Chase (Stephen Brennan) and Amanda Prynne (Paris Jefferson) have both remarried, have both arrived in the same resort in France, and have both had the nasty shock of realising that the other is honeymooning in the balcony opposite. After attempting (unsuccessfully) to persuade their new partners (Katie Kirby and an enjoyably foppish Simon O'Gorman) that they should relocate to Paris, the two ex-spouses share cocktails and a few acid quips. A perfect example is the conversation about Elyot's new wife Sibyl, whom he mentions he met in a house party in Norfolk, to which Amanda blithely notes "Very flat, Norfolk". When Elyot reproves her ("There's no need to

be unpleasant"), her mild rejoinder is, "That was no reflection on her, unless of course she made it flatter". And that's all it takes, really, to ignite that old black magic and send them sneaking away from their unsuspecting new spouses to indulge in a tryst in Amanda's flat in Paris. But old habits and new spouses prove surprisingly tenacious.

The skilful timing of Alan Stanford's direction maintains just the right pace to keep the quips coming at a lively pace, with nary a lag. Stephen Brennan is urbanity personified throughout, and makes himself the lynchpin in much of the humour in the production. Paris Jefferson makes a good job of rendering Amanda's narcissism attractive as well as amusing, although both of the female leads have an unfortunate tendency to err towards dolphin-like squeaks when their voices hit the higher registers. Coward's wit is still vibrant, although one or two lines (such as "Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs"), even while spoken in jest, seem slightly unsettling in the current clime of ultra-political correctness.

Certainly this production of *Private Lives* does not try to break any new ground, following as it does strictly a very tried-and-tested formula. But there is a reason why Coward's plays enjoy such regular revivals. Ever the master of the *bon mot*, Coward him-



Paris Jefferson in Private Lives

self said of *Private Lives* that it was "...described variously as 'tenuous, thin, brittle, gossamer, iridescent and delightfully daring', all of which connoted to the public mind cocktails, evening dress, repartee and irreverent allusions to copulation, thereby causing a gratifying number of respectable people to queue up at the box office". Judging by the lengthy queue of punters hoping for last-minute tickets (and this was on a Bank Holiday) it seems this formula has lost none of its efficacy.

THE MAIDS

by Jean Genet

Loose Canon

Directed by Jason Byrne.

Set Design: Wayne Jordan

Lighting Design: Sarah Jane Shiels

Sound Design: Karl Burke

With Karl Quinn, Phil Kingston

and Deirdre Roycroft.

Project Arts Centre

10–21 July 2007

Reviewed 19 July

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THE MAIDS IS A RARE MISFIRE from Loose Canon, a company whose concentrated artistry usually pays dividends with challenging material. It was hard not to watch with rapt fascination as they were clawing their way through *The Duchess of Malfi*; then to be beguiled as they transformed *Hedda Gabler* into an absur-

dist meditation on desire and transgression; it was sternly compelling to sit in the dark listening to low-frequency harmonics while awaiting their mounting of Heiner Müller. There is never a doubt that this company have a distinctive aesthetic and a philosophy, nor is there a question of their skill or their willingness to take risks. But in this case, they have fumbled material which, on the face of it, seemed ideal.

Jean Genet's absurdist play probing the mystic ceremonies of murderous paranoid psychosis surrounding the notorious Papin murders is steeped in ritual, performance, and movement. It explores the 'games' played by two sisters in servitude as they pretend to be not only their hated mistress, but each other: acting out (or practising) a theatre of death that should culminate in her murder but never achieves that catharsis. In reality the Papin sisters brutally murdered and mutilated their employer and her daughter, but Genet's play is prelude, not grand guignol: fantasy, not history.

Though later strongly associated with overt political activism, Genet's take on the Papin case was not so much a dramatisation of social and class conflict, which was how many people saw it at the time, as a highly stylised exploration of the schisms and sutures that defined the relationship between the murderous sisters



Phil Kingston and Karl Quinn in *The Maids*

and their victim. It is not that Genet was unaware of the currents of the re-alpolitik, he simply chose to approach them from an aesthetic borne out of Artaud (whose work was concurrent with the events themselves) through the (post) modern sensibility of the Fourth Republic, where old class divisions had collapsed in the face of fascism and world war.

There is already quite enough going on with this text for Loose Canon to get on with, but seemingly to add something 'interpretative', they have chosen to cross-cast the roles of the maids but not that of Madame. Karl Quinn plays Claire and Phil Kingston portrays Solange, adding another layer of 'performance' to a play already rife with levels of signification, fanta-

sy, and schismatic personality. Perhaps Genet's avowed and asserted homosexuality gives leave to read his 'maids' as aspects of his own identity as a gay man in a hetero world, but is it necessarily a good thing to 'out' his disguised drag queens? Would Tennessee Williams play better without women? We've already had the Stanford/*Importance of Being Earnest* debate in these pages, and I don't wish to revive it, but it does seem that this crucial bit of casting by director Jason Byrne is central to why the play on the whole is never involving.

Something seems horribly amiss within minutes of the opening when Quinn, in the role of Claire performing her riff on her sister Solange performing the mistress, is clearly doing Deirdre Roycroft. His gestures, his posture, his intonations, the movement of his arms all call to mind Roycroft's now characteristic style, and while it is faintly amusing, the effect is jarringly camp. It is a signification too far which, on the level of performance, disengages the spectator. Kingston is better as Solange, at least conveying a strength and menace that grounds the character and hints at the violence that has been not so much repressed as ritualised and overtly expressed in their fantasies. But he's still a man, and in the midst of the complexities of psycho-socio-sexual identity explored by Genet through this character and her sister,

it adds nothing that this is so. By the time Roycroft herself enters as Madame, the play has already become a studied exercise in performance rather than gripping theatre. That Roycroft is uncharacteristically ordinary is a final, fatal blow. She plays Madame more like a D4 yummy mummy than an haute-bourgeois aristo, and her performance is lacking in depth, nuance or grace. This makes nonsense of Quinn's imitative physical parody of her character, again breaking any sense of an organically enclosed psychologically intense set of relationships and pushing the audience back to tittering at men in drag.

The skin-crawling effect created in *Waterfront Wasteland* is repeated here as Karl Burke pumps low-frequency vibrations through the sound system throughout the show, changing pace and intensity, and even disappearing as befits the moment. There is also a clever bit of business involving Sarah Jane Shiels' lighting design, which has the actors operate the lighting sources on set, where they double as props. Wayne Jordan's set is dominated by Madame's plastic-covered bed, but every other piece of furniture, in an interesting conceit, is subject to being dragged or thrown around the theatre by the actors. But as much as the central performances fail to bring the basic text to life, these metatheatrics fail the play, draining it

of intensity and leaving the audience with hollow theatre games, when there should be something altogether more disturbing in all this roleplay.

DANCING AT LUGHNASA

by Brian Friel

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Directed by Mick Gordon

Set and Costume design: Ferdia Murphy

With Laura Donnelly, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Patricia Gannon, Rhidian Jones, Aislin McGuckin,

Mairead McKinley, Niall Cusack, Sean Sloan

1 June—7 July 2007

Reviewed 4 July

BY TOM MAGUIRE

FERDIA MURPHY'S DESIGN FOR *Dancing at Lughnasa* created a large oval of grass angled across the stage on which the setting is split between three connected spaces: the kitchen of the Mundy sisters' cottage, the adjoining garden, and the liminal place from which the adult Michael (Sean Sloan) remembers his childhood in Ballybeg in the summer of 1936. The kitchen grows out of the same earth as the garden, no walls present and its edges marked only by the furniture which is so characteristic of the Irish peasant play. Only 'Marconi', the sporadically functioning radiogram plonked in the corner of the kitchen, marks the onset of modernity. The garden is overhung by a tree in full leaf, an idyllic setting in which a boy might make kites and observe

the adult world around him.

These are places from the memory in which Michael casts his unmarried mother, Chrissie (Laura Donnelly). At twenty-six she is the youngest of the five sisters in the last days before they are overtaken by the shifts of history. The eldest, Kate (Geraldine Fitzgerald), is the village schoolmistress and had taken a role in the Irish revolution, but is to lose her job; Agnes (Aislin McGuckin) and Rose (Mairead McKinley) are amongst the last members of a cottage industry of knitters who will be made redundant with the coming of a textile factory. Maggie (Patricia Gannon) keeps house and maintains spirits with a repertoire of riddles, songs and ready wit. It is a credit to actors and director that despite the schematic figuration of these characters, each is played with a variety of shades and tones which are often missed. When they abandon themselves to a frenzied dance around the kitchen, for example, it is not a matter of joy unleashed but a gasping attempt to fend off the desperation that threatens to engulf them.

The quality of this moment is sustained throughout in a production marked by its ensemble playing. The excellence of this is established in a wordless opening through which the soundscape of the home place is conjured in the complementary yet distinctive rhythms of domestic chores within the kitchen. In a household in



Geraldine Fitzgerald, Patricia Gannon, Aislin McGuckin, Mairead McKinley and Laura Donnelly in *Dancing At Lughnasa*

which endless talk is a ritual to ward off hurt, it is in the silences that sisterly jealousies and rivalries are revealed, particularly when they are visited by Michael's father, Welshman Gerry Evans (Rhysian Jones). Effortlessly charming, he flirts with each of the sisters, despite his wife in Wales, and his repeated invitation to Chrissie to marry him. Yet even as he bestows his affections on one sister, he leaves others weeping wordlessly, gazing at him in jealousy or into the fire in remorse.

The men, too, are reliant on the power of words. Father Jack, the older brother, who has been sent home from the African missions having 'gone native', retains faith in the transformative power of language but is hampered by his difficulty in remastering his native tongue. His bewilderment at the facility with which words slip away from him is well-captured by Niall Cusack's faltering delivery. By contrast, the other

two male actors speak in an insistent staccato and at a breakneck speed, betokening an anxiety on the part of their characters that things will fall apart if they somehow let up. While this can be motivated in both instances, Gordon's interpretation of Michael as someone who is reluctantly unburdening himself of these memories, rousing emotions that threaten the stability of his buttoned-up and orderly life has much to commend it as a thematic revelation. What it misses is a sense of the emotional commitment required to begin to tell this story and to continue with it, something only apparent through Michael's final speech with which the play ends as the feelings threaten to vent themselves.

Ironically the high quality of the production accentuated for me problems with Friel's writing. With such beautiful moments of ensemble between the women, Friel's insistence

that his female characters can only make sense of their lives in relation to the males around them is even more problematic. Indeed I find it especially odd that Friel introduced Father Jack, a ridiculous figure who seems more representative of a dalliance with postcolonial thinking than an intrinsic part of the plot. While both elements date the play for me, on the night on

which I saw it the audience lauded the playing with a partial standing ovation, a credit to the high standards and artistic merit of the whole company at the tail end of the run.

Tom Maguire lectures in drama at the University of Ulster. His book Making Theatre in Northern Ireland is reviewed on Page 54.

Shocking State of Play

Playwrights often set out to shock the audience, but to what end? Our critics assess whether the end justifies the means in some recent productions, or whether there can be any meaning at all.

RED LIGHT WINTER

by Adam Rapp

PurpleHeart Theatre Company

Directed by David Horan

Set design: Martin Cahill

Lighting: Simon Maxwell.

Costumes: Donna Geraghty

Sound design: David Gillespie

With: Dermot Magennis, Stewart Roche,

Olga Wehrly

The Mill Theatre, Dundrum

June 6 — June 23, 2007

Reviewed June 22

BY IAN WALSH

RED LIGHT WINTER BEGINS BADLY and never recovers. Matt (Dermot

Magennis), an 'emerging playwright', attempts suicide by hanging himself with his belt from a clothes hook on the wall of his dingy hotel room in Amsterdam. He fails in his attempt and, before he can try again, his loutish friend Davis (Stewart Roche) interrupts him. The hook on Martin Cahill's set is not far enough up the wall for the audience to believe Matt was ever in danger of carrying out his plans. His feet do not even leave the ground as he feigns strangulation, so the suicide attempt is thus comical.

It is unclear in this PurpleHeart production, directed by David Ho-

ran, if this is intentional. If yes, we can perhaps view Adam Rapp's play positively as an attempt at a comedy that lampoons affected Americans abroad. However, if the humour generated from the ham suicide was not deliberate (as I suspect), it is hard to see the play as anything more than an unhealthy slice of misogynistic, self-indulgent, adolescent American pie.

I hope I am not misleading readers into thinking that the question of whether or not the play is a comic satire is somewhat engaging, because it was not. Any engagement with the characters or the content was blocked by the exhausting, effusive, self-obsessed psycho-babble that spews from the mouths of Rapp's characters.

The plot is as melodramatic as the language. After Matt's botched suicide, Davis arrives with a French prostitute, Christina (Olga Wehrly) whose services he has acquired to cheer up his buddy Matt. We learn that Christina, the hooker with a heart of gold, is in fact American, and that she has quickly fallen in love with Davis, as he gave her multiple orgasms in his brief dalliance with her before bringing her to the hotel. Matt also rapidly falls in love with Christina, who shows him kindness: she has (awkwardly staged) sex with him despite her love of Davis and leaves him her red dress as a memento. In Act Two, we encounter Matt in his New York apartment. He is writ-

ing a play of the play (how clever!) and sleeping with the souvenir red dress. He is visited by Christina who has been trying to trace Davis back to New York to tell him she has AIDS. Matt leaves to get food and Davis enters. After being obnoxious for a spat, he then has rough sex with Christina, proceeding to take a phone call from his wife in the middle of the act. Davis, shockingly, leaves never knowing that Christina has got AIDS. Christina, broken hearted, then jumps out the window of Matt's apartment before he returns. Matt re-enters and sees that his muse has gone. Lights down.

All of the characters are liars: Christina pretends to be French, Davis is a self-serving adulterer and Matt denies his unhappiness to all but himself. Their stories do not match up; memories of events are argued over. Nothing reported in the excessive verbiage can be trusted.

Could it be that Rapp through his improbable plot and verbose articulation is trying to make an existential statement about the uncertainty of the modern world?

If so, his theme is marred by his fidelity to a naturalistic form of drama. Naturalism holds that all phenomena can be explained in terms of natural causes and laws – it claims the existence of essential truths that cannot be denied.

Any doubts raised regarding the



Dermot Magennis and Olga Wehrly in *Red Light Winter*

nature of truth, therefore, cannot be indulged.

Despite the implausible plot and simplistic character types, the actors for the most part do well. All handle the American accent well and deliver the dialogue with an earnestness it does not deserve.

Wehrly, in particular, manages to breathe some humanity into the chauvinistic fantasy figure of Christina and Roche gives the boorish Davis enough charm to almost make him interesting. Magennis is fully committed in his portrayal of the miserable playwright Matt, but his acting seemed too exaggerated, and jarring

with the naturalistic approach of the production, as in the attempted suicide already mentioned.

PurpleHeart write in the programme that they are a company dedicated to exploring the 'boundaries of naturalism'. This production of *Red Light Winter* shows just how limiting the boundaries of naturalism can be. It would seem that not all exploration guarantees discovery; more often than not, we get lost or give up, returning home unsatisfied.

Ian R. Walsh is Doctoral Fellow in the School of English and Drama, University College Dublin.

MEAT**by Neil O'Sullivan**

Asylum Productions in association with

Granary Theatre

Directed by Donal Gallagher

Set Design: Olan Wrynn and Medb Lambert

Sound Design: Cormac O'Connor

Costume: Lisa Zagone

With Cormac Costello, Gerrie O'Grady

and Mark O'Brien

Granary Theatre, Cork

19 – 30 June 2007. Reviewed 23 June

BY JULIE KELLEHER

NEIL O'SULLIVAN'S FIRST PLAY SINCE his debut, *Hatch 22*, begins with the warning, or perhaps the promise, that "the tale that follows contains scenes of murder, betrayal, adultery, bisexuality, castration, fellatio, prostitution, pornography, male, female and vegetable sodomy and at least six varieties of drug abuse" amongst other depravities against which we are also duly warned. This promised list of contents sets high expectations for the play to both shock us and make us laugh, but also makes one wonder whether the play can actually deliver. The action is set in London in 1890 – the city of Jack the Ripper and Sweeney Todd – Victorian London, with all its scandalous sex and violence laid bare. The story focuses on the series of events by which three characters – Mark O'Brien as bumbling PC Richard Ruskin, Gerrie O'Grady as Louise Coleridge, a tart

without a heart masquerading as a society wife, and Cormac Costello as Ethan Coleridge, eccentric doctor (who is bordering on being slightly demented) – find themselves connected.

The opening twenty minutes is quite slow and somewhat stodgy. There is virtually no action or movement as each character introduces themselves through a long and involved monologue, giving the sensation that one is listening to an audio-book rather than experiencing live theatre. Each character's monologue is spliced with those of the other two, telling the tale and setting the scene. This exposition takes too long and the rotating monologues begin to induce a slight sense of boredom despite the zeal with which the actors introduce their respective characters and their back stories. As the stories dip and weave they become increasingly difficult to follow. However, the complex plot is tied up satisfactorily towards the end of the play, which harks back to the fragments of story that we hear in the opening moments.

As soon as the characters begin to interact, the play becomes immediately more fun and engaging. The performances, as befits the title of the play, were deliberately hammy and almost self-satirising. Characters were drawn with broad brushstrokes which matched the melodrama-in-

Cormac Costello in Meat



DONAL GALLAGHER

spired comedy of the play. While this was a playfully comic choice, the cast were at times in danger of doing no more than hamming it up, and losing the self-aware edge of the comedy. Costello had a strong handle of this exaggerated style of play, lisping and grimacing around the stage to the delight of the audience. O'Brien and O'Grady came into their own when they were required to bring something a little more sinister to their respective characters, particularly in the closing scenes of the play.

On entering the theatre, the sound design by Cormac O'Connor set the tone by evoking sideshow grotesque with the strains of a slightly off-key organ grinding. The music took its cue from Victorian melodrama, at times underscoring the action and at others punctuating the drama or the punchlines. Costume by Lisa Zagone was adequate if unimaginative. PC Ruskin was suitably attired in period uniform and Coleridge in rags and a battered top hat. Louise's costume was reminiscent of Oliver Twist's Nancy, her brown tweed dress belying her appetite for sex and violence, apparently letting flashes of red fishnet tights and a black lace garter do the talking instead. Lights by Kath Geraghty were suitably murky, conjuring the half-light of the backstreets of 1890's London.

The set design by Olan Wrynn and Medb Lambert was one of the most

successful components of this production. A single set-piece cleverly provided several locations in one: a Victorian drawing room; a dungeon cheerfully wallpapered with human body parts; and a sweeping staircase. A lone lamp post suggested the streets of London and a backdrop draped in silvery gauze gave a sense of an opulent Victorian drawing room, and also, ominously, a shroud.

Physical comedy, under skilful direction from Donal Gallagher, was a strength of the production, as was the playing of innuendo and visual gags. It was a shame, however, that the play did not venture further into the darker recesses offered by the plot, which delves at times into infanticide and serial murder. These moments were infinitely more interesting and powerful than much of the rest of the play, but were heavily outweighed by moments played for laughs and titillation. The grotesqueries listed at the beginning of the play are treated by and large as hilarities, so that the action became a little bit *Carry On* at times. That said, the audience clearly enjoyed the bawdiness of what was a fun and entertaining piece from Asylum.



Julie Kelleher is a graduate of the BA and MA programmes in Drama and Theatre Studies at University College Cork and is currently working as Assistant Producer at Once Off Productions.



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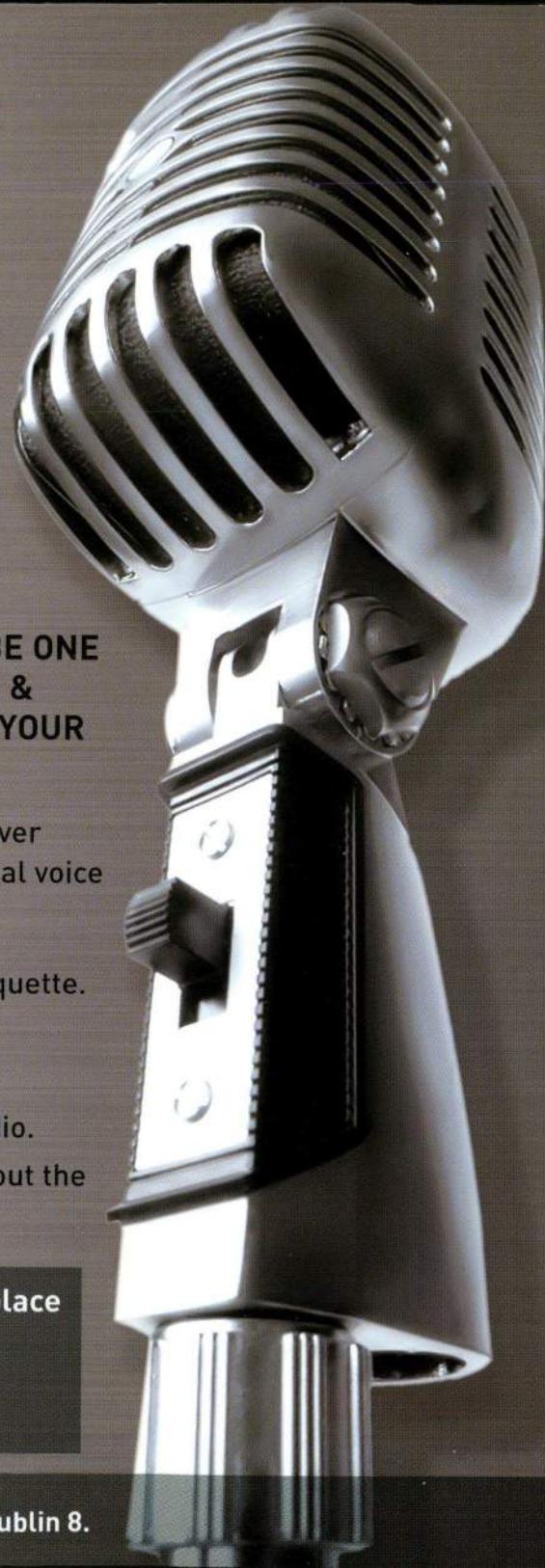
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