

irishtheatre MAGAZINE

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VOLUME TWO, NUMBER SEVEN AUTUMN/WINTER 2000 £4

MAGAZINE



VOLUME TWO NUMBER SEVEN ■ AUTUMN/WINTER 2000

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ON THE COVER: Norma Sheehan, Enda Walsh, and Peter Gowen on the set of *bedbound*, photographed by Tom Lawlor

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Printed by A Cunningham. Tel. 8389398



Who's Getting What?

Meridian — £403,000.

Fishamble — £450,000.

Rough Magic — £737,000.

The Dublin Fringe Festival — £521,000.

THE PAYBACK HAS BEGUN. As of December 2000, 13 theatre and theatre-oriented organisations have been invited onto the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon's multi-annual funding scheme. The above figures are grants offered to the respective organisations over three years, and each represents a significant bump up on existing funding levels — increases to these organisations range from 36% to a whopping 194%.

While the amount of government monies allotted to the arts has risen incrementally throughout the '90s, this latest round of grants represents the biggest influx of public cash into the theatre sector that any of us have ever seen. At last, it seems, Ireland's theatre community is starting to feel the benefits of the country's boom economy.

The increased amount of funding isn't the whole point, of course. What's also important is the space and time these companies and the nine others now on multi-annual grants (the list includes Barabbas, Barnstorm, Blue Raincoat, Galloglass, Island, Red Kettle, Storytellers, the Temenos Project, and Theatre Shop) will have to plan ahead properly. They'll be able to spend more time doing the work they really want to do — creating and supporting theatre — and less time writing funding proposals

and waiting for delayed word on grants.

But money is what's on everyone's mind these days, and what we'd like to focus on here is the question of who's getting what — on how much individual artists, technicians, and administrators are benefitting from the relative financial success of Irish theatre. And the short answer is — not much. It is our perception that deep inequities exist, and are being allowed to continue to exist, in levels of pay throughout the Irish theatre sector.

Enid Reid Whyte, the Arts Council's drama advisor, says that the Council is concerned about and will be monitoring pay practices. The Council does not, however, stipulate defined criteria about pay levels when it gives grants; its point of view has always been that it's up to artists' organisations to establish and police proper rates of pay. But with a weak and poorly organised actors' union and no professional organisations in place for the rest of us in the sector, how is this meant to happen? We intend to investigate these concerns in our pages, and make a start in this issue with Mark Phelan's article about the increased difficulties Irish actors are having in navigating the Social Welfare system.

"The days of the 'hidden subsidy' have got to end," says Whyte. Hear, hear — but we all know it's going to take some time before an industry that's used to functioning with scant resources alters practices that, in many cases, it had to adopt in order to exist at all. The payback has begun, indeed; but the challenge now is to make sure it's shared fairly.

IS THAT YOU, MEDEA?

THE ABBEY THEATRE'S lauded production of *Medea* is transferring to London's West End for a 12-week run — minus nearly all the actors from its Dublin premiere run last May. Only Fiona Shaw in the title role, and Max Wringer as Aegeus, will remain in the show, which opens 30 January at the Queen's Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue. The Abbey's artistic director Ben Barnes says director Deborah Warner is recasting the production to keep one of her essential concepts for the production — Medea's foreignness — intact. In Dublin, Warner directed the chorus to "be more Irish than Fiona herself" (in Barnes' words) — as when they spoke in Irish so that Medea wouldn't understand them. In London, Shaw's Irishness will be played up, with the chorus and major supporting roles played by English actors. The creative team will be the same in London as in Dublin, save lighting designer Jvan Morandi, who will be replaced by Peter Mumford; the only change to the production's "look" will be some alterations to the set to make it fit in the new space. It's not really a surprise that this production is having a future life: there were outside producers involved in the Abbey run, and none of the key players kept their aspirations for international bookings a secret. That two of the names above the title in London — Max Weitzenhoffer and Roger Berlind — are old New York hands indicates that the West End may not be the last stop, and Barnes confirms that they're looking "to Broadway, or perhaps the Brooklyn Academy of Music." So does this mean that the Abbey's now going to serve as a staging ground for its associate artists to

FIONA SHAW AS MEDEA



try out material? "That's not our intention," says Barnes. "If you have an international associate directorate, then there is always the potential for a spinoff, but the fact that Deborah is an associate director here is really just by the way in this case."

BUILDING BLOCKS

There was much ink spilled in the mainstream press this autumn about the long-awaited renovation of the Abbey, with most of the discussion centring on whether the theatre should rebuild on its historic Abbey Street site or find a new location altogether. Arts Minister Sile de Valera effectively poo-poohed the former notion in the Dail in October, saying that she was not in favour of "just tinkering around" with the existing building to placate "those who would like the Abbey to remain on the present site for historical reasons." It's said that Ben Barnes is in favour of a move as well, though he has kept tight-lipped on the matter in the press. *The Sunday Business Post* reported on 12 November that the Abbey would most likely move to a site in Grand Canal Docks and that the price tag for the move would be about £65 million; other sites mooted for relocation include Spencer Dock and O'Connell Street. The Abbey declined to comment to *itm*, saying the situation was "too delicate" to discuss.

KELLY'S BACK

And not a moment too soon. RTÉ are redeeming themselves (somewhat, and belatedly) from their shoddy recent record on arts coverage with the launch of a new TV arts programme that sounds, well, pretty darn similar to their last TV arts programme. *The View*, a half-hour magazine-style show hosted by John

GREAT MINDS

The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, in celebration of its 50th anniversary, is sponsoring an International Visiting Critics' programme in 2001. The Council will host international critics from various fields throughout the year who will attend arts events and engage with Irish artists, critics and audiences. Fiach MacConghail will be the programme curator. (See page 8 of this issue for the transcript of *itm*'s first-annual International Theatre Critics' Roundtable.)

Kelly, will premiere on 9 Jan. and run on Tuesday evenings from 11:05 on RTÉ One.

HOLLY PLAYS HESTER

Chicago's Irish Repertory Theatre will present the U.S. premiere of Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* from 17 May–20 June 2000 (directed by Kay Martinovich), but the limelight will surely be focussed on a subsequent production of the same play at San Jose Repertory in California, which will star Oscar-winner Holly Hunter as Hester Swane. The California production opens in September and will be directed by San Jose Rep's artistic director, Ms. Timothy Near.

IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN

Pan Pan Symposium time, that is, a rare opportunity to see some of the most innovative theatre practice going on in Europe today — and to work with leading practitioners as well. This year's



headline act is Forced Entertainment, the edgy-yet-surprisingly-accessible live art ensemble based in Sheffield, England. Forced Ents are performing two pieces, *Speak Bitterness* (8-9 Jan.) and *Quizoola!* (11 Jan.), at the Symposium, and will conduct a workshop and a public discussion. Other international groups participating are Teatr Osmego Dnia (Poland), Unga Klara (Sweden), and Il Pudore Bene in Vista/Andreas Staudinger (Italy/Austria); domestic participants include Artslab, Bedrock, Blue Raincoat, Corcadorca, Corn Exchange, Loose Canon, Ridiculusmus, and Pan Pan itself. The overall dates are 8-13 January, and Symposium ground zero is the Beckett Centre, Trinity College. For bookings ring 01-608-2461.

SPRUCED UP IN SLIGO

Blue Raincoats have a new roof over their heads — well, new-ish anyway. The company re-opened the Factory Performance Space on 17 December following extensive renovations. The first

new Raincoats production in the revamped Factory will be *Macbeth*, playing 20-31 March; the production will also tour nationally and internationally from August through October.

Mark your diaries

This year's Irish Times/ESB Theatre Awards will be held 11th February in the Burlington Hotel, Dublin; judges Fergus Linehan, Sr., Una Carmody, and Rose Parkinson will announce their awards shortlist on 13 January. For the 2001 awards, Linehan will stay on as a judge, joined by Fiach MacConaghail and *itm's* editor in chief Karen Fricker.

UP BELFAST!

Northern Irish theatrical types scored big at this year's London Evening Standard Drama Awards. Rathcoole man Gary Mitchell won the Most Promising Playwright award for *The Force of Change*, which first ran at

the Royal Court in April and returned for an encore run in October-November. (Next round's on you, Gary: The prize includes a cash award of £30,000 — sterling!) And Belfast native Marie Jones' smash hit *Stones in his Pockets* picked up the Best Comedy award, which represented both a going-away present for Conleth Hill and Séan Campion, who left the West End production on 16 December on their way to Toronto and Broadway, and a happy welcome for Louis Dempsey and Sean Sloan, who have taken over as the show's headline performers in London.

NEXT AT THE NATIONAL

The first Abbey mainstage show for 2001 will be John B. Keane's *Big Maggie*, directed by Garry Hynes (9 Feb.-17 Mar.), followed by Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, directed by Katie Mitchell (22 Mar.-21 Apr.). In the Peacock, Conor McPherson will direct Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* (18 Jan.-17 Feb.), followed by a reprise run of Paul Mercier's *Down the Line* (20 Feb.-31 Mar.); Gerry Stembridge will then direct Mark O'Rowe's latest, *Made in China* (5 Apr.-12 May). At press time the Abbey say they've "pencilled in" a brief April run of the Schaubühne Theatre (Berlin)'s production of Brecht's *Mann Ist Mann*, pending resolution of "technical issues."

DRUID GET DIVORCED

Druid's next production is *My Brilliant Divorce* by Geraldine Aron, directed by Garry Hynes, which will open in May at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway. The company's long-awaited Synge cycle will start up later in 2001. Meanwhile, Hynes' Stateside career continues apace: she will direct Beth Henley's 1981 Pulitzer Prize-winning black comedy *Crimes of the Heart*, about three nutty

Mississippi sisters, at Second Stage in New York, from 3 Apr.-20 May.

Replay are presenting *One Night in February*, a translation by Eivor Martinus of Swedish writer Staffan Göthe's play for 7-11 year olds; new Replay a.d. Richard Croxford directs. The show will tour throughout spring 2001... *Romeo and Juliet* will play at the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire from 5-31 Mar.; Karen Louise Hebborn directs... Storytellers are presenting *The Star Child and Other Stories*, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde fairytales by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy for children. It plays at

LIMERICK ROCKS

Unfringed is back for the fourth year running at the Belltable, Limerick. This year's festival opens on 25 January with Daghdha Dance's *Reverse Psychology*; other productions include *Gift*, a commissioned play by Ursula Rani Sarma (25-27 Jan.); Owen O'Neill's one-man show *It was Henry Fonda's Fault* (29-31 Jan.); *Jocasta*, by Leland Bardwell, a co-production between the Belltable and Sligo's DHA-EAN theatre company (1-3 Feb.); and the long-awaited premiere of *Rap Eire* from Bickerstaffe, a comedy written and performed by Arthur Riordan and Des Bishop, also featuring Joe Hanley, Renee Weldon, and Fiona Condon, and directed by Jimmy Fay (1-3 Feb.) Unfringed '01 will also feature a three-play children's season and a festival club with live entertainment; ring 061-319-709 for details and bookings.



BILLY ROCHE

Project Space Upstairs from 29 Dec.-20 Jan.; Bairbre Ní Chaoimh directs... Fishamble's next production is *Wired to the Moon*, six Maeve Binchy stories adapted for the stage and directed by Jim Culleton. It plays 5-31 Mar. in Andrew's Lane, Dublin; then tours through the end of May to Blanchardstown, Portlaoise, Limerick, Longford, Eniskillen, Sligo, Belfast, Tallaght, Dun Laoghaire, and Cork.

FRESH BLOOD AT THE GATE

Michael Caven, artistic director of Theatreworks, will make his Gate Theatre directing debut with a production of Zola's *Therese Raquin*, playing 8 Feb.-17 Mar. American Neil LaBute will then direct his controversial play *Bash* from late March through mid-April. Meanwhile, Conor McPherson (busy boy!) will direct his own play *Port*

Authority, which premieres at the New Ambassador's in London from 15 February for a seven-week run, and will then transfer to Dublin from 24 April through the end of May. A new production of Pinter's *The Homecoming*, featuring Ian Holm, will open in June and play for four weeks, in anticipation of a Pinter Festival at New York's Lincoln Center Festival in July.

Billy Roche's *Wexford Trilogy* is currently running at London's Tricycle Theatre. Wilson Milam directs the award-winning trio of plays (*A Handful of Stars*, *Poor Beast in the Rain*, and *Belfry*); the cast includes Gary Lydon, Peter McDonald, and Michael McElhatton. Performances run through 4 Feb.... Red Kettle's production of *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* is also off to the Tricycle; it plays 19 Mar.-14 Apr.



CONOR MCPHERSON

Alan Stanford is directing *King Lear* for Second Age this spring; it plays the Cork Opera House (14-17 Feb.); the Market Place, Armagh (21 Feb.); An Grianán, Letterkenny (23-24 Feb.); and the Gaiety, Dublin (27 Feb.-3 Mar.)... Greenlight are premiering *Why I Hate the Circus* by Ioanna Anderson, directed by Audrey Devereaux, at the Loose End in the Civic, Tallaght from 7-24 Feb....

Prime Cut are presenting the Irish premiere of Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* from 24 Jan.-10 Feb.), at the Lyric, Belfast... The Civic Theatre/Common Currency co-production of 1900 — *The Pianist on the Ocean*, featuring Donal O'Kelly, is on tour to Galway, Letterkenny, Cork, Mullingar, Portlaoise, and Dun Laoghaire through 10 Feb... Corn Exchange launch an extensive tour of Michael West's *Foley* on 5 Feb. at the Civic, Tallaght; the show will then tour to over a dozen

venues from Tinahely to Derry... Patrick Mason will direct, and Joe Vanek design, the Irish premiere of Mark Anthony Turnage's opera *The Silver Tassie* (based on O'Casey's play) for Opera Ireland; it will play in rep with Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, directed by Nicholas Mooney and designed by Peter Werner, at the Gaiety Theatre from 31 Mar.-8 Apr.

TWO DREAMS

This summer will see two different productions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in different corners of the island: Upstage Live's production, directed by Declan Gorman, will tour ancient outdoor sites in the border regions this June, while Corcadurca and the Cork Midsummer Festival are pairing together on a co-production of the *Dream* in Fitzgerald Park, directed by Pat Kiernan (who should be well recovered by then from his stint playing Prince Charming in the Cork Opera House's panto this winter!) Other Corcadurca news: novelist Eamonn Sweeney is working on a commissioned play which the company plans to produce later in the year.

VOICES

BEDBOUND (ABOVE);
BOXES (TOP RIGHT); AND
HAMLET (RIGHT)

ON 9 OCTOBER,
IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE
HOSTED A PANEL DISCUSSION
ABOUT THIS YEAR'S EIRCOM
DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL
AND DUBLIN FRINGE
FESTIVAL; THE PANELLISTS
WERE THEATRE CRITICS
AND PROFESSIONALS FROM
AROUND THE WORLD.



from A BROAD

EXCERPTS FROM THE PANEL,
WHICH WAS CHAIRED BY
KAREN FRICKER, *ITM*'S EDI-
TOR IN CHIEF, WERE BROAD-
CAST ON RTÉ RADIO ONE'S
"RATTLEBAG" THE FOLLOWING
DAY; WHAT FOLLOWS HERE IS
A TRANSCRIPT OF THE PANEL
PROCEEDINGS.



KAREN FRICKER: I'll start off by introducing our panel. Marcel Bogers is the only member of the panel who doesn't work as a critic; he is the theatre programmer at the Melkweg arts centre in Amsterdam. Nelson Pressley is based in Washington, DC and writes about theatre for the *Washington Post*. Joyce McMillan is the lead theatre critic of *The Scotsman* and a political columnist for that paper. Brian Singleton is a senior lecturer at the School of Drama in the Samuel Beckett Centre at Trinity College, Dublin and has been a frequent contributor to *irish theatre magazine* from our earliest days. I thought I would ask each of the panellists to make some preliminary comments, to let you know what their previous experience of Irish theatre is and what their interest was in coming to these Festivals.

MARCEL BOGERS: Well, until last year I knew nothing about Irish theatre... The reason that I started to get a bit more

that the theatre part of the festival in Utrecht had to be cancelled, but I'll tell you what I would have programmed, just so you know where I'm coming from and what interests me. I would have chosen *Kids in Control* from Belfast, which is a kind of community art-related group which works with youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds. The other group would have been Calipo, who are more what I would call live-art based, and live art is really the thing I am really interested in as a theatre form.

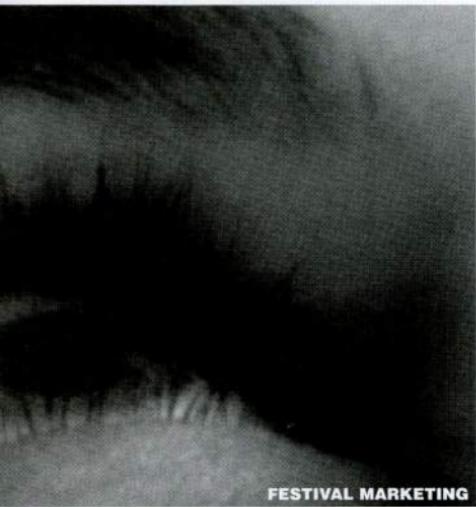
NELSON PRESSLEY: I come with no expertise necessarily on Irish drama; I basically know what I've seen in Washington over the last ten years as a graduate student and then as a working theatre critic. Which means your fair share of Beckett, all the new Brian Friel stuff, and so forth. Recently, the Martin McDonagh plays have been taking America by storm, but from my point of view they just seem to



“I suppose what I sneakily do is to use the Dublin Theatre Festival as a way of gauging how Irish audiences are reacting to new Irish work....”

acquainted with it was that the British Council in Holland was organising a festival about the arts in Northern Ireland and Ireland to be held in Utrecht in 2001. Until recently I ran a festival and programmed a venue in Utrecht so I was going to be programming some of the work for this Festival... My perception of Irish theatre before then... I had this cliché image of Beckett, storytelling, folk music, and probably expected a lot of English acting methods, which are different from European acting. It turns out

be working the same stereotypes and the same caricatures forever and ever. Last spring, three plays came to the Kennedy Center in Washington as part of the "Island" Irish arts festival, and I wrote a piece for *irish theatre magazine* about it. As I said in the article, the most provocative thing to me weren't the three plays themselves — each of which individually was very strongly performed — but was the panel discussion that the Kennedy Center held, which had a number of people speaking — Paul Mercier,



Donal O'Kelly, Fintan O'Toole, Garry Hynes... it was a fascinating discussion, and it made me realise how very little I knew of Irish drama. So recently I had been getting a lot of new information about Irish theatre, and Karen asked would I come over to the Festivals and

FESTIVAL MARKETING

see if that helps any of the information to come together.

JOYCE McMILLAN: This is my third visit to the Dublin Theatre Festival, and I suppose my main interest in coming here is usually to use it as a quick or more concentrated way of seeing some new Irish work, in which I am quite interested. In Scotland, I do see some of the theatre by Irish writers that is filtered through the stages in London, particularly the Royal Court, which has been the home of a great kind of Irish writing phenomenon over the last five or six years. I also see the Irish theatre which comes to the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, where you get some very big mainstream productions in the official Festival — we

had *The Wake* from the Abbey Theatre last year, for instance. On the Fringe there is an interesting selection or collection of all those companies which are motivated or interested enough to actually come to Fringe venues and be seen there. Also there is a kind of ongoing connection between some of the Glasgow theatres and some young Irish companies, which means that you get to see things through that filter as well. So I suppose what I sneakily do is to use the Dublin Theatre Festival as a way of gauging how Irish audiences are reacting to new Irish work....

BRIAN SINGLETON: This is my eleventh Dublin Theatre Festival and sixth Fringe — I've been attending the Fringe as long as it's been going. I was quite struck this year by the marketing — I thought that the Festival's marketing was stunning; those eyes captured my imagination straight away. In terms of content, there seems to be a greater tendency towards looking at the European avant-garde — we've got *Complicite*, and *Castellucci*, and so forth, and an absence of what I'd call corporate marketing shows. In the past we have usually had some big productions which attracted kind of socialites rather than theatre aficionados, and thankfully those aren't here this year. It's also interesting this year that the Festivals are breaking out of the strict theatre mould. The Fringe has always embraced stand-up comedy and dance, but the main Festival... if you take something like *Dracula* which incorporates film and live music — I thought that was very exciting. What has struck me most of all really — and we'll obviously be talking about content later — is the audiences. I've been to 16 shows in the last ten days and I've just seen a whole new audience which I don't normally see during

the year. And I'm not just talking about the Fringe, which always has attracted a very young, vibrant, alive audience, but the main Festival seems to be getting that younger audience as well...

FRICKER: Before we get started talking about individual shows, I need to point out that the list of productions we discuss is naturally going to have to be selective; this has been largely dictated by the fact that our international visitors can only be here for a short period of time. So we're focussing on the things that they could see in these four days, with Brian broadening it out where possible since he's been on the ground throughout. We're going to start by talking about Paul Mercier's play *Down the Line* in the Peacock, the second stage of the Abbey.

PRESSLEY: This is a difficult play to synopsis in real detail. One of the most striking things — and un-American things — about it that it's a 12-character

play. It starts where you almost expect a theatrical family to start off — they're really at odds with one another. The set I thought was beautifully evocative, because there's a hallway right down the center of it — so it's a house divided, which tells you an awful lot that you need to know about the play. But it's also a very kind-hearted play. I was excited to see it — it was possibly what I was looking forward to most in coming here to these Festivals because at the Kennedy Center during the panel that I mentioned, Paul Mercier gave an incredibly impassioned speech about what theatre should be and the people that he was trying to write about and to depict onstage with his company Passion Machine. His speech almost had me in tears and I thought, 'Golly, if there were an American counterpart to Paul Mercier, how vibrant our theatre would be.' This play was very documentary, which I expected, and a little domestic, which I didn't... I expected something a little more urban, gritty, and confrontational.



“If I’m in the United States, and I’m looking at a stage with 12 actors on it, I know who wrote the play and his name is Shakespeare. So this was almost luxurious.”

play using 12 actors and it's roughly only two hours long. Now if I'm in the United States, and I'm looking at a stage and there are 12 actors, I know who wrote the play and his name is Shakespeare. So this was completely alien... this was almost luxurious. It's a family play; it's set in the 1980s, and really in a nutshell, it's about what can happen over the course of time to a fam-

tional — but as a family documentary it was really well done. I'm becoming a fan of Lynne Parker, the director, having seen her *Pentecost* earlier this year at the Kennedy Center. This production didn't take me by the gut as I was hoping a Mercier play would, but I admired the close observation, and it was a type of 'Irish play,' if I may say so, that I had never really seen before.

BOGERS: I partly agree, especially about the text, but again, I'm not really text-based; for me text is only a part of theatre along with visual imagery, music, dramaturgy, and connections in general with art, culture, and society. I felt that the text

thing more, to comment on life or react to it. Because realism doesn't really exist anymore — there are so many realities existing next to each other, and this kind of realism was quite old-fashioned. Without being arrogant, I thought the set was ugly; it had a seedy realism that reminded me of the '70s, a stage design that we only use now for old fashioned operettas... while I was convinced by the text I was not by the cardboard setting.



DOWN THE LINE

here was written by someone who is really involved with the lives of those he writes about... I was convinced he was taking about real human life, but I wasn't convinced by the way it was staged... It reminded me of soap operas on television, but I think theatre has to add some-

McMILLAN: I saw Mercier's *Dublin Trilogy* two years ago and I was excited by it — it shared the same positive qualities Nelson pointed out, and the negative ones mentioned by Marcel. I felt a little disappointed with this play though, that it was a step back in time and in formal difficulty from what was attempted in the *Trilogy*, and I couldn't see why he'd done that or what was in this particular story and year that was so important to tell. However, maybe there's a limitation of my insight into the relationship between the play and the local audience, though I thought the audience were laughing obligingly to the same kind of criticisms of family life they've seen before — the familiar territory of the family moving from tradition to modernity. Also, in comparison to other shows I've seen, I was a little bit disappointed by the acting, which was a little bit routine and oddly cast.

PRESSLEY: It's a family play; it's about reconciliation. It's interesting that American drama is moving in a similar direction recently — maybe that's because everyone gets happy when the economy improves.

FRICKER: The next play is *bedbound*, which is a major innovation for the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival in that it's a commission from Enda Walsh, who also directed the production.

McMILLAN: I liked it very much, and I loved the atmosphere of the New Theatre! The space was beautifully chosen for this piece, which is about a father and a daughter who sit, stand, and jump around on a squalid metal-framed bed in a plywood cubicle whose meaning we come to understand as the play unfolds. It was a very stylized set from Fiona Cunningham, in stark contrast to the realistic set for *Down the Line*. My only other experience of Walsh was seeing the famous *Disco Pigs* and I do like what he does with language — its deconstruction, the rhythm of this type of Irish-English, stylising it, making it hyper-realistic, and transforming it into a higher level of English altogether... it's really exciting. The two characters seem on the verge of hardly being human any more.

interesting meeting point between a lot of the issues and themes of Irish theatre, to do with distorted family relationships; the patriarchal, bullying male figure; the inner insecurity... all heightened, souped up, and delivered in 50 minutes straight between the teeth with two terrific performances. The more I think about it the more interesting it becomes.

PRESSLEY: I'd agree with that. It was the first show I saw out of what turned out to be three family plays, all of which had a similar dynamic of moving towards the same kind of reconciliation... The performances here were ferocious, from Peter Gowen and Norma Sheehan. The first opening image was so strong... I shrank back; I wanted to have nothing to do with these people's lives. The performances never flagged, in what was a fierce vision, well directed and realised by Enda Walsh.

BOGERS: I'm sorry but I don't agree with either of you. I was disappointed. *Disco*



“In modern life, theatre should have more questions than answers. In the old days, directors and writers were God... but today life is more complicated.”

The father is a kind of monster who is so driven by the strange idea of being a successful furniture salesman that he is almost incoherent with aggressive energy. The daughter is this poor little creature who had been a childhood polio victim, hidden by her father, and has a small human spirit twisted within her; she also speaks in this driven compulsive manner. I just thought it was a very

Pigs was recently translated in Holland and the play is well known... my problem with this was that it was directed by Enda Walsh himself. The whole thing was too one-dimensional. I realised what the writer was trying to get across, but there always needs to be a text and a subtext — something *more* that the director, that the actor or the writer even, doesn't know. What happens with this is

that he's written a question and an answer in the piece; as the director he illustrates the subtext through the way he stages the production, which makes the whole thing very hermetic. In modern life, theatre should have more ques-

means incidental to the piece... As a Protestant, the character Foley is looking back and questioning his family, and his voice is like an internal voice although he very much engages the audience and asks himself why he's telling this story...

so there's this fabulous self-awareness as he delves back in time to unearth the things he needs to move forward — again, a very common theme in both Irish and American drama. It's an exquisite piece of writing, but I have to stress how integral to the piece the performance is. The fact that this voice sounds so intelligent and so self-aware — that really brings the play home, and there's a piano accompaniment that plays into and also features in the story. It's really a lovely piece of work.

OLIE DEASY



tions than answers. In the old days, directors and writers were God... but today life is more complicated and the lives of Walsh's characters could have been like the lives we are leading, but ended up too much as mere puppets on a string.

FRICKER: Moving on, the next play we'd like to talk about is the Fringe Festival's *Foley*.

PRESSLEY: See it if you haven't; it's lovely. A new play by Michael West, performed by Andrew Bennett, who has one of the most gorgeous baritone voices I've heard in a long time, which is by no

FRICKER: Macnas' *The Lost Days of Ollie Deasy* is playing in the Round Room in the Mansion House as part of the main Festival.

MCMILLAN: You couldn't not enjoy this show — a kind of promenade show using lots of fringe and street theatre techniques to tell the story of young Terry Deasy, who decides in the 1980's to go looking for his 1960's hurling star father, Ollie. So we're all in the bus, and various things happen on the way... I particularly liked when we stopped and went into this parish hall and saw the last four lines of *The Playboy of the Western World*, which was very entertaining in a postmodern way, making

me think about how Irish theatre has changed. It's a big show, and technically quite complicated. I was again left asking, though, was the story *that* important, and the father's nightmarish kind of story about where he's been contained a lot of familiar stereotypes about the influence of the church, farmers, and local gossips. It was very entertaining, but I feel there's a slight question over the weight of the story.

SINGLETON: I'd agree with Joyce there. I loved the fun sense of space. The most memorable moment was when the bus takes off — those transitional moments when I was moved around from location to location, I loved... The story didn't hold me, though. A lot of the big scenes, like the father-son reunion, were done in dumb show, whereas a lot of the more inconsequential scenes had dialogue... and I thought maybe a little more thought should have been given to the bigger scenes... I had a lot of fun, but I wasn't moved.

ishing with you transfixed by the power of what's happening among its main characters.

FRICKER: We'll move on to *Pigtown*, which has been playing over Ireland for a while before coming to the SFX Centre for the Fringe.

SINGLETON: I'd read so much about it and I know it's incredibly popular, but I'll say the same thing as I did for *Ollie Deasy*: that I've had *enough* of sentimental caricature of Irish people and I want people to write truthfulness... please!! It pretended to be perambulatory but really didn't go anywhere... I found the whole thing terribly disjointed. I've seen priests abusing boys in every media form in the past few years — really, I've seen this all before.

BOGERS: I've seen it all before too! I missed a lot of the text as the piece was so locally based. But I liked the almost epic quality, especially in the second half. The first half I found very long, text-based, and boring



“This is post-human theatre; it no longer subscribes to the idea that the way to get to the truth is to have a human being representing or being anything.”

PRESSLEY: I was moved throughout! This is what I'm going to take back with me. It's really an uncommon theatrical experience that gets close to my heart, and it happened to me here partly through the sheer sense of infectious fun. It's technically complicated but not hi-tech at all, and has tremendous theatrical imagination — it's truly a singular piece of theatre. I can't think of anything I've seen like it, starting so whimsically and fin-

— the priest and the policeman with their uniforms straight from the costume shop were too literary... I thought the acting was a little like the show *'Allo, 'Allo!* — the characters were clichéd images.

FRICKER: CoisCéim's *Boxes*, which is being performed in Players' Theatre throughout the Fringe — Brian?

SINGLETON: I loved it; it was so inventive



PIGTOWN

and witty. I find it hard to talk about dance, but it's basically about two guys in a warehouse being physically inventive with boxes; there are battles, reconciliations, moments of anarchy, and moments of trying to restore order. Great visuals, lighting design, and music — it's 43 minutes of sheer joy and I recommend everyone to fight for a ticket! Without overstating the case, I feel also that David Bolger is writing something with his body in his own idiom; he's telling stories and has some sense of corporeal dramaturgy: that it's constructed and goes somewhere and achieves something. I was enormously taken by it.

BOGERS: I agree. It was a charming piece, not too long, and taken together the musicality of the piece, the technical dance used for image making, sometimes funny and witty, sometimes emotional and even dramatic... you really felt that they also had fun making this performance... and you really felt the basic need of making theatre.

FRICKER: Moving on to international work. Joyce is going to lead off on *Genesi*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio's second visit to the Festival, which played this past weekend at the O'Reilly Theatre in Belvedere College.

McMILLAN: It was towering. I hated the first show of Romeo Castellucci's I saw, *Guilio Cesare* — it upset me quite a lot, though I couldn't forget it. Then I saw *Amleto*, his strange version of *Hamlet* — the title character is played as an autistic child — and I had the same reaction, it was pretty unpleasant but I just couldn't ignore it. The word "post-human" came into my head — that this is post-human theatre; it no longer subscribes to the idea that the way to get at the truth is to have a human being representing or being anything, or speaking to you or filtering the experience through the human voice or body. That's very disturbing to me as I am a committed humanist. However, watching this play convinced me that this man is some sort of genius with what he's doing. This show is his three-part vision of creation... the miracle and horror of it, focusing more on the horror! The horror in the fact that you can't create anything good without creating evil... the images of Adam and Eve with that of Madame Curie discovering radium, and the final images of Cain and Abel and the entering of evil into human affairs... As he is post-humanist, or dis-humanist as he describes

himself, he uses images of creatures which are not human or those who stereotypically would have been regarded as less than human — those with obvious disabilities; those who are old, whose bodies are old and not usually displayed on the stage; and children, regarded as human beings in preparation; and little mechanical creatures imitating human actions and animals. In that sense, it questions all our liberal feelings about what the broad mass of human beings owe to these groups which are traditionally seen as vulnerable and though some view this as exploitative and objectionable we have to debate that. I thought it was a beautiful, frightening series of images that I can't forget, that work at an incredibly deep level.

SINGLETON: I agree with everything said. I loved and hated it — it moved and disturbed me; it has given me nightmares and made me think — the only play in the Festivals to have done so and to continue to do so. We were in the presence

of physicality, but here this was denying us all that... What really disturbed me was the second act dealing with the Holocaust, in which his six children played all the parts — how can they perform those parts night after night? How did he get them to do it? How did he explain? Did they know what they were doing? It broke boundaries... it was visual art theatricalised.

FRICKER: The Royal National Theatre's production of *Hamlet*, which played last week in the Gaiety Theatre as part of the main Festival.

MCMILLAN: I saw this *Hamlet* in Glasgow. And straight down the line, it's reasonably well spoken, but I don't think the production had an idea to bless itself with. Obviously it's set in a church — and so what, nothing happened in any of the performances that seemed to reflect that decision. I was a bit grief-stricken because I think Simon Russell Beale is a great actor and I know that, well, every-

“I think Simon Russell Beale is a great actor... but this *Hamlet* was an object lesson in the limit of what an actor can do alone to lift a production of that scale.”

of genius last week. What I saw was a stage of things that we don't normally see represented in our increasingly mediatised world. Our theatres have increasingly dispelled all of those uncontrollable things from the stage like children and animals — he puts them all back in! What I saw was, literally, a breathing stage, an organism full of dead, rejected, and dismembered things. We increasingly have this quest for per-

son knows that he wanted to do this show with a different and possibly slightly more inventive director and I think if he had we might possibly have had a *Hamlet* to remember. But I think this was an object lesson in the limit of what an actor can do alone to lift a production of that scale. And although there were some other good performances — it wasn't that he was the only good actor on stage — there were one or two really



FRICKER: A rather different take on Shakespeare was that taken by Volcano Theatre Company from Wales, who performed *Macbeth: Director's Cut* here in Project as part of the Fringe last week. Brian?

SINGLETON: I fairly rarely agree with reviews in *The Irish Times* and I wouldn't go as far as the review of this one in that paper — it got one star, just one. I would give it more than that. But I would agree with the point that if you do have so much text from Shakespeare and throw so many visuals at it, layered on it... this version reduces the play to two people who are psychopaths, and there's so much more in that play. The characters are motivated by personal ambition, political ambition; they don't live in isolation... it's fine if you remove the text and if you do something interesting with it performatively, but with so much text inserted in the show I was judging this creation against Shakespeare, which I shouldn't be.

BOGERS: I have very mixed feelings about this performance. I think theatremakers and actors always have the right to take Shakespeare, cut it into pieces, and perform it how they want, because Shakespeare is part of our cultural heritage — he is such a big name and still so contemporary that I think it's necessary that people adapt him and his work to contemporary styles. So I think in that sense that the work was very close to where I come from, but on the other hand I hated it... and why did I hate it? It was brought together in a way that it would only appeal to theatre people. For me it was not recognisable that Lady Macbeth could be me (if I was a woman) or my mother, or my sister. It was about the crazy neighbour. It was so

weak ones, and I just thought as a production of *Hamlet* it just lacked a central driving idea to give it energy and passion which was a great pity.

SINGLETON: For me it was all about his relationship with his mother and he played it as a camp suburban housewife. He moved me at times and I went with him all the way, but I found the others did nothing for me, particularly those playing Ophelia and Claudius. I thought it was a one-man show — I agree with what you say.

exaggerated in the way it was put on stage that it was more like reacting to art... I don't mind people making theatre about theatre, but I think it's necessary then that the actors be naked on stage, that they say 'this is me, this is what I want to say about this Shakespeare role, this is what I want to say about acting,' but here they did everything at the same time. That is not clear and it's not fair, not fair to Shakespeare and not fair to me as an audience member...

FRICKER: Our final production to discuss is *The Small Poppies* from Company B in Sydney, which is playing throughout the Festival at the Tivoli Theatre.

McMILLAN: Well, I have very mixed reaction to this. I did enjoy it. It's a show for families about little kids of five making the transition from nursery school to 'big school' as they call it. The subtext — well not subtext because it's pretty overt — its underlying theme has to do with the diversity of the new Australia. There are

is fine, I am not at all against upbeat theatre. The show is very beautifully done, obviously it was a star ticket because it has Geoffrey Rush playing little Clint — a six-foot five-year-old, a very touching image. They are obviously a very talented company and this is obviously not their most complex and demanding work. I did think that there was something interesting there in seeing actors, some of them quite old, playing very young children. It did give them a very direct route to some very clear emotions, and it made me think a little bit, when I saw the Castellucci show, and saw his little children enacting these scenes which are tangentially to do with the experience of Auschwitz — I thought it maybe is part of the same impulse, that the adult human being standing on stage perhaps isn't enough any more. Or there are too many veils, too many pretenses, assumptions... about what an adult human being would be and you need somehow to go to this image of a child or some other different type of being to get



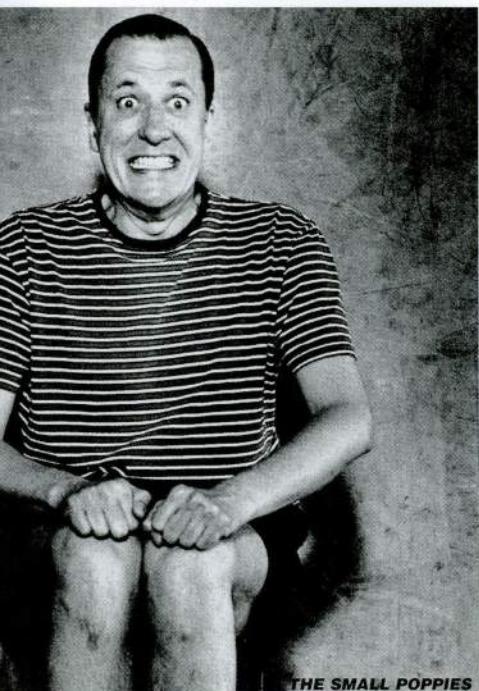
“The Small Poppies raises issues of reconciliation, acceptance, and tolerance of otherness, and that's why I think it **should be compulsory** viewing in today's Ireland.”

kids who are Cambodian refugees; there is a Greek-Australian family; the main character Clint comes from a standard Englishy-Australian family, and there is a reference to the Irish heritage in Australia. So it has this foreground which is about the diversity of the new Australia, which is really handled in a fairly soft-centred and rather celebratory way — a kind of Olympic Australia kind of mood. Which

to a more truthful level...

SINGLETON: I enjoyed it enormously. Again, not so much the play but the performances — very sharply observed performances of children by adult actors. I found the play a very sentimentalised and idealised view of what a multicultural society is and what it can and should be; however, having said that, and living

here where we are encountering a multi-cultural society, and issues of racism, for the first time I would force everyone to go see it. It does raise issues of reconciliation, acceptance, and tolerance of otherness and that's why I think it should be compulsory viewing for schools around



THE SMALL POPPIES

the Tivoli and everyone else.

McMILLAN: It was really noticeable — the audience in the interval were saying this is the kind of thing we need to see in Ireland just now. There was a really strong reaction that there was a kind of similar situation here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I'll start off with a very general question — why have a festival at all? You've talked about a range

of productions, but what about the event overall — what has it done?

SINGLETON: The Dublin Theatre Festival is totally different to the other theatre festivals in Europe, like Avignon and Edinburgh. It's much, much smaller, but it also doesn't rely on tourism... our Festival doesn't bring in an amount of tourists specifically to see the great and the good from all over the world... Why I think it's important, speaking from the point of view of being Irish, and working within theatre education, is that we get exposed to the international avant-garde; we get to see other forms, we get to explore different avenues — that's got a value in itself... audiences. And that has a value.

FRICKER: Did you have a comment, Fergus?

FERGUS LINEAHAN [director, *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival]: I think it's a really good question. All the European festivals kicked in in the post-war period when there was a need for Europe to culturally tie itself together, but there is a real question if festivals should go on forever. It's dangerous. Certainly at the Theatre Festival we are not defensive about that; we have no position to defend. I think that at the point at which there is no need for the Festival it should stop... There are practical things that the Festival does. One is that I think theatre is in danger of dropping into a niche category. And from time to time it rears up its head so that even if people don't attend it's headlining in the media and it is headlining in terms of profile. I think and I hope the Festival does drag people in at that time of year and forces people to address theatre. If it wasn't there, there would be a danger of theatre fur-

ther becoming a niche art form.

FRICKER: The Fringe has become its own free-standing multi-genre arts festival. There is a question as to whether it needs to break free from the main Festival, perhaps run at a different time of year. A similar situation exists in Edinburgh between its Festival and Fringe, so perhaps Joyce, could you talk about the situation in Edinburgh and then could Ali Curran tell us her position?

McMILLAN: The Edinburgh Fringe is such a special phenomenon — I could talk about it for ages. It is huge. The thing about it is, no one really made an effort to start it. It just happened spontaneously. It started with eight companies and now there are a thousand companies; no one invites anyone, unless you are talking about the main venues which have their own programming policy. But it is still the case that if you have an idea for a show tomorrow and if you could rustle up a couple thousand quid from a bene-

the Fringe and the Festival here is not going to be the same because the Fringe here is not a Fringe in that sense; it is an alternative festival with a programmer and a direction and all the rest... I think there are a few things to say about Edinburgh: one of the things that is major about an international festival is the opening-up effect it has on your national theatre culture — over decades... Within about 15 years of the Edinburgh International Festival starting you could see the impact on Scottish theatre, of people having a less parochial vision of what theatre was. In Scotland it has always been very psychologically important to have theatre coming in from outside, but not from London because obviously the relationship with London has always been a complex one having to do with deference and resentment and all the rest of it. So, the incoming imagery of the Edinburgh International Festival gradually changed generations of Scottish writers, painters, theatre people, and really had an



“In order to make [a festival’s] impact work, you have to have a **critical debate that goes beyond single reviews of individual shows. You need a **kind of will** in the public arena.”**

factor, you could go and do that show, and it would be in the Fringe programme if you wanted to pay £200 to be in it. In that sense it is a strange phenomenon — an open Festival that clustered itself around the Edinburgh International Festival. There have been programming difficulties that have led to slight differences in dates in recent years, but it’s hard to imagine them completely apart. The relationship between

impact... The other thing which is related to all this, is that in order to make that impact work is that you have to have a critical debate that goes beyond single reviews of individual shows, bad or good. You need a kind of will in the public arena from journalists, directors of festivals, and spokespeople from various cultural organisations to make the links, to say this kind of show is not the kind of thing we do here, and why? The final

thing is — just to back up Fergus — is the exposure. A festival gives an exposure and a profile to the arts which helps link the arts to the wider public debate which otherwise would not happen as the arts subside into their niche.

ALI CURRAN [director, Dublin Fringe Festival]: To answer the question as posed, no, I don't think that there is a



competition between ourselves and the Festival. Our mission statements and our vision are very different, not just in the size and the type of work, but just in the ethos that the Fringe has towards independent Irish work. We provide a showcase and bring unknown or just-becoming-professional theatre artists up to the same level as some of the established innovators... so I think we have very different programming policies and I think we complement each other quite well. This year is a prime example of that — if you look at some of the young work on the Fringe as the starting part of a curve of both Festivals that goes on all the way up to the *Barbaric Comedies*, a very large-scale co-production with an international agency. Between the two Festivals we

have represented international and national theatre very well... And following on from what Joyce was saying, Edinburgh is not the model for the Fringe here; she is correct in saying ours is not a Fringe. It's an independent Festival that represents a number of disciplines... Because we do represent younger and slightly funkier work — though *bedbound* is a credit to the Theatre Festival this year, and should have been in *my* programme (*laughter*) — but, you know, generally, you can say that experimentation, challenge, new staging ideas, new writing, the multidisciplinary aspect, are what set us apart. The real question is whether we both should move to another time of year.

BOGERS: Could I add something about the function of a festival? What I think is very important is that you can be a player in the market. As soon as a festival starts producing, for example, or co-producing, you can see where the lacks are in the field, the things are that are not happening, and you who have all the money and the energy and are bringing together influences from all kinds of groups — you can push things in directions that you think are important. In that sense you can use the marketing thing and the way in which festivals bring audiences and styles together to create something new that you think is important.

CURRAN: Another thing that Joyce pointed out... it is going to be a slow-burn situation, because we are only six this year, but the reaction of practitioners in the country to the international work that we have brought in the Fringe as well as that which comes in the main Festival, has had a significant psychological effect on people involved in theatre here, even if we haven't practically witnessed that

effect on stage yet. It's so important to see where you sit, to get a global context of how people are approaching their work, because we do live on an island and we do tend to become introspective.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Can I ask Ali and Fergus, are new audiences at the foreground of their thinking? I am involved in youth drama and student drama, and I am curious... I think the Festivals are vital but some people question if they are esoteric, and I do think that theatre festivals should be about bringing in new audiences.

CURRAN: For the Fringe, bringing in new audiences would be part of our legal constitution. To generate new audiences, we operate a low-price ticket policy which is there to encourage people to take a risk on a particular show or even take the risk to go into a theatre for

FRICKER: Fergus, could you elegantly tie in the commissioning-and-producing-new-work-being-a-player-on-the-scene thing with the building-new-audiences thing?

LINEHAN: It's a huge issue, but I don't think this idea of building new audiences in a self-conscious way actually works. The way you build new audiences is to do things that knock 'em dead. The minute you say, we're a bit low on the 18-25 bracket, and then try to program in that direction, you're in trouble. Phillip Glass made this fantastic comment the other day. He said there's a movement away from ideology and towards talent. So I think the way to do that is to just trust the talent to do it — you don't self-consciously go about doing it... that ties into what we are doing with Enda [Walsh] at the moment, we are saying to people who are full of talent, go away and do



“It’s about staging theatre where people can recognise their own lives... I think that will be a big challenge for a festival — to be a new meeting place in a society that’s otherwise falling apart.”

the first time in their lives. The way we market the Festival and brand it is very clearly thought out to not alienate anyone, to have an aesthetic, that is exciting and represents something that will be fun and entertaining and exciting but that doesn't make you feel like you need to have a reference to go and appreciate it... It would seem to me that we have a great number of people who are first time theatregoers who are drawn in by that comfort zone of the event itself.

whatever you want to do that you can't do in an institutional setting. So that's a tenuous tie, but there it is.

FRICKER: It's an interesting point — I would not have looked at *Dracula* as an audience-building event and I didn't see it, but everyone I know who was there came out wondering, who was that audience? There was this young, affluent, good-looking urban Dublin audience...

SINGLETON: That was me, Karen... (laughter)

But this is an important point in terms of work being not just multidisciplinary but also interdisciplinary. There are audiences for different disciplines and if you are going to combine genres you are going to combine audiences, obviously. What I noticed about the Fringe... the average Fringe show is 75 minutes long, and leisure trends within Dublin show that new audiences will not commit to a four-hour show — it's such a risk in terms of their social life — but they'll commit if it's 75 minutes because it's part of a whole evening's entertainment... I agree with what Phillip Glass said, but I'd go much further. There are many people in this city who would not go in through the doors of the Abbey; they don't know what the codes of behaviour are, what the dress is supposed to be... Most people in this country are not used to sitting down in a room in darkness. We're used to doing a whole lot of things — talking on your mobile phone, while watching TV or playing a video. Our leisure time is multi-disciplinary and perhaps our entertainment needs to reflect that.

PRESSLEY: This has been a huge problem in the United States — there is a huge competition for the attention of the audiences. Sometimes it's not good enough to put good work on the stage and let it speak for itself; you have to go out and get the audience — so how do you bring them in? Center Stage in Baltimore is a kind of dual focus theatre — they are the biggest theatre in Baltimore with very high professional standards, but they are also as close to the edge as a mainstream theatre can possibly be. It was crisis time for them in the '90s; they went out and got grants and spent a lot of time thinking about how do we get the under-30 audience

in? They put a lot of effort into getting that audience, and it worked. The artistic programming didn't really change that much; it became an issue of fighting for the ear of the audience, saying, come in — you've got to give us a chance and once you come in you'll be hooked. But it was getting them hooked that first time that was the challenge, and it was very expensive — they spent \$6 million over three years just on the issue of getting the audience in.

BOGERS: In Holland it is very much the same. But the complicated thing and what makes a big challenge for festivals is that there is not just one audience anymore — you have different kind of audiences. You have traditional audiences, who know the etiquette of theatre and know about behaving well in the dark... but there are also new kind of audiences. I think it's good to look at yourself and say, why do you like theatre, where did you first start to be interested in theatre? I can give a good example about a classic tragedy — *Medea*. You learn about this stuff in school and you think about it and you go, well done well done... Well, I once had a love affair; the person let me down, and I saw *Medea* and I thought, Kill the children! Kill the children! (*laughter*) All of a sudden, I understood the play — not with my head but with my heart, and it gives the play a complete new meaning. What's very important to do is to make theatre more normal. It's not about knowledge; it's about staging theatre where people can recognise their own lives in it. Festivals are challenging because you can bring together all those different audiences — old people, young people, experienced people, new people. I think that will be a big challenge for a festival: to be a new meeting place in a society that's otherwise falling apart.

BARBARIC

*With masturbating priests, on-stage nudity and “a vicious rape scene — both vaginal and anal, since you ask” (The Daily Telegraph), even the Abbey’s artistic director Ben Barnes had to admit (to The Sun, no less) that the notorious Barbaric Comedies was “no Mary Poppins.” But did the four-hour Spanish trilogy deserve its public mauling? What did audiences and reviewers really think? Whether you missed it all at the time (where were you?) or simply wish to relive some of the juicier moments... **ROSY BARNES** reports on the drama on stage and off, while **JOE DEVLIN** and **JOSEPH LONG** offer defences of what they feel was a misunderstood masterpiece.*

MELODRAMA

BARBARIC COMEDIES WAS DESCRIBED AS "SHOCKINGLY LURID" by *The Times* and "a parody, of everything that is wrong, and rotten, about the Edinburgh International Festival's drama programme" by *The Daily Telegraph*. *The Times* announced that "dozens of people walked out" of the opening night performance of at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh.

Enter stage-right, Edinburgh Festival director Brian McMaster and the Abbey's artistic director Barnes to pooh-pooh the claims. Barnes told Victoria White of *The Irish Times* that the reports were "grossly exaggerated" and that he himself only saw three walkouts on the opening night. (As Jackie Westbrook, Edinburgh Festival publicity officer unconvincingly suggested, "Maybe they were going for their bus.")

The Times had a simpler explanation: "FESTIVAL'S BRUTAL SEX-SHOCKER EMPTIES SEATS." The paper claimed the production was "the most shocking piece of drama in the festival's 54-year

history" and "threatening the future of the official Edinburgh Festival."

By the time *The Sun* got hold of the story the play contained "live rape scenes, orgies and satanic worship." *The Daily Express* saw "an X-rated shocker." But only *The Sunday Times* saw flesh-eating; the headline to Jan Battles and Javier Aja's story screamed "DUBLIN ROW OVER RAPE AND CANNIBALISM PLAY."

There were some good reviews. *The Stage* described "an intense theatrical spectacle," inviting us to "see it and watch theatre be stretched to its limits." *The Evening News* and *The Irish Times'* White both enjoyed the play while the *Scotland on*

Sunday critic saw Ramón del Valle-Inclán's play as a "beautiful and brutal image of imploding feudalism and decomposing Catholicism."

However, it was the sex 'n' violence most of the media was really interested in. And everyone waited with much anticipation to see how the play would go down in Ireland. "The great thing about Dublin audiences," a confident Barnes told White, "is that they make up their own mind."

They did. Many, it seemed, without needing to see the play at all:

"Sir, I am an 18 year-old UCD student... I am ashamed and embarrassed that a play reportedly containing scenes of rape, necrophilia, and masturbation is considered entertainment in our society today..." (*The Irish Times*' letters page)

"Sir, I am a 28 year-old UCD graduate who was ashamed and embarrassed by the 18 year-old UCD student who was ashamed and embarrassed..." (*The Irish Times*' letters page)

And so on.

North Dublin Fianna Fail TD Martin Brady took it upon himself to save the morals of the nation, "concerned that 'by seeing this on stage a certain type of person might believe it was accepted behaviour and act it out in real life.'" (*The Sunday Times*). Openly admitting he hadn't seen the play, Brady nonetheless busily set about lobbying Arts Minister Síle de Valera, calling for the play to be banned and demanding a public watchdog body to make sure no more "unsuitable" plays be subsidised.

Meanwhile, another campaign gathered steam, as a steady stream of letters and phone calls to the Abbey complained about the "depraved" and "promiscuous" play. "The Devil Despises as Vermin those he gets to do his filth work," one petition addressed to the cast and producer omi-

nously warned. Exciting though this sounds, there were probably not as many complaints as it might have initially seemed: most of the petitions and letters the Abbey received were suspiciously similar, sometimes replicating each other word for word. This doubtless accounts for the lack of the much-anticipated protest on opening night. Despite the threats of fire and brimstone, (and the presence of Abbey security guards!) the papers had nothing more eventful to report about the event than a glimpse of Oscar-winning Geoffrey Rush through the Dublin drizzle.

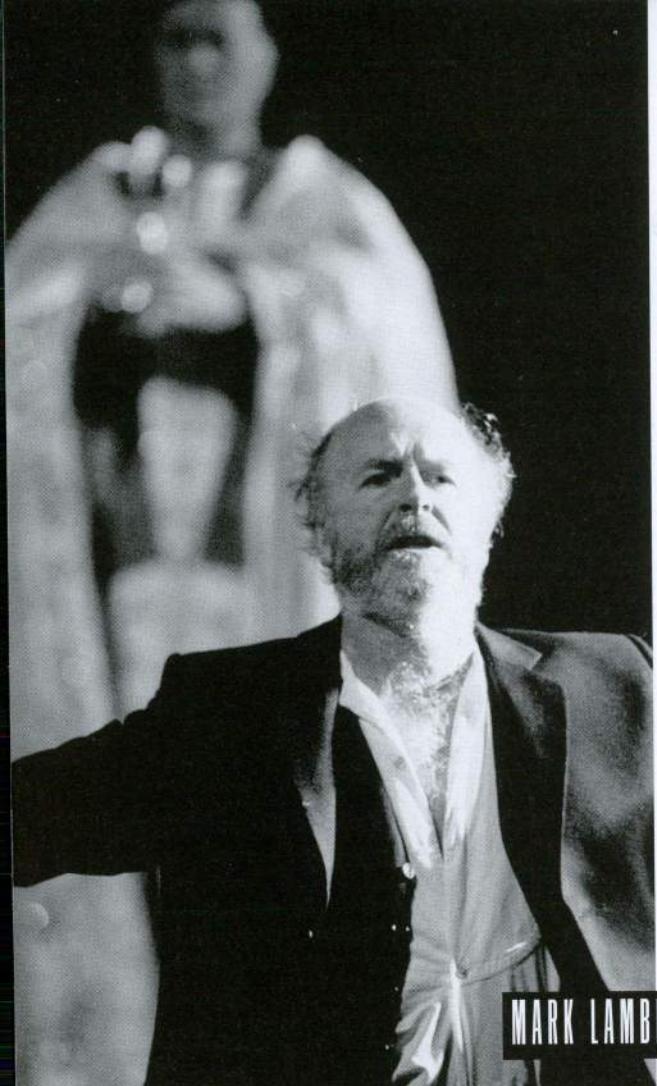
Unlike the response of the Edinburgh and London critics, many of the Irish reviews were very positive. In his rather austere review in *The Irish Times*, David Nowlan not only took the view that it was a significant play, but seemed to imply that the misery of watching it was somehow proportional to its importance — and a moral challenge to the audience. *The Sunday Independent*'s Emer O'Kelly claimed "Valle-Inclán's name belongs to the front rank of dramatic innovation and rancorous socio-political comment; his work is also darkly funny and kaleidoscopically disturbing." *The Irish Examiner* viewed it as "a unique and outstanding theatrical event."

On the other hand, *The Evening Herald*'s Luke Clancy found it "histrionic tosh... swollen, pointless... the culture of the engorged super-state"; a disappointed Susan Conley urged "don't believe the hype" (*In Dublin*); while Jocelyn Clarke of *The Sunday Tribune* criticised the "pedestrian direction and leaden adaptation."

Nobody, however — love it or loathe it — could claim it was a fun night out in the theatre. And audiences were dismal for the rest of the run.

So, what can we make of it all?

Certainly in Edinburgh the reports of



seemed to provoke in some of the British critics. McMaster has come under fire in recent years for his programming, and some writers saw this production — the flagship theatre offering in this year's Edinburgh International Festival — as representing all that they loathe about McMaster's approach: it was difficult, long, obscure and indulged his taste for prestigious foreign directors and obscure European classics.

These particular elements did not figure in the Dublin papers, where there seemed to be a lot of support for the production. Again, it is hard to tell how much of that was a reaction of defiant support for the National Theatre, in the midst of so much antagonism abroad.

In fact, fundamentally most of the serious reviews (good or bad) shared similar concerns. Most were in agreement that the play was over-

walkouts were exaggerated — (though there were definitely more than "three" on the opening night). The reviews were, on the whole, unenthusiastic, but by no means dominated by the issue of sex and violence, as *The Times* would have us believe. There is also a back-story to the extreme hostility which the production

long, confused, and hard going; though most disagreed about who was to blame: the play, the production, or adaptor Frank McGuinness (with one reviewer even blaming the programme note). Many critics wanted more context; yet few could agree on what that context should be. *The Independent's* Paul Taylor, *The Scotsman's*

MARK LAMBERT

Joyce McMillan, and *The Sunday Telegraph's* Kate Bassett wanted more Ireland, Emer O'Kelly wanted more Spain, while both Taylor and *The Guardian's* Michael Billington shared the desire to see Valle-Inclán "performed by his compatriots" (*The Independent*).

Many critics, particularly the female ones, questioned the play's attitude towards women. Bassett seemed doubtful as she described the rape scene which was drawn out, "...I presume, with the intention of being deeply shocking rather than titillating"; whilst McMillan declared, "I have never seen a show which contained so many explicit and prolonged rape scenes, or which seemed so perilously close to enjoying them."

Most acknowledged the stunning design and lighting and many praised the courageous acting. The problem of the show's audience-unfriendliness was uniformly acknowledged. Audiences themselves were divided. Notwithstanding the reviews, the Edinburgh audiences varied greatly in their response, reacting rather as individuals than a mass. For every person who left, clapping sarcastically, there would be another standing and cheering by the end.

The reaction in Dublin was more muted. Certainly, the play was different to the Edinburgh version. The deep King's stage added grandeur, mystery and a feeling of boundless space that could never be replicated in the Abbey fan, where the back wall and side lights were all too mundanely visible. The addition of a second interval too, made the evening more drawn out and was yet another reminder that you were just in a theatre, your bottom was sore, and you were as likely as not going to have to walk home afterwards.

Basically, when it came down to it, audiences did not know what to make of

Barbaric Comedies. Without a straightforward morality or a single sympathetic character to identify with, the play is both unfamiliar in style and content. The rape scene is a good example. Disturbing though it was, the rape did have a context — by juxtaposition. Valle-Inclán shows us a woman who is savagely raped and then, the next time we see her, is using her victim status to her own advantage. This may not be comfortable, but it is a stark and interesting portrait of a society where everyone — women included — struggles to grab what they can. Sex is simultaneously a woman's downfall and her one weapon: as is cruelly portrayed when the raped woman willingly jumps into bed with the play's anti-hero Don Juan Manuel.

The play has room for a multiplicity of interpretations (which many would agree, by the way, is the defining feature of a classic). Does it constitute a warning, a moral message, and therefore contain hope in the possibility of change? Or is it a nihilistic and irredeemably bleak portrait of human nature? It was impossible to tell.

Valle-Inclán is weird, unfamiliar stuff. As Billington astutely pointed out, "There is simply nothing in Anglo-Irish drama that matches Valle-Inclán's delight in violent grotesquerie." Chatting to a couple of Spanish friends, I asked what they thought the production needed. They pondered seriously before one said: "More dwarves — Valle-Inclán needs lots of dwarves."

Perhaps a few more dwarves could have helped highlight the cultural divide, but I doubt it would have given the audiences in Edinburgh and Dublin what they wanted.

Rosy Barnes is a Dublin-based writer and occasional theatre critic.

SHAKESPEARE ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH FREUD

JOE DEVLIN WRITES:

FRANK McGUINNESS' VERSION OF *Barbaric Comedies* by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán is a vital and poetic experience. Valle-Inclán's work was rarely performed in his lifetime and has virtually been unseen outside of Spain. This is surprising when you consider how extraordinary these masterpieces of theatre actually are. That is not to say, however, that they do not set challenges for producers, actors, and audiences.

The three plays that make up the trilogy are *Eagle Rampant* (1907), *The Romance of the Wolves* (1908), and *Silver Face* (1922). From the opening moments of *Silver Face*, the first to be performed in McGuinness' version, director Calixto Bieito creates a metaphysical environment in which we are to experience and understand the world of these plays. A lone figure emerges through the darkness calling out to the audience and in a moment ghost-like figures start to take shape before our eyes as if appearing from the ether. It is riveting.

The staging has echoes of the new

European classical formalism of Romania's Silviu Purcarete, but with much more humanity at its heart. I could not help but marvel at and enjoy the stark poetic quality and depth of vision in the staging of these magnificent plays. There is a fluidity of style as minimalism merges with baroque in a dark and deathly surreal landscape of emotional extremes. Everyone in this world lives on a knife-edge.

The cast is one of the best ensembles I've seen on the Abbey stage for a very long time. Stand-out performances include Mark Lambert's haunted, Lear-like Don Juan; Eleanor Methven in knuckle-white strident form; and Lalor Roddy, Garrett Keogh, and Eamonn Morrissey in challenging bouffon extremes. Des Cave and Kate O'Toole are both suitably skin-crawling as an Abbot in an incestuous relationship with his sister. It is Joan O'Hara's Dona Maria who brings a welcome dignity to this world, but ironically she dies too soon. The characters are abusive and abused beasts. It must be said, however, that some performances were a bit shouty, which diminished the power of some of

the scene playing.

Conall Morrison's *Tarry Flynn* broke new ground on the national stage by combining the traditional Irish kitchen sink drama with European physical theatre. *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, directed by Patrick Mason, combined Tom Kilroy's literary and theatrical experimentation with Japanese theatre techniques. *Barbaric Comedies* pushed the envelope yet again in terms of some of the performance styles, which very much suggest bouffon — the French clowning style of grotesques. This style is used to attack and satirise the powerful and hypocritical personages of bourgeois society. It is not a style for the faint-hearted or — the enemy of art — the politically correct. It works well for *Barbaric Comedies* as the plays are asking its audiences to accept and to go to the dark places of the human psyche.

With these plays Valle-Inclán is showing the consequences of a repressive society on individual people, whether those repressions be religious, social, or within the traditional patriarchal family structure. The message is that human impulse, if hindered, will emerge in the most twisted and grotesque forms. This is immediately relevant here: Ireland itself is only now emerging from the grip of de Valera and repressive Catholicism. These plays use a vocabulary of extremes to examine the nature of life and death in a repressive environment. These characters do not make love; they have violent sex. In one now-infamous and disturbing scene Pichona (Cathy White) is in bed with Silver Face (Karl Shiels) as another character stands looking at them while masturbating over a skeleton. It is both epic and absurd. This is Shakespeare on a collision course with Freud. In light of *Barbaric Comedies* both Brecht and Beckett look like one-trick ponies.

These plays were never going to be easy to realise due to the style and content — never mind the scale and bud-



AIDAN KELLY

getary requirements needed to produce them. The Abbey and the Edinburgh Festival should be praised for having the imagination and courage to stage such challenging and extraordinary plays and for bringing unexplored world theatre to English-speaking audiences.

Joe Devlin is artistic director of Rattlebag Theatre Company.

A TIME OUT OF TIME

JOSEPH LONG WRITES:

FRIDAY 29TH SEPTEMBER: A PACKED HOUSE for a preview performance of *Barbaric Comedies* at the Abbey Theatre. The opening moments capture the tone and aesthetic of the production: a full cast move downstage with the strength of an army, passing through spaces shaped by successive zones of lighting. Group movements dominate, in patterns which are almost choreographed. The stage is most often bare. Visual impact, texture, and tone dominate. Situation is more important than psychology, and is conveyed more by pictorial values than by dialogue. Here, the individual is less important than the group, and has meaning only in relation to the group, as leader, as aggressor, or as outcast. Conflict focusses on land, on inherited rights, on feudal loyalties, on ecclesiastical prerogatives. Costumes, props, dehumanised gestures, confrontations, regroupings conjure up a world which is in part medieval, in part modern — a time out of time.

It seems impossible to follow the twists of plot and counter-plot: patterns emerge of vengeance and betrayal, a fragmented society powered by greed and lust. There seems to be no linear story which might vindicate reason or offer a promise of redemption. But across the epic canvas of the trilogy, the figure of Don Juan Manuel de Montenegro takes on heroic stature. Here is a concept of

character which is far from offering a psychological study, the reassuring confirmation that models do exist after all to account comprehensively for human behaviour and experience. The thrust of Valle-Inclán's writing is to assert the very opposite.

The concept of character which underpins this writing suggests a composite figure, drawing together fragments of legends that have haunted the European imagination for centuries. At the start, he is a variant of the Don Juan theme, the notorious womaniser whose absolute sense of feudal honour and generosity confer on him a towering nobility and place him on a different plane from his petty and vengeful foes. By the end of the trilogy, he has mutated into a Lear-like figure, evicted from his ancestral castle by his corrupt progeny, the five dissolute and faithless sons who finally will slay him. His decline into madness is figured by his lunatic servant, portrayed in grotesque animality by Eamonn Morrissey's astonishingly physical performance, and collectivised by the band of beggars, lepers and cripples which he gathers around him at the end.

Here as elsewhere, the priorities of the production are faithful to Valle-Inclán's preoccupations as dramatist: pictorial qualities of texture, colour, lighting, the grouping of figures, the pattern of gestures, the rhythm of choral speaking, the elements of musical composition, all com-

bine to suggest more than dialogue or the logic of action can communicate. But can we say where all this is leading us?

The last line of the play is given to the most cynical of the five brothers, the thieving seminarist Don Farruquino: "Now we are damned and we will wait twenty years for judgement," but his demonic laugh and simian leap disallow a clear moral ending to this highly moral play. Brecht, in *The Good Person of Szechuan*, demonstrates the impossibility of goodness in a society which is corrupt. It is not so easy to see, in the repentant character of Don Juan Manuel, an unequivocal incarnation of feudal high-mindedness done to death by the moral chaos of a post-medieval world. In this play and in this production, tragedy and moral resonance are constantly undermined by the blackest comedy and the most savage grotesque. Calixto Bieito's choices frequently exacerbate this tension. He introduces visual incongruities which invite the spectator to engage with the scene as performance, rather than as representation.

Thus, in the notorious scene where Don Farruquino attempts to boil a cadaver in a pot, hoping thereby to produce a clean and marketable skeleton, while his brother, played by a stalwart and bare-butted Karl Shiels, bonks in consensual frenzy with the mercantile Pichona, the ironic juxtaposition of sexuality and death, of boisterous carnality and physical decomposition, recalls the medieval *danses macabres* and its grim morality. Bieito's staging heightens this ironic framing. Don Farruquino launches the scene by dragging a huge yellow Calorgas cylinder across the stage, along with an enormous but very modern aluminium cooking pan. The cadaver protrudes alarmingly from the pan, and Don Farruquino calls over to his brother: "You wouldn't happen to



KATE O'TOOLE & LALOR RODDY

have a bigger pot, would you?" But the brother is otherwise engaged.

Bieito's compellingly visual and athletic production made demands upon the cast which they admirably met, moving into a style of physical performance different from what is fostered in the mainstream tradition of Irish theatre. It made demands also upon the audience, and some did not seem willing to follow where the performance was taking them. It presented Valle-Inclán as a forerunner of the 20th-century movements away from representational, rational, analytical forms towards the more expressionistic. It gave us a riveting theatrical experience, even if we were not always quite sure what it was exactly that we were riveted to.

Joseph Long is director of the UCD Centre for Drama Studies.

CAN'T PAY WON'T PAY

All of Ireland is on strike, it seems – except its actors.

MARK PHELAN reports on the acting community's increasing difficulties in navigating the Social Welfare system – and on the surprising silence emanating from the community in response.

THE RECENT, WIDESPREAD SERIES OF STRIKES BENIGHTING the nation on a scale not seen since the 1970s has drawn attention to the fact that the benefits of our much-vaunted Tiger economy are not being shared by all sections of society. As the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen, many

lower-paid sections of the workforce have mounted vociferous media campaigns to publicise their plight and urge the government to intercede.

There is another sector of the workforce, however, in the midst of a mounting crisis over its working conditions. Given that this group — the acting community — works in one of the most public of professions and undeniably has a legitimate grievance, it is deeply ironic that they have failed to organise themselves towards a unified protest, unlike their U.S. counterparts, whose strike has been so visible in recent months. Actors in Ireland, it would seem, remain content to suffer for their art in comparative silence.

The crux of the problem is that actors are

increasingly and consistently being disallowed social welfare benefit, traditionally the lifeline for those between shows, as nearly all actors work on a contract-to-contract basis, with periods of unemployment an inevitable feature of the job. Social Welfare (SW) officials are now requiring actors to retrain or apply for alternative jobs when they apply for benefit.

The scale of this problem has convinced many actors that they are being specifically targeted by SW officials — a charge vehemently denied by both Denis O'Brien and Tom Lehane, job facilitators in city centre SW branches, who simply maintain that current policy has changed due to the positive economic climate. Last year, job facilitators assisted 49,000 people to return

to work on the Back to Work Programme and the live register is currently at 5% — down 50% from only a few years ago. With fewer cases to worry about, greater scrutiny "is now being brought to bear on individual cases" says O'Brien, and accordingly, the benevolent "blind eye," which Lehane admits, "unofficially supported the arts for years," has disappeared. Ireland's chronic labour shortage has seen to that, and actors and others, are being pressured to take up alternative jobs or undergo training to make them more "employable" to fill this gap.

Actor Eithne McGuinness and musician

hope of being seen, we do workshops, auditions, and we're so badly paid anyway... I think it's reasonable that we should be able to avail of benefit. Especially if the state wants to have the theatre sector which it pretends it does, then it must support actors. I've been signing on regularly between jobs for the past ten years, and without it, I couldn't be an actor."

Experienced and often-employed actors like Bennett and Morna Regan have recently been threatened that dole would be withdrawn. "I was explicitly told that if I hadn't got a job in six weeks they would strike me off," says Regan, "but I couldn't understand



QUESTIONING: (left to right) Eithne McGuinness, Morna Regan, and Andrew Bennett

Vincent Doherty report that work in Bewley's and brick-laying were suggested to them in SW interviews, which both viewed unfavourably. O'Brien warns, however, that he would not "countenance" an actor refusing to work in any other field. Are actors being "precious" by refusing work in other areas? Actor Andrew Bennett doesn't think so: "I don't know a single actor afraid of a hard day's work, but to be an actor you can't do those jobs... we do so much unpaid work already, we even do plays unpaid in the

this as I hadn't been constantly signing on and off... I had only signed on for seven weeks and I'm working again now."

The sporadic, contractual nature of actors' work has recently been acknowledged by the Minister of the Department of Social, Community, and Family Affairs, Dermot Ahern, who wrote (in an article in *The Equity News*) that, "employment is usually not long-term and that periods of unemployment are regular features of the profession." Such sentiments provide little comfort to actors, however, as they have

not been formalised in policy. In spite of the Minister's explicit recognition of the unique nature of the acting profession, there are still no specific SW guidelines for the consideration of actors' cases, with the result that actors are at the mercy of individual officials.

Actor Eugene O'Brien reports that he has found the response of officials uneven in the extreme: "I'd been disbarred [thrown off the dole] for 6 months and had been brought in for an appeal. There was an independent assessor and a SW representative present. They went through my case and I reiterated the arguments about what it is to be an actor and what I had been doing, and at the end of it all, the SW representative questioned me and was grudging of my efforts and my 'supposed career', but the independent assessor said he had only one question, and it was to the social welfare guy, about why I was even there in the first place when it was obvious

ator]. But in the meantime, I sent on a load of letters to TDs, got replies from them, and sent out further letters. Then months later, this letter arrives from Pascal Sheehy saying 'we will leave you alone until October.' That was the union's contribution. But by then I had been working for the past month and would be working through October and November. I don't want to be 'let off the hook,' I want something done for *all* actors. I'm still writing letters and because I'm not on the dole they are so confused and don't know what to do with me. I'm not arguing for my personal case but against the general policy."

Undoubtedly, there is a clear lack of urgency, energy, and vision in Equity's approach to the issue. The July edition of their recently introduced newsletter, (which aims to be printed weekly, although only three have been produced since the end of last year), refers to this problem and declares, "we have a number

ALTHOUGH EQUITY IS COMMEMORATING ITS FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY THIS YEAR, MANY **DISILLUSIONED MEMBERS** FIND LITTLE TO CELEBRATE IN A UNION THEY SEE AS **PASSIVE** AND POORLY ORGANISED.

I had a job and was genuinely seeking work. The assessor was fair, though, too, and said if I was unemployed for more than three months they would have to clamp down on me again."

So what is the actors' union doing about all of this? Not much it seems. Although Equity is commemorating its fiftieth anniversary this year, many disillusioned members find little to celebrate in a union they see as passive and poorly organised.

"When I first had this hassle," says Regan, "I got on to Equity and they said they would see what they could do and passed my case on to Pascal Sheehy [a sen-

of strategies in mind — more of which later." Yet, four months "later," little seems to have been done to address the problem.

Equity branch secretary Gerry Browne says that the executive of the organisation met in October, "and we drafted a statement — well, not a statement, but a letter to the Minister — which we haven't sent, as we felt that before we lay it on heavy, we should ask once more for a meeting (with Ahern)... and so we approached Seamus Brennan, the whip, and asked him to try and secure a meeting." Brennan has replied to Equity that he has contacted the Minister and is waiting, in turn, for his reply. When

questioned on the efficacy of this softly-softly approach, Browne responded, "courtesy demands that we try other avenues first before making the press aware of the situation." Such "courtesy" is conspicuously absent in the more militant campaigns of other unions and seems unlikely to rattle a strike-beleaguered government, so should Equity consider changing tack, and adopt a more direct approach?

Actors seem to think so, although they have yet to collectively and officially demand such action. Browne says that "members only get in touch with me after a deciding officer has made a decision to disallow them benefit, so we're at an appeal stage." At this point, Equity steps in, lobbying on behalf of individual cases in rearguard, reactive actions, instead of pursuing a positive, proactive policy which could protect the collective interests of their members in the long term.

However, actors must also share the blame for their current predicament, as Browne rightly contests: "a union can only be as good as its members; if they don't join and attend meetings, nothing will change." Whilst many individuals are inflamed about the SW issue, the sector as a whole remains apathetic. There are no pickets or protests and the only public acknowledgement of the issue to date has been a single article in *The Irish Times'* new entertainment section, *The Ticket*. Cohesive, concerted action is urgently needed, but the idea that Irish actors may strike like their U.S. counterparts is dismissed by Eugene O'Brien as an "erotic fantasy." More plausible, perhaps, is an idea mooted by Andrew Bennett: a publicity campaign spearheaded by well-known faces, such as, say, Brendan Gleeson and Mick Lally.

A further, crucial problem is that beyond expressing a vague desire for "some kind of change," the acting community has singularly failed to outline what this might entail. Whilst other aggrieved

groups, such as teachers, taxi drivers, pilots, cabin crews, and so forth, have drawn up detailed proposals which they are currently negotiating with both government and senior management to secure better deals for themselves, a basic list of changes to improve the lot of actors "hasn't been drawn up yet," says Browne.

Abstract claims, by individual actors, of their wider contribution to the nation's economy and culture will doubtless cut no ice with SW officials, nor will demands that there should be a special category within the SW system for actors, as there is in other European countries. Government officials are likely to reject a demand for such a category as undemocratic and dangerously impractical, and it does raise the fraught question of how to define who counts as an actor and who doesn't. No one could reasonably deny that if an actor only gets, say, two days' work in a year, perhaps a career change is in order; but even the best actors hit dry patches. Is it in fact possible for clean, clear criteria to be drawn up to define what an actor is, and should others in the theatre world — writers, directors, designers — be similarly defined and included?

These and many more difficult questions need be addressed by the acting community; given the Arts Council's current restructuring and re-evaluation of its role, perhaps the time is right for actors to engage in just such a process themselves. However, Equity's next general meeting is not scheduled until Easter, and until such time as Equity or the sector itself develops a coherent strategy and meaningfully engages in debate with both government and theatre management, the current crisis will only continue to mount.

Mark Phelan is a PhD candidate at the School of Drama, Trinity College, and is news editor of this magazine.

Taxi!

MICHAEL COLLINS offers an excerpt from his play *The Hackney Office*, which has its world premiere at Druid Theatre in Galway this December.



MICHAEL COLLINS: I was living in a communist tower block in the suburbs of Krakow and every day I went to Jagellonska Library where both Copernicus and Pope John Paul II had studied. It's a beautiful library full of bearded professors and girls in flouncy dresses. I was trying to write a play about Vikings and it was going very badly. So I went for a walk and sat on a bench beside a tramp fumbling in his pockets. I decided to write something set in a single location with only three characters. I tried to think of a setting — a bicycle shop? A sauna? A laundrette? Then I remembered a hackney office that was around the corner from me when I lived on North

Frederick Street in Dublin. Every time I passed, there was a young fella standing in the doorway drinking a can of beer. A few minutes later I had sketched out the plot for *The Hackney Office*. And the tramp had found the cigarette he was looking for.

(Enter Danny)

DANNY (handshake) Man yerself! Howya keepin'? This yur place? Christy Quinn, I tell ya, I am impressed.

CHRISTY How ya keepin' yourself? Magine that.

DANNY Handy Hackneys. I was just passin', I seen the sign. Heard ya were in the game alright.

CHRISTY Come on sit down.

DANNY Noice one. Goin' well for ya?

CHRISTY Wouldn't believe it. Run off our feet we are. Where ya been hidin' yourself?

DANNY Ya know how it is.

CHRISTY 'Deedin' I do.

DANNY Car safe out there ya tink?

CHRISTY Course. (tidies) Sit down. Bit of a mess today.

DANNY Not at all. I know how it is. (sits) How's business?

CHRISTY Phone never stops ringin', Danny. Turnin' down the customers we are.

DANNY Must be rakin' it in?

CHRISTY Flat out.

DANNY That's great to hear.

CHRISTY Gorgeous weather to be stuck in here though.

DANNY Powerful isn't it.

.....PLAY EXCERPT.....

CHRISTY We were up the Garden a Remembrance lunchtime. Very breasty weather, as the fella says. (*laughter*)... How's Alice?

DANNY Not a boddler... Hackneyin's the ting. Wise man got into it the time ya did. Enough cowboys around these days.

CHRISTY The wild fuckin' west.

DANNY Meant to look y'up many's the time.

CHRISTY Good ting I seen ya so.

DANNY Don't get down here too often. Spot a business nearby.

CHRISTY That so?

DANNY A fine set-up ya have here.

CHRISTY Put the work in ya get the results. That what they say?

DANNY Always had the savvy though. (*of forehead*) That's the place to have it.

CHRISTY Ah now. We have plans. Expansion, ya know.

DANNY I don't doubt it. I'd say yiv a fair fleet as it is.

CHRISTY Tink big, as the fella says. We've done alright but that's no reason to stop. Can't rest on yer laurels, can ya? Ya'll meet Jude — drives for me. Goin' into partnership we are — a new taxi company altogether. Have it all worked out in me head.

DANNY Wouldn't put it past ya.

CHRISTY The Duke has an interest in this place.

DANNY That so? Couldn't be in better hands.

CHRISTY Some man alright.

DANNY Have to take yer hat off to him.

CHRISTY Ya know him?

DANNY Reputation... Who doesn't? I am impressed, I have to say.

CHRISTY Well, ya know...

DANNY Who's this fella? Jude —

CHRISTY — Caffrey. Great head on his shoulders.

DANNY Do I know him?

CHRISTY Local lad.

DANNY So long since I was round

these parts.

CHRISTY Three years drivin'; not so much a scratch.

DANNY The kinda lad ya want alright.

CHRISTY Not easily come by though.

DANNY Caffrey sounds familiar. Would I know his father?

CHRISTY Well... he doesn't.

DANNY Follow ya. (*pause*)

CHRISTY Mother died a few years ago. Hasn't a sinner.

DANNY Hard to get someone reliable.

CHRISTY You were in the taxi game yourself?

DANNY For a while yeah.

CHRISTY Had a few on the road?

DANNY Seven one stage.

CHRISTY Not bad. Not bad at all. Sold on the plates, I s'pose.

DANNY No. Still have them.

CHRISTY Jokin'? Ya don't use them?

DANNY Well, they're there ya know. How is Catherine?

CHRISTY Great. Not a boddler.

DANNY Still playin' the badminton?

CHRISTY Oh yeah... I'd say so...

DANNY Yis still in Stoneybatter?

CHRISTY Ting is, Danny, we got kinda separated.

DANNY Oh. Very sorry to hear that, Christy.

CHRISTY No. It's nuttin' like that.

DANNY I hate to see that sorta ting happen.

CHRISTY No, not a real sepration. Owney a temprey ting. A trial one.

DANNY Jokin' me?

CHRISTY No. It's a great idea.

DANNY And?

CHRISTY Oh yeah. Getting' back together the end of the month! Was worth doin' — lookin' forward to the end a the month though.

DANNY And did you stay in Stoneybatter for it?

CHRISTY No, that's the whole point of it.

DANNY No, I mean which a yis moved out?

CHRISTY I'm closer to the office this way.

DANNY Very modern carry on altogether. And are ya in touch with her? While yur.

CHRISTY No. Not at all.

DANNY Some man, Christy.

CHRISTY Well, I do ring her a fair bit. It's hard not to.

DANNY And this place boomin' for ya.

CHRISTY Turnin' down the customers, Danny.

DANNY Many on the road have ya?

CHRISTY Tell me yerself and Alice? Are you still?

DANNY Oh yeah. Goin' strong.

CHRISTY Many kids is it now?

DANNY Two.

CHRISTY And seven licenses ya said?

DANNY Well, they're there, ya know.

CHRISTY What ages the kids?

DANNY Still in school.

CHRISTY That's great.

DANNY Up in Donegal with Alice the moment — her mother's. Bit of a holiday for them.

CHRISTY Few days off won't do them any harm.

DANNY Off what?

CHRISTY School.

DANNY Jaysus, easy knowin' you've none.

CHRISTY None what?

DANNY It's the summer holidays, Christy!

CHRISTY So it is.

DANNY S'pose that made it easier though: the trial. Wouldn't be on there's kids involved.

CHRISTY Oh yur right there.

DANNY Many cabs on the road have ya altogether?

CHRISTY On the road?

DANNY Would ya say?

CHRISTY Cater for The Duke a fair bit these days. He'd be a big customer of ours.

DANNY Right. Right.

CHRISTY Works out well that way. We're happy with it.

DANNY I see. (*rising*) Well listen, great to run into ya, Christy.

CHRISTY Yer not headin'? Hang on there. Shure yiv to meet Jude yet.

DANNY Don't have time, Christy.

CHRISTY Sit down there. Relax.

DANNY I can't hang round, Christy. Ya know how it is.

CHRISTY Not at all. Sit down. Ya know what I'll do? I'll get him on the CB.

DANNY I'm on the run, Christy.

CHRISTY Ya have to meet him. (*turns on the CB radio*) Sit down. Sit down. (*Danny sits. To CB*) Breaker for a copy. Breaker for a copy. Homebase for HH8. HH8, do ya copy? Over. (*listens to mouthpiece. To Danny*) HH is Handy Hackney. (*to CB*) Breaker for a copy. This is Homebase for HH8. Do ya read me good buddy? Over. (*pause. To Danny*) Might be outta range or somethin', (*to CB*) Breaker. Breaker. Come in HH8. Over. Breaker for a copy.

CB Roger there. This is Mister Chocolate. What's your 10-28?

CHRISTY Hello?

CB That's a 10-2 there, Homebase. Coming in loud and clear. What's your 10-28?

CHRISTY Me what?

CB This is the Mister Chocolate. How's my modulation?

CHRISTY Homebase for HH8. Do ya copy?

CB Gimme a 9 there, Homebase.

CHRISTY (*to Danny*) I'll try a different channel. (*changes channel*) There's 40 a them. (*to CB*) Jude, are ya listenin'? It's Christy.



RESPECT IS DUE

Three of the most influential and respected figures behind the scenes of Irish theatre — TONY Ó DÁLAIGH, HAROLD FISH, and PHELIM DONLON — are retiring from full-time work. But does that mean they're disappearing from the scene altogether? Perish the thought, they tell KAREN FRICKER.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM LAWLOR

KAREN FRICKER: Can you each tell me a bit about your initial interest in the arts, and how you got involved in theatre?

TONY Ó DÁLAIGH: I grew up in Mallow, County Cork, and my only experience of theatre growing up would have been small scale panto. I came to Dublin when I was 17 to work in the Department of Defence. There was really very little to do — I could do a month's work in a week, literally. I joined an amateur drama group to offset the boredom, and then became involved with the Irish language company, Gael Linn. Someone there saw I was good at organising things so they asked me to work in the administration of the company, which I did part-time for eight or nine years while still keeping my day job.

But then I was promoted in the civil

service to be private secretary to the Minister for Education, so my theatre work had to stop. But I did stay involved with the Irish National Opera, a small-scale touring opera company I had set up with friends. The group toured the country from 1965-85, doing about 50 performances a year mainly at weekends.

In 1974, the Government set up a national theatre company specifically for touring, the Irish Touring Company, and I was offered the job of general administrator. I got a leave of absence from the civil service for nearly four years to work with the ITC, and when I left in 1978, I was succeeded by Will Weston, and then its third and final administrator was Phelim [Donlon].

I spent 1976-86 in the civil service, in the latter part of that time managing the first Student and Sport division of the Government. That was very interesting

work; we had a youth employment scheme and I managed to divert a lot of the funds into the arts. Red Kettle and Graffiti were some of the companies that grew out of that scheme. The biggest theatre project we did was directed by Peter Sheridan — it was three shows about inner city life, and we broke every rule for it. Peter is an extraordinary directing talent; someone should get him to do more these days.

In the '80s, the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham was renovated into a facility for the arts, and I was asked by the Department of the Taoiseach to be its first director. That was a fantastic opportunity and I spent a happy four years there. When the Government decided they wanted the building to become the Irish Museum for Modern Art, I indicated that I knew nothing about that, and started to avail of a scheme for early retirement. But then the Theatre Festival called and said they needed a new director. So I retired on a Friday and started work again on a Monday! That was 1990 and I stayed as director of the Theatre Festival until 1999.

PHELIM DONLON: My first real interests were music and the technical side of theatre. The only acting I did was a couple of seasons as a 'super' with the old Music and Drama Society in the Gaiety — what is now Opera Ireland — doing walk-ons with a spear. The real advantage of that was you got to hear the operas without having to pay for your seat!

I spent my early years working in the family business, which is the liquor trade, and through that I learned other things — banks and insurance and labour law. It then happened that there was a vacancy as general manager of the Olympia Theatre, and so I went along for an interview with its board chairman, Brendan

Smith. I struggled to persuade him that I knew the theatre, but what really interested him was my experience in the liquor trade, because the Olympia had five bars, and very often the conduct of business in the bars paid the way of the theatre! This, plus the fact that I owned my own tuxedo, meant I got the job.

I was happy there but it was hard work — you could be there 'til all hours and then in the next morning. The Olympia was very exciting then — this was the mid '70s — there had been great money spent on a refurbishment so it was in great nick.

Four years later a vacancy came up at the Irish Touring Company, as Tony was saying, to replace Will Weston. I was very happy to learn that side of the business — how a theatre company produces work, how it does its planning, decides what play to do.

I was with the ITC for about three years and then in 1982, the Arts Council withdrew its grant to the company, because they decided to put a touring scheme in place to which a number of companies could apply. The ITC had been going for ten years by then, and it had a great record, great contacts, an improving brand image... this was quite a trauma. But I found jobs for the rest of the company, and then I had a meeting with the Arts Council and said, well, what are you going to do with me? They said there was a vacancy in Council for an administration officer, but there was an embargo on filling civil service jobs, so they got permission to offer me that job because I had two years of an unexpired contract with the ITC. So I became poacher turned gamekeeper!

I wasn't a fortnight in the place when Colm O'Briain, the Arts Council director, called me in and said, you know the guy before you looked after film as well —



PHELIM DONLON

do you know anything about film? That was the way it was in those days — the arts were growing, but the staff in the Arts Council wasn't, so this doubling up happened, and people did the best they could. I handled film for two or so years, and then took over as drama and dance officer in 1985. I was in that position until last year.

HAROLD FISH: My first job was teaching Spanish and French in a cathedral school in Bristol. After a couple of years, I realised I'd be better off teaching my own language, so I applied for, and was offered, a job teaching English in Brazil. I was married with two small daughters at the time, though, and it became clear that the job wasn't going to support a

whole family. The recruiting agency was the British Council, and they were terribly embarrassed by all this, so they asked me to come to London for a career service interview. I knew they were just trying to make up for an awkward situation, but there was a Goya exhibition on in London at the time that I wanted to see, and I thought, well, they'll pay my train ticket from Bristol...

The outcome of all that was the following August — this was 1969 — I was on my way to Peru for my first British Council job, with the family in tow, travelling first class on an Italian ship. My job there was running an institute that taught English. There wasn't much cultural stuff associated with the job, but I was involved in bringing over the Amadeus Quartet, and we did have the Bristol Old Vic with Barbara Jefford as Hedda Gabler — that was exciting.

The British Council being what it is, you spend three years in one place and then you move on... so next I went to Milan. I wasn't fond of opera at the time, yet, but I went to La Scala and saw *The Italian Girl in Algiers* — it just blew me away. I arrived early and realised there was an opera before the opera, just the way the place filled up... the colour and the movement and the excitement and the buzz, just sitting there looking over the balcony, watching all that happen, was extraordinary.

After that I spent three years in Israel, which was politically exciting — it was the time of the first military invasion into south Lebanon. I did four years teaching applied linguistics in Birmingham, where I discovered the West Birmingham Jazz Society, in a big way! Then it was six years in Cologne, Germany, and that was when the cultural side of my life started to take off, if you like. Mostly we started off working with literature, inviting writers and organising festi-

vals up and down the country.

In 1990 I was sent to Argentina, where there had been no British presence since the Falklands War in 1982. This was the first time I was the director of an office, and I was creating everything from scratch. It struck me that the best way to say that Britain was back and happy to be back was with a very high-profile arts programme. So that's when the arts became central to the work rather than an exciting part of the work.

When that posting was up, my wife and I were feeling quite far away from Europe — we both had elderly parents here — so we were looking to come back. I hadn't even thought about Ireland when I saw the posting, but we talked about it and I rang around to a few friends and I got the job — I became director here in 1994.

FRICKER: What do you think are some of the most exciting or important things that happened in Irish theatre in the 1990s?

DONLON: The growth in the field has been enormous. In 1985 the Arts Council had 14 companies receiving grant aid, and only four regional theatres. In 1998 we had 41 organisations receiving funding, including seven regional theatres. Every company in 1985 with the exception of Druid was based in Dublin; now there are quite a number of companies based around the country. Those are figures, and they don't say anything about the range and variety of work undertaken by new companies. We've also seen a huge amount of growth in facilities — in the number of venues and the resources they have to offer.

Ó DÁLAIGH: Yes, the growth in venues has been amazing. When the Irish Touring Company and the Irish National Opera were touring, we played in terri-

ble school auditoriums, town halls without a lamp... the whole situation has changed now. All around the country and in the North as well, there are beautiful new venues opening up.

DONLON: Another thing that has changed is an improvement in the whole area of production values — people are bringing diverse skills and training to all aspects of production. We expect a higher standard now, and new technologies allow for more sophisticated design. There has been some really exciting writing by contemporary Irish playwrights. I also think it's been exciting to see Irish artists embrace the non-verbal aspects of theatre — it has been exciting to watch the work of Barabbas, the Blue Raincoats, and Pan Pan develop.

FRICKER: Listening to each of you talk, I'm struck by how you're all really self-taught. You made your careers on your own terms, without following any set paths. So what do you make of the culture of training that's emerging in Ireland?

DONLON: I feel it's important that people can get training — actors, directors, designers, and administrators. The days are gone when you could go into a rehearsal room and start tidying and sweeping, and in a few days someone would say, 'what's your name,' and you're in. Business and the arts have become more sophisticated. That being said, I don't think you can do a three-year course and end up knowing it all. It's necessary to have hands-on experience, whether you are an artist or an administrator.

Ó DÁLAIGH: There is clearly a need for skilled, trained staff around the country, particularly in senior positions. You can't



HAROLD FISH

just do a one-year postgrad course and then know how to run a venue. There is a need for placements, to work for six months with the people who are actually doing a job. You can't just throw someone in the deep end. This needs to be tackled and recognised. Also, people are leaving the field because the money is better elsewhere. The sort of cash that's available to a good PA in the business world — why would anyone stay working in theatre? The arts has to pay more, there's no question about that.

FRICKER: Harold, what were your perceptions of Irish theatre when you came here, and how have they changed?

FISH: I guess I arrived expecting every-

thing to be text-based, and I expected to see plays about poverty. Both things are true to a certain extent, but the variety has also been surprising.

Two plays which really demonstrated to me the didactic power of theatre, certainly vis-a-vis my own knowledge of this island, were *Good Evening Mr. Collins* by Tom MacIntyre and Gary Mitchell's *A Little World of Our Own*, both in the Peacock. I was inspired after *Good Evening* to go off and read various books about Michael Collins... In terms of history it was crucial in helping me understand. *In a Little World* brought in the other side; it opened up my thinking about the violence in the North. The extraordinary thing was that it could have been about any community which operates in or near a paramilitary environment. It was the Loyalist community in Belfast but it could have been Nationalists, or it could have taken place in Argentina... that was really gripping.

My overall impression is that there has been enormous growth over the six years I've been here. I think the Fringe has done an incredible amount over that time. It has created a great energetic space for people to try all sorts of things. It's the nature of a Fringe that things will fall on their face, and that's actually essential. I don't think that mankind and the power of the arts to help mankind are going to progress in a serious way if there is no risk. I think there has been an increasing amount of risk in the time I have been here.

FRICKER: What productions or performances were the most memorable to you in your career?

DONLON: In the Abbey, *The Gigli Concert*, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *The Iceman Cometh*,



TONY Ó DÁLAIGH

The Silver Tassie, and *Lughnasa*, of course. At the Gate, *Twelfth Night*, *The Steward of Christendom*, *Peer Gynt*, and *The Recruiting Officer*. Bailegangaire at Druid, with Siobhan McKenna. Their *Playboy* as well was pretty definitive. Rough Magic's *Serious Money* and *Pentecost*. At the Theatre Festival, Footsbarn, Complicite, and *Les Danaïdes* — and the show they did last year, *Cloudstreet*. You could go on and on! *The Winter's Tale* from the RSC in the Festival a few years ago — God, that was wonderful. Some of Field Day's work, particularly in the early years. It was a pilgrimage to see a Field Day show in Derry: *Translations* and *Making History*.

Ó DÁLAIGH: We all have the ten or 12 things that we remember forever. For

me it's Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which I saw in England. It's the Cheek by Jowl *As You Like It*. *The Street of Crocodiles* by Theatre de Complicite. Joe Dowling's production of *Faith Healer* — that was the first time I saw Donal McCann. And of course McCann in *The Steward of Christendom*, and his Captain Boyle, again for Joe Dowling in the Gate in 1986. We were blessed to have an actor like him; he had an excitement and a danger that is rare...Patrick Mason's first collaborations with Tom MacIntyre — *The Great Hunger* was an extraordinary show. And in 1997, Conall Morrison's double bill of *In a Little World of Our Own* followed by his own adaptation of *Terry Flynn* — that heralded the arrival of a great talent.

FISH: In addition to the productions I've mentioned, I was very struck by the *Hamletmachine* that came to the Theatre Festival this year. It was a production of a German play by an Argentine company, so given my background I was particularly interested. They used the play as a metaphor for political events in Argentina, and there was a moment in performance that was so disturbing, I'll never forget it. They asked people in the audience to throw darts at the back of a dummy who represented a political prisoner, and people came up and did it and the whole audience just laughed... there was a sense that no one really knew what it was meant to represent. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was powerful but very disturbing — people's ability to block out the darker meaning of things.

FRICKER: What are your thoughts about the future of the field?

DONLON: I would be enormously optimistic about the future. Audiences are more discriminating. I am enthused by the energy and commitment of young people coming into the business in different capacities. There is a building up of enormous potential in Irish theatre, of what theatre can do for the makers of theatre and for audiences. It's becoming more valued. Just looking over the field at the moment, there were about 40 companies last year who made applications to the Arts Council who we weren't able to respond to. Very few had no merit. And there is so much commitment and motivation they will get their work done anyhow.

FISH: I'm not afraid of paradox: I'd like to see Irish theatre become more international but keep its essential kernel of Irishness. The theatre here is still self-centred, but there's a more universal way for theatre to

function — you can take local issues, but broaden them out at the same time.

FRICKER: Phelim, what's the project you're working on at the moment?

DONLON: For the last year I've been working for the Arts Council on a special project called Auditoria, which is an overview of all arts venues North and South. We hope to have the work completed on it by this time next year.

FRICKER: And after that?

DONLON: I'm set to retire, though I would like to continue to have some involvement. I wouldn't want to walk away from 25 years in this business. But one has to recognise that younger people have to be involved. At a certain point it's time to step aside.

FRICKER: Harold, you're moving to Germany?

FISH: Yes, I am retiring and we're building a house in the countryside near Bonn. But I think I'll keep working — I have some writing and broadcasting ideas. I'm not disappearing from the scene entirely!

FRICKER: Tony, it's said you've had more retirement parties than anyone in the business, and you keep on taking jobs! What are you working on at the moment?

Ó DÁLAIGH: I'm a freelance arts consultant. I'm working with the new theatre in Blanchardstown at the moment, and I've done some work with Auditoria as well. I'll continue with this kind of work if I get the offers. Obviously, I'd like to go on working.



SMILE! Flamingo Bar
from Germany

PUPPET PANORAMA

The International Puppet Festival at the Lambert Puppet Theatre offers a great opportunity to assess the state of play in this underappreciated artform. ROSY BARNES offers an overview of this year's Festival — and a plea to the Irish theatre community for more puppets, please.

IN MAY OF THIS YEAR, MY COMPANY, COMMON CURRENCY, took a show, *Bimbo*, to Birr, County Offaly, as part of the UNIMA Puppet Festival. As ours was the only adult show in the festival we didn't know what to expect.

Nobody bought any tickets.

On the day we were due to open, a woman came up to me outside the theatre.

"I hear you have a puppet show on."

"Yes," I said brightly, seeing the chance of a sale. "It's great — come along."

"My son was talking about coming to that."

"Wonderful!" I said.

"I laughed at him."

"Oh."

"I'm not having him go to see puppets — he's going to university."

"But it's a very adult show." I argued. "Life-size puppets. Adult humour..." I was getting desperate. "It's even got sex in it..."

"Sex!"

"Err — yes."

"Sex? Well!"

(I was in for it now.)

"If that's the case, I'm coming. And so are all my friends!"

Puppetry that is exclusively for adults is still not a common idea. Puppetry has neither the trendiness nor the highbrow status of its more fashionable relation, physical theatre. Apart from productions by the likes of Macnas and the ever-innovative Barabbas, puppetry is rarely seen on Dublin's stages, having to settle for the odd ill-conceived bit-part in *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* to remind audiences of its existence.

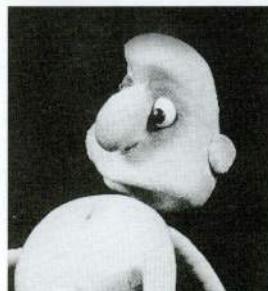
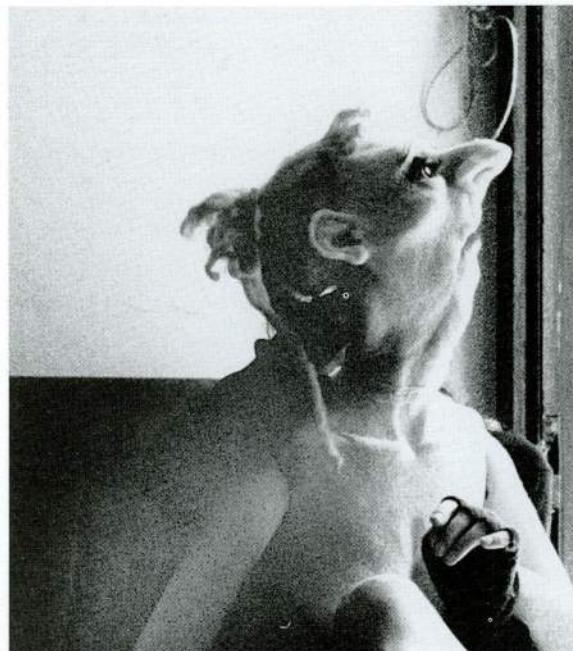
This is a shame because puppetry is just bursting with untapped potential.

The International Puppet Festival at the Lambert Puppet Theatre is one of the few places to see international puppetry for adults in Ireland, and the audience is growing steadily every year. Alongside the usual

children's fare, this year boasted a varied adult programme including Germany's *Flamingo Bar*, *The Gertrude Show* from Israel, and *Puppet Dreams* from Bulgaria. What is so interesting about seeing all three is how, despite their differences in style and attitude, each play shows the exciting possibilities of adult puppetry, whilst sharing problems common to the form — problems that need to be addressed if puppetry is ever to be considered seriously as a viable adult entertainment.

With its extraordinary sculptural puppets, *Flamingo Bar* is both beautiful and deeply charming. Like many puppet shows, it is basically a one-man show. The set is minimal. The whole experience is small-scale, relying totally on the skill of one puppeteer. It is full of memorable images: a repulsive old woman provocatively bares her legs; a sexy cabaret dancer, with the head of a bird skull, lap-dances seductively to no avail; a wide-jawed death figure laughs and laughs until her skull flies off with excitement; a beautiful bird-man marionette tears desperately at his own strings...

More simply than any other theatrical image, the puppet symbolises the human condition. Dependent, vulnerable and ultimately powerless, the puppet is a metaphor for us, embodying profound human truths simply and without ceremony.



PUPPET POSSIBILITIES:
The Gertrude Show (top);
Puppet Dreams (above);
and 70 Hill Lane (right)

beyond his limited condition.

However, one of the pitfalls of serious adult puppetry is a tendency towards obscurity and *Flamingo Bar* is no exception.

Invited to appreciate every detail and nuance, we are not given enough to put the jigsaw together. Whilst an opera-loving dog provides a wonderful comic set-piece halfway through, there appears to be no connection made to the bird-man or the death-women and it seems suspiciously like an unrelated sketch popped in to perk up a slightly lagging audience. The impression is of a work-in-progress — with all the imagination and excitement, but not enough consolidation of meaning.

Yaël and Revital Theatre's *The Gertrude Show* was distinguished by its unusual female focus: the two puppeteers are women as are most of the show's puppet characters, including the fabulous-looking Gertrude herself. The opening section concerns an old peasant woman who is greedily obsessed with an egg. It is hard to describe how effective this is. The puppeteer's foot operates the rather Muppet-like peasant while she controls the other character (a



gosling) with her hand. *The Gertrude Show* is worth seeing for Yaël's incredible foot control alone; she fills her character with idiosyncrasy and personality with just a few well-timed wiggles of her toes. The whole sequence is cleverly governed by a recording of a fairytale that the peasant woman plays on her crackly old record player. The piece begins to dictate

reality, leading to interesting results as the record gets stuck, jumps, and refuses to give up its narrative straightforwardly. But just as we are settling down to find out what happens next — it finishes, and we are on to the next item.

Gertrude herself is a half-bodied puppet who finds herself without a pair of legs and starts complaining... after a little searching she takes over the legs of one of the puppeteers. Gertrude is a fabulous creation: her appearance (nose permanently in the air) perfectly communicates her character, exactly as a good puppet should do. But unfortunately the material is a let-down, neither funny nor meaningful enough. Gertrude is a fantastic character with nothing to say and nowhere to go.

The Gertrude Show, like *Flamingo Bar*, suffers from a lack of continuity — in this case, even within the styles of the puppets themselves. Whilst there are amusing and clever moments alongside moments of real potential — including a disturbing dance in which a screaming puppet attempts to escape from the black-clad body of an impassive and threatening puppeteer — *The Gertrude Show* is a patchy and inconsistent evening.

Puppet Dreams is, again, basically a sketch-show, and a strangely random assortment of material it is too. The first section uses lights to give the impression of white-gloved hands floating in black space (along with magician's hat, various muslin shawls, and a magic wand). The point here lies in the act of transformation itself. A simple length of material is knotted to become a suddenly twitching rabbit; some stretchy material transforms itself into a flamingo; another becomes a human figure... These pictures are sweet, slick and entertaining, and amusing enough for a while.

continued on page 96

Entrances and Exits

LOUGHLIN DEEGAN charts *comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.*

ENID REID WHYTE (pictured), formerly of Barabbas, has assumed the role of drama advisor to the Arts Council. She will advise the Arts Council on all aspects of contemporary Irish theatre; the Council's artform director, **DERMOT MC LAUGHLIN**, will continue to make policy and grant recommendations to the Council. Also at the Arts Council, **MARY HICKEY** has been promoted to the position of drama executive.

At the National Theatre, **GILLY CLARKE** is leaving her position as promotions officer to take up a new post with Kate Bowe PR; **KEN HARTNETT** has vacated the position of Technical Manager. He is replaced by **TOMMY NOLAN**, previously of RTÉ. Following the retirement of **BRYAN O'DONOGHUE**, **ALAN STANFORD** is now artistic director of Second Age Theatre Company; **DONAL SHIELS** is the company's general manager.

At Project, **TOM COUGHLAN** (pictured) has



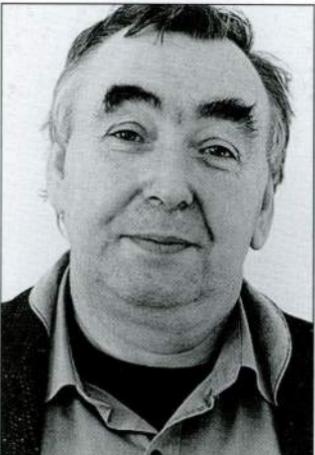
vacated the post of general manager, and is now administrator at the Gaiety School of Acting; he is being replaced by **JENNY TRAYNOR**, formerly of the Arts Council's Auditoria project. **JAMES KELLY** has vacated his position as finance officer, and is currently acting general manager of Irish Modern Dance Theatre, following the departure of **MARINA RAPTER**. Following the departure

of **DEBBIE BEHAN**, **STEPHEN BOURKE** has been promoted to technical director and **ANTHONY COURTNEY** has been appointed technical manager. **SIOBHÁN COLGAN** replaces **NICOLA SWANTON** as press officer. Swanton has assumed the role of temporary programming manager at City Arts Centre following the departure of **COLETTE FARRELL**. Also at Project, **CHRIS WHITE** is the new play director in residence; **TIM BRENNAN**, formerly artistic director of Arthouse, has been appointed curator of talks and critical events; and **NIAMH O'DONNELL**, also formerly of Arthouse, has been appointed artistic programme coordinator.

TEERTH CHUNG has been appointed director of Draíocht, a Centre for the Arts in Blanchardstown. Chung was previously general manager of the Cochrane Theatre, London, and programme coordinator of the Riverside Studios, London. **BARRY MCKINNEY**, formerly of the Hawk's Well, Sligo, is Draíocht's new production manager.

AUDREY BEHAN, previously general manager at City Arts Centre, is the new general manager of Barabbas... the company. **CONOR NOLAN** is leaving the position of general manager of Island Theatre Company to assume the role of Waterford City Arts Officer. **VALERIE BISTANY** is leaving her post as general manager of Dublin Youth Theatre; **MAEVE COOGAN** replaces her. **GARY McMAHON** has vacated his post as PR and marketing manager of Macnas to assume the position of community and enterprise officer with Galway Corporation. **EMER MCGOWAN** has vacated the position of executive director of Babaró. The position has been advertised. **SHEILA PRATSCHKE** is the new manager at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig.

At TEAM Educational Theatre Company, **EMMANUELA PAPASOTIRIOU** has been appointed as administrator; **JOHN WHITE** is the company's new education officer, and **LIZ COSGROVE** has left her position as tour/production manager. Her position has been advertised. **RICHARD CROXFORD** is the new



artistic director of Replay Productions. **JAK AHLUWALIA** has been appointed development manager at CoisCéim Dance Theatre, and **MIRIAM KEHOE** is the company's new administrator. **UNA KEALY**, previously of Big Telly Theatre Company, has been appointed part-time administrator of the Northern Ireland Theatre Producers Group. **PAULA McLAUGHLIN** is vacating her position as company manager of Kabosh

Productions in February. Her position has been advertised.

PHILL McCAGHEY has left her position as administrator at the Ark to work for Public Communications Centre. Her position has been advertised. At Dun Laoghaire's new Pavilion Theatre, **JAN DUFFY** has been appointed front of house manager, **POLLY O'LOUGHLIN** is the new administrator, **STEPHEN EDWARDS** has been appointed musical director, and **TREVOR DAWSON**, previously of the National Theatre, is technical director. At the Civic Theatre, **JULIANNE MULLEN** is the new box office and marketing officer and **KERRY HENDLEY**, formerly of Gerry Lundberg PR, is the new audience development officer. **AMANDA HAMILTON**, formerly of the Verbal Arts Centre, has been appointed marketing manager at Derry's new Millennium Theatre Complex. **JILL HOLMES**, previously arts officer for Down District Council, has been appointed theatre director at the Market Place Theatre and Arts Centre in Armagh.

opinions & overviews



THREE VIEWS OF ALICE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

by Lewis Carroll

adapted by Jocelyn Clarke

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the Town Hall

Theatre, Sligo on 27 September 2000

BY CORMAC O'BRIEN AND AUDREY WALL, PAUL HAYES AND JOSH TOBIESSEN, AND ALAN FOX

FROM ITS BEGINNINGS IN 1991, Blue Raincoat has matured into one of the most innovative independent Irish theatre companies, and the first to be named a "Peacock Partner" — the Abbey's new scheme to bring companies from the independent sector under the roof of the National Theatre. Their Peacock Partnership this summer consisted of a five-week run of two plays adapted by Jocelyn Clarke from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* stories; the newer of these two productions, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, then toured the country including a stop at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway. Clarke explained in the *Irish Times* that the Raincoats' work is "not the theatre of dramatic literature; the text is just another element which one uses with the body. I'm interested in that collaboration of theatre rather than just being the playwright in the corner." Under Niall Henry's direction, the cast of six — all trained in mime and physical theatre — challenge themselves and their audience by developing a spectacle of choreographic images and poetic language, rather than by enacting a slice of life.

Three vast suitcases, one several metres long and a metre deep, are asymmetrically arranged on stage. To the accompaniment of a dreamlike score, the

top of the largest cracks open, and in slow motion six actors emerge. Alice (played by Fiona McGeown) comes forward, reciting "Jabberwocky" — "slithy toves did gyre and gimble..." She tumbles through a twisting open frame which an ensemble of dream-like characters behind her pass through the air, and enters the looking-glass world. The characters explain to Alice what rules she'll have to follow to become queen, and the games commence.

The ensuing action is imbued with a sense of childhood magic that brings the wonder of Carroll's book to life for an adult audience. The production is built of familiar set-pieces: Tweedledee and Tweedledum (John Carty and Ciarán McCauley, worthy of a place in the Olympic synchronized swimming competition), Humpty-Dumpty (just the head of Liz Bracken), the Red Queen and White Queen (Liz Bracken again, and Sandra O'Malley), and the Lion and the Unicorn (Carty and O'Malley). McCauley does an inspired turn as the White King, who demands ham sandwiches but will happily settle for hay.

These set pieces give full expression to Blue Raincoats' precision-training in physical theatre and their taste for tableaux-vivants. The minimalist set design highlights the athletic grace of the actors; they move the oversized cases about as if they were feather-light, and creatively use them to represent a chessboard, a boat, a dining table, and Humpty Dumpty's wall. The company's signature use of whimsical props continues from their first Alice play, with a blue umbrella popping open at various points, and the return of the red chair,

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though now two sizes smaller than the massive one on which Alice perched so memorably in *Wonderland*.

The character of Alice is left to hold these pieces together. Compared with the heroine of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, this Alice — now seven and a half years old — is wiser in the ways of the world; she has lost some of her sense of wonder and gained a princess's headstrong ambition to be queen. The production aims to spark the imaginations of those in the audience to participate in the adventure, not just to watch a dramatic story enacted. While *Through the Looking Glass* may not stretch the company's ingenuity beyond the limits of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it provides a satisfying sequel.

—Cormac O'Brien and Audrey Wall

BLUE RAINCOAT THEATRE COMPANY'S production of *Alice Through The Looking Glass* is high on visual content and takes us deep into Lewis Carroll's imagination. A fine example of ensemble performance, the 70-minute production is a melancholy blend of mime, movement, and theatrical recitation, but there is little drama in the text to engage the audience. The lack of dramatic tension in the play seems to go against the grain of the Blue Raincoats' artistic policy, as stated in the company's artistic policy document (1998-2001): "Although there is a very strong physical and visual context to the pieces, usually there is a play with a beginning, middle and end, and a story to it. It is neither just a visual piece, nor a straight play. The attempt is to arrive at both, in a sense. Something that is beguiling to the eye, and that, at the same time, would also follow the traditional basic theatrical rules of drama."

The current production is definitely beguiling to the eye, but, unlike *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland, it does not follow the traditional rules of drama — that it involve rounded characters, conflict, and plot. In this, however, the play is faithful to the book almost line for line, which functions as a series of vignettes with little in the way of an impelling through-line. We do understand that Alice is on a quest to get to the other side of a chessboard and thus become queen. As she passes through each square of the chessboard she meets a host of famously puzzling, eccentric characters. She delivers monologues that often seem to describe things that we have either already seen or are about to see.

Adaptor Jocelyn Clarke's only innovation seems to be an epilogue spoken by a grown-up Alice Liddell (the real-life girl on whom the character of Alice was based), sadly reminiscing on her later correspondence with Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll). Dodgson has become disappointingly formal with her, referring to the stories as her adventures; she had always considered them to be *their* adventures. This comes off as something tacked on to the end, perhaps superfluous, since Alice's relation to Dodgson is not clearly dramatised earlier in the play. Alice had a dream and then she woke up, that's it. It is a tale for children after all. The characters are not supplemented by a subtext.

The works of Lewis Carroll again provide a vehicle for Blue Raincoat to show off their unique, surrealistic style. Tweedledee and Tweedledum recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in a perfectly-timed chorus; the White King and his court are choreographed to impressive effect, but anyone not interested in physical theatre may find Blue Raincoat's latest offering either monotonous or only sporadically entertaining.

—Paul Hayes and Josh Tobiesen

BLUE RAINCOAT THEATRE COMPANY deliver *Alice Through the Looking Glass* with their usual visual flair and instinct for tableaux. The works of Lewis Carroll obviously lend themselves to the company's highly choreographed style. Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is an even more bewildering narrative than *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but Jocelyn Clarke's tight script conveys the episodes clearly and provides a frame to hold them together.

The play opens with Alice giving a somewhat sinister recitation of "Jabberwocky"; the poem becomes something of a thematic thread. One attempt at interpretation follows another — though Humpty Dumpty's advice that "Words mean whatever I say they mean" doesn't help Alice much. Toward the play's end, Alice speaks the poem as a valediction. By then we are at home with its otherworldly language, and the looking-glass world has lost its terror and become a fond memory.

The stage setting is simple: gigantic suitcases. As the lights come up Alice is the first to emerge from the largest one, as though coming from "wonderland." The cases then become props that represent whatever is needed, even the wall on which Humpty Dumpty sat. The cast treat the stage as a canvas onto which they paint tableaux. These evoke Sir John Tenniel's illustrations for the original edition of Carroll's book, but here they are illustrations that have come alive — even larger than life. The lighting by Michael Cummins includes some spectacular uses of shadow silhouettes, and a spotlight is frequently used to focus the audience's attention. Joe Hunt's synthesized music is ominous or jolly as required.

The joy of the production is in its dazzling ensemble work. The members of

Blue Raincoat execute acts of strength, anti-gravitational tricks, and movements of every kind (but upright and straightforward) with ease. In film, slow motion and freeze frame does not impress us with the actors' ability; in theatre, slow motion and statue-like stillness give the pleasure of a human triumph over time and gravity. Because of their training and discipline, the Blue Raincoats' is an art that hides art.

Fiona McGeown is good as the belligerent Alice, while John Carty and Ciarán McCauley shine as Tweedledee and Tweedledum in the best scene, in which one acts out what the other says. Kevin Collins is jolly as the White Knight and touching as Lewis Carroll. Director Niall Henry fills the stage with his cast of six; there is great energy but no chaos. Jocelyn Clarke gave Blue Raincoat a script that lets them show off their skill, and they gave him a performance that brought the script alive. Both children and those adults who love the art of theatre will enjoy this production.

—Alan Fox

The writers are students in the M.A. programme in Drama Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

A LIFE

by Hugh Leonard

The Abbey Theatre

6 July - 2 September 2000

Reviewed on 15 August BY MARY COLL

CHRISTOPHER ORAM'S VERY LITERAL SET for the Abbey's revival of *A Life* divides the stage into obvious and confining spaces, a 1970s living room and a 1930s kitchen, with a bandstand looming behind both. This preludes much of what follows in the production itself: territory that is utterly familiar and pre-



FANCY A DIP? Patrick Moy and Fiona Glascott in *A Life*

dictable, revisited with few surprises, and illuminating nothing new or of great value for the audience.

Originally produced by the Abbey in 1979, the *Life* which Leonard attempts to explore is that of Desmond Drumm (John Kavanagh), a cantankerous civil Servant in his 60s, facing retirement having also discovered that he is suffering from a terminal illness, with less than a year to live. In this context, Drumm attempts to review the mechanics of his personal relationships, and redress the balances outstanding.

The most significant of these relationships is not with his long-suffering wife

Dolly (Bernadette McKenna), but apparently with Mary (Barbara Brennan), the woman whom he failed to conquer in his youth, and it is conquest and control, rather than love, that compels Drumm's actions throughout. Drumm has maintained a cynical form of friendship over the years with Mary and her husband Lar Kerns (Stephen Brennan), peppered with petty rows, long silences, unstated jealousies, and a large degree of devious manipulation. Drumm gives and takes offence with ease; contemptuous and arrogant, he presides over the smallest of kingdoms with the greatest of tyranny. Now, about to make his final exit, he

struggles to effect reconciliations while simultaneously gaining some deeper understanding of himself.

This is achieved by moving the action back and forth between the present, 1977, and 1937, the year in which Mibs (as Mary was called in her youth) spurned Desmond for Kerns and in which Desmond settled instead for the less complicated and less worldly-wise friend Dorothy. The youthful foursome, Desmond (Tom Murphy), Kerns (Patrick Moy), Mibs (Fiona Glascott), and Dorothy (Fidelma Keogh) replay the events of that year as if by way of effecting an epiphany through a series of small lows, and even smaller highs, from which great drama can often emerge — though not on this occasion. Instead, we circle the kitchen sink interminably, prevented from reaching any emotional truths by the obstacles of sentimental comedy which the writer laid down and which the director, Ben Barnes, allows to remain there unchallenged. It is an easy path for audiences to follow, but ultimately leads nowhere. There are strands of darkness lying inside Leonard's writing, but they still wait to be released and confronted.

Most frustrating of all, the nucleus of the drama — the pivotal moments in which Mary tries to force Drumm to recognise his responsibility for manipulating and destroying the fabric of Lar's relationship with his son, are simply thrown away. The actors hurtle through the scene as quickly as possible as if not wishing to stir up the slightest degree of upset, or touch any genuine emotions.

Tom Murphy's performance as the young Desmond hints at the cold and damaged heart of a true predator, and his attraction to the flighty and intellec-

tually inferior Mibs is charged with potential. However there is no sexual tension, neither is there any of the poignant affection of youth; instead we see a man obsessed by what he can make of a woman, what he can turn her into, what he can possess. Traces of this re-emerge occasionally in Kavanagh's sneering portrayal of Drumm, and are subtly underscored in McKenna's hesitant Dolly, anxiously twisting the ends of her scarf, hinting at the lives lived behind closed doors, and out of sight.

But we are not allowed access to anything that might offend, our sense of curiosity continuously distracted by Lar/Kearns' endearing comic prattle through the ages, timed to perfection by both Stephen Brennan and Patrick Moy. However comic relief is not what's needed here; rather what we long for is relief from the comical. There are too many truths that remain untold within this play, and no time or space allowed in which to ponder their implications.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based critic, broadcaster, and poet.

ARMS AND THE MAN

by George Bernard Shaw

The Gate Theatre

25 June - 2 September 2000

Reviewed on 17 August

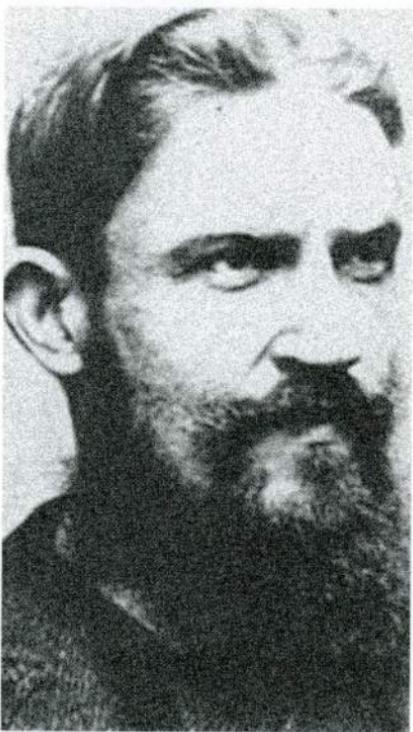
BY CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

AS WITH SHAKESPEARE, THE THING to do with Shaw is to play him. No need to update; no need to abandon the stage directions, remove the scenery, or go for postmodernist theatricalism. It's all there in the script. But one does need good performances, intelligent and dedicated enough to bring out the ripple and shine of ideas. In this stylish and highly intelli-

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gent Gate production there wasn't a weak link, from Liz Lloyd's brittle-sweet Catherine to Mark O'Halloran's brilliant poseur Sergius.

The play is hinged on the conflict between romanticism and realism. With war as background, it puts before us the



AUTHOR! George Bernard Shaw

conventional notion of heroism — or what was conventional before Shaw, O'Casey, and Brecht successfully exploded the notion of heroism — as lived and worshipped by the idealistic lovers Raina and Sergius. Thesis: war is noble, soldiers are heroic, love is pure. Then the

play deconstructs this cliché by introducing a professional soldier, Bluntschli, who is the living denial of everything so noble and idealized, for he carries chocolate instead of ammunition and is sensible enough to declare himself completely terrified of battle. Antithesis: war is romantic nonsense, war is harsh reality which it is common sense to flee. This whole dialectic was beautifully judged by Fiona O'Shaughnessy as Raina, as refined and lively as an Audrey Hepburn reborn, and David Herlihy as Bluntschli, all beefy good sense masking a keen and subversive radicalism.

Parallelling their progress out of romance and into the world of common sense is the story of the servants Louka and Nicola. In conventional comedy (or opera) the parallel love story would remain a parallel but in Shaw the whole point is that, as in Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, better the zig-zags of imagination than the straight lines of normality. The master-servant relationship was for Shaw a political metaphor: "In a slave state the slave rules." What is so energising about this comic vision is that the naked materialism and ambition of a servant like Nicola is transformed into a moving force enabling Louka — his Pygmalion in some ways — to achieve her full potential and rise above the class issue to capture Sergius and make a man of him.

Nicola is what makes the world go around, the reality principle in action even if he has "the soul of a servant." He was expertly played by Pat Kinevane, whose tendency to over-mime was here curtailed to good advantage, while Eileen McCloskey responded with suitable fire and creativity, an Eliza Doolittle before her time. Between them, this pair made wonderful play with Shaw's notions of

will and the human capacity for achieving miracles (think of St. Joan) and self-transformation through the female principle. Such sharp-eyed servants of the Life Force are streets ahead of the likes of Major Petkoff, the nominal social designer, endearingly played by Des Keogh with all the bumbling in the business (and vice versa). Shaw would doubtless have been enraged at the gagging but would surely have guffawed with the rest of us at Keogh's scene stealing.

Thesis, antithesis, but where's the synthesis in Shaw's Hegelian analysis? Perhaps in the realpolitik, the always shocking insistence in Shaw that life means getting your hands dirty in serving the general good. There is a passage in act three where Shaw's anti-war sentiments come across "bluntly" indeed: the story of Bluntschli's friend burned alive after he was shot in a woodyard. "Your fellows' shells set the timber on fire and burnt him, with half a dozen other poor devils in the same predicament." It is at this point that a synthesis begins to shape up. Sergius' response is that war is "a hollow sham, like love." It is up to Raina to show that love is not a hollow sham; we have just seen that war is all too painfully real. So Raina exposes Bluntschli as a romantic, a most unexpected development, and breaking through his disguise she captures him. Life must be lived, Shaw insists, not as a melodrama or a romance but as a serious business in spite of its farcical components. His comedy, then, is finally a synthesis (and corrective) of absurd, untenable, and escapist attitudes.

As director, Alan Stanford did the text excellent service by taking it seriously while at the same time allowing Shaw his full comic and parodic rein. Only once did his eye miss: David Herlihy

was allowed to scribble furiously and at length in act three, using a quill, without once dipping in ink, as if the content of those writings were of no moment, when, in fact, they contained the hard soul of this chocolate soldier. The setting was very effective (Robin Don), and very amusing as well, although the library might have been less "Gate chic" and more of a provincial travesty as Shaw's text indicates. The lighting (Rupert Murray) was all that was required. All round, this was a first-rate production of a play which, over a hundred years on, still works, still teases, still amuses, and, alas, with the Balkans still at war, still stings.

Christopher Murray lectures in the English department at University College Dublin and is the author of Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation.

BANSHEE MAKERS

by Ger Bourke

Half Moon Theatre, Cork

Sept 6 - 16 2000

Reviewed on 7 August

BY MARY COLL

CORCADORCA SUCCEEDED IN BRINGING a confidant and engaging new voice to Irish audiences with Ger Bourke's *Banshee Makers*, the winner of its 2000 Playwrights' Award. There is always a risk in competitions of this nature that work will be produced simply because it is the best submission, rather than because it merits production in its own right, but *Banshee Makers* has a strength and originality in the writing which more than justifies itself as a production-worthy script.

The play is a story of love and passion, and of the craving that the absence of

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both can leave in every human heart. It is also the story of shadows that can be permanently cast over lives, and the damage that these shadows can do. Set in a Kilkenny coalyard in the 1970s, *Banshee Makers* examines the lives of three coal men — Scooter (Joe Meagher) a simple-minded youth who dreams of love and the family he never knew; Nix (Donncha Crowley) embittered and world-weary; Charlie (Garry Murphy) the coalyard's married Lothario — as well as Kathleen (Noirin Hennessy), the lonely and desperate office clerk who works with them. By unravelling the fabric of their lives, Bourke weaves a simple yet compelling story which reminds us that there is often nothing as extraordinary or deceptive as that which

is apparently ordinary.

The success of the production lies both in the authenticity of the writing, which achieves great poetic beauty at times, and in the heartbreakingly sensitive performance of Joe Meagher as Scooter, as the play's naive anti-hero. Bourke confidently gives voice to County Kilkenny, his own place, capturing the simple nuances of phrase and vocabulary that make each town and village unique. He demonstrates the skills of a keen listener, and accurately recalls the social references of the period essential for credibility of context.

There are some difficulties in the production which detract from the work's overall impact, particularly involving the characters' movement on stage. Pat

WHY, I OUGHTA... *Banshee Makers*



Kiernan's direction favours a form of fixed and motionless performance, often rooting the characters of Nix and Charlie to the spot, and leaving Kathleen paralysed and vacantly clutching her handbag during some of the most potentially emotionally charged moments of the play. Dialogue therefore is delivered into space, and physical or visual contact between the characters is avoided to such an extent that the actors often look totally abandoned on stage. One unfortunate exception to this is an extraordinarily awkward fumble-and-grope scene between Charlie and Kathleen up against the coalyard wall, when paralysis might actually have provided some relief for all concerned, particularly the audience.

The problem may be that while Bourke has developed the character of Scooter to its full potential, the other characters needed serious work at almost every level, particularly Kathleen, who Bourke has cut from cardboard and who Kiernan has left there to stand or fall. There is also an unnecessarily intrusive interval which emotionally dislocates the audience for no better reason than to remove items from the set, and which detracts completely from the pace of the production.

Banshee Makers has many excellent aspects which help to compensate for its inherent weaknesses: Cliff Dolliver's set design, which effectively recreates the grim utilitarianism of a working coal-yard; some superb special effects including convincing rain; and a wonderfully evocative and subtle score by Eoghan Horgan. Ultimately this is a production which, through the character of Scooter, makes an emotional connection with the audience that is both compelling and surprisingly memorable.

CLOSER

by Patrick Marber

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

17 August - 23 September 2000

Reviewed 28 August BY JIM CARROLL

IN *CLOSER*, RELATIONSHIPS ARE UNPLEASANT affairs. What start out as red-hot, passionate swings and roundabouts soon cool, and proceed to slip and slide into sorry, mundane, and soulless states. It's a wane you can attribute to a number of things — familiarity, ennui, mismatches — but, by the time the wholly unlikeable



SOULLESS: Joseph Bennett in Closer

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characters do anything about their lot, you are past caring. It's not that we aren't interested about other people's ups and downs (sales figures for *Hello, OK*, and *VIP* are proof that we are in spades), but more that we don't quite give a fig about what happens to Larry, Alice, Dan, and Anna.

But maybe this is Patrick Marber's intention. After all, the London which is portrayed in his plays was (and is) one of the most soulless, uncaring, and cynical places known to man, woman, or beast. The arrogance and greed of the boom '80s produced a city where characters like our four could roam as the moral renegades we see them to be. All surface and no depth, Marber's characterisations are fine because they fit the bill — it's the realisations of these roles here which don't quite leap into the frame.

In *Closer*, the pairings between Dan the obituary writer and Alice the stripper, and Larry the dermatologist and Anna the photographer are the opening moves in a game of sexual one-upmanship and mannered betrayal which see partners falling for each other amid bitter break-ups and nasty deceits. There is little joy or passion here, just the sometimes cunning but always desperate gamesmanship of four people who are unwilling to let their real, baser instincts take over. Sometimes this real intent does materialise. You can see it when Dan and Larry end up in an early scene talking to one another in an Internet chat room — Larry is himself while a bored Dan is pretending to be Anna. That Larry ends up meeting and falling for the real Anna at a later stage is one of those ironies which pop up throughout the play.

Whatever about the arch cleverness of such plottings, the cast do their level best to avoid any entanglements with them.

It's a slow torture watching Conor Mullen try to muddle halfheartedly through Dan's lines, while the female characters are overplayed, under-directed, and grotesquely two-dimensional caricatures. The actors seem to shy away from any sort of engagement with their roles — witness how ill-at-ease Mullen seems to be with Dan's job as a newspaper obituary writer, as if the actor thinks the role calls for a more starry position.

While this might hint at a casting mismatch, it seems more likely down to confused signals from offstage. The play calls for a nasty, uncomfortable, selfish and cynical flow, but what Simon Magill's direction gives us is a hamfisted *Abigail's Party* complete with Habitat throws and chilled New Zealand wine. Instead of cut and thrust, the direction is laboured, hesitant, and cloying. Sometimes (such as in the scenes which call for extreme rage, as when Larry discovers Anna is having an affair with Dan), the director holds back and the scene fragments rather than explodes. Other times — as with the fate of poor Alice, the lass destined to end up on a mortuary slab — the director seems unsure what exactly to do with her and seemingly tries to forget about her and her influence on the course of the play.

Closer fails to ignite and involve because its cast and director don't seem to know exactly what they have on their hands. The play itself could be spun as a sharper *Drop The Dead Donkey* or a blacker, acidic *Cold Feet* but this production avoids such avenues and ends up as a comparative *Upwardly Mobile*, you could say, in a dreary, dull suburban cul-de-sac. Perhaps it's a cultural thing — it is a very British play albeit one with universal concerns — but there is nothing new or exciting about what was onstage at the Peacock. Some may feel that this is

down to the play itself, but there is more interest in this vacuum world than is communicated here. The fault lies in how the play's world is realised.

Jim Carroll is a journalist and editor.

THE COUNTRYWOMAN

by Paul Smith, adapted by Elizabeth Kuti

Upstage Live Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed at the Civic Theatre,
Tallaght, on 14 October 2000

BY CATHY LEENEY

ERNEST BLYTHE MIGHT WELL HAVE HAD a heart attack if he had seen this show.

The managing director of the Abbey Theatre through the 1940s, '50s, and most of the '60s was determined that domestic

violence, alcoholism, rape, incest, and abortion in Irish life would never be reflected in Irish theatre. Because his view was widely supported in the nascent Free State, Paul Smith's novels were banned in Ireland in the '50s and '60s.

The Countrywoman is based on Smith's own mother's story; it was published in novel form in 1961 and banned in Ireland. Molly Baines was a native of Wicklow who brought up her family in the slums of Dublin, bravely navigating between a vicious husband, the oppressions of poverty and disease, and the Catholic Church's contempt for women. Smith's work must have been influenced by Maura Laverty's Dublin plays, and novels (also banned) of the 1950s. Both writers tackle similar material, and with a similar sense of authenticity, but the



ERNEST BLYTHE, BEWARE! *The Countrywoman*

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quiet savagery of Smith's depiction of his abusive father makes a compelling central focus to this piece.

Elizabeth Kuti has adapted *The Countrywoman* for the stage, and balances naturalistic family scenes with choral and narrative passages to tell Molly's story. Declan Gorman's production orchestrates an ensemble of ten hard-working actors playing well over 28 roles. The action runs from the end of World War I and Pat Baines' belated return from the Allied Front in France, to the countrywoman's death in the 1930s.

One of the ironies that comes across strongly is the failure of independent Ireland to improve the lot of its poor; as the two neighbour/narrators repeat, "the clouds over our heads are green, white and yellow," and still falls the rain. Theatrical vitality takes off in the choral passages, with evocative music and rhythms creating energy which is then, often, dispersed in the naturalistic scenes. Here, the echoes of O'Casey only draw attention to the difference between a play and a novel adapted for the stage. The adaptation struggles to dramatise what is, of course, a narrative structure. It succeeds best when the epic quality of the story is acknowledged, and the stage is used to conjure an impression of a (happily) lost way of life.

There are a number of convincing and touching performances, especially from Simone Kirby, Fergus Walsh, Sean O'Shaughnessy, and Emma Colahan. Patricia Kennedy and Brendan Laird bring all that is possible to the parts of Molly and Pat Baines, but the writing does not support the weight of their characters, and the cameo parts work better.

As an act of remembrance, and as a measure of the little distance that separates us from the brutal harshness and unmerciful constrictions of our fore-

mothers' lives, *The Countrywoman* is an achievement. The Civic Theatre audience warmed to the show, and for the first time in my experience at that venue, the performance onstage stimulated conversations of shared memories and associations in the lives of those present.

It is ironic perhaps, in the theatre of 21st-century Ireland, long after the demise of Blythe and his stringent conservatism, that this is one of very few occasions on which his prohibited issues are being addressed in our theatre.

Cathy Leeney lectures in the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin, and recently completed her doctorate on Irish women playwrights.

DESERTER

by curious.com

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

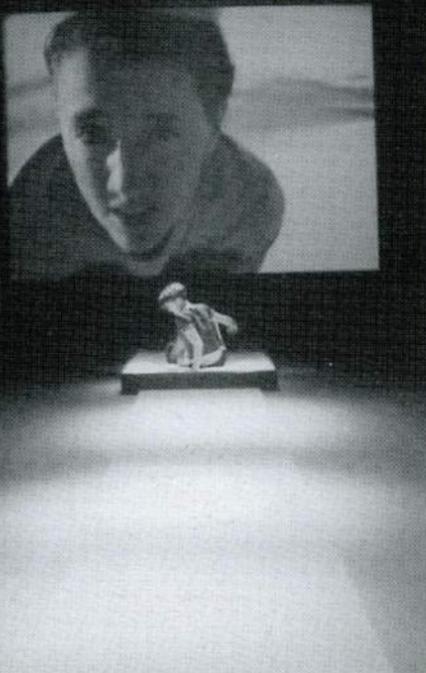
22 – 26 August, 2000

Reviewed on 26 August

BY ANNA McMULLAN

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO THE DESERT? How do you get there, by what means: flying, walking, memory, mediated images, fantasy? What does it mean to desert, or to be deserted? *Deserter*, by curious.com, brought the audience on a performative and virtual journey to the Arizona desert, and to various other deserts or desertions, outer and inner.

curious.com was formed in 1997 by Helen Paris and Leslie Hill, who both have backgrounds in live performance and new technologies. Previous work, like *I Never Go Anywhere I Can't Drive Myself*, has involved Internet communications, has crossed borders of various kinds, and has included collaborations with the innovative Irish company desperate optimists, whose Christine



DIGGING FOR TRUTHS: Deserter

Molloy appears in some of the screen images in *Deserter*.

Deserter was structured around a series of individual and communal rituals, particularly of arrival and departure from the performing space. The audience were allowed in one by one. When you opened the door, you found yourself in a small box space with what looked like sand on the floor. A panel in front of your face slid open and the head of Helen Paris appeared behind a grille. Though she appeared to invite confession — “Is there anything you’d like to say to me?” — she was the one who confessed, “I’ve missed you,” evoking, Echo-like, a voice that has to be heard before flesh turns to bone or stone.

When the voice stopped, you opened the door ahead to find yourself in the relatively dark playing space, all heads turned to watch the newcomer. Leslie Hill arranged chairs for each of the newcomers individually, greeting us with a card, on which were hand-written questions that provoked unexpected inner journeys: “what do you miss the most?”, “what keeps you awake at night?”, “where would you rather be?”, “what keeps you from moving on?”

The show interwove virtual images (such as an image, projected on a large screen, of Hill walking away from us in the desert, then walking back), stories of the desert and desertion, and ritual performance in the here and now, including a series of long-jumps by Hill onto a sand filled box just below the screen (the sand turns out to be salt). She and Paris offered contrasting views of the desert — from an insider local on the one hand, and from an uninitiated English visitor on the other. The piece played with the virtual and narrative presentation of the (absent) desert, contrasting screen images with vivid verbal evocations of its effect on the skin (people licking the salt off each other’s skin for rehydration, skin peeling so that Paris has to wear socks on her hands).

Paris’ monologue evoked images of the metamorphosis of desert to ocean through the image of “drowning in heat” and indeed, the desert became the catalyst for a series of trips across time, space and the virtual/material. The desert sequence transformed into a verbal mode of deserting — Hill told a story of a relation who fought in the civil war, deserting from one side to the other. As she narrates the story of his glass eye, she holds a live camera “eye” in her hand, projecting live images of the audience onto screen. This story then moves into a

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more personal, intimate story of desperation within a relationship — the tone shifting from comic to poignant — contrasting with images on screen of women and a little girl laughing. The show ended with a ritual of leaving, as Hill poured tequila and offered each audience member one by one a glass with slice of lemon, and salt from the jumping box.

The performance raised a number of questions, including the role of the audience. The piece seemed to invite active response, yet didn't really seem designed to accommodate audience deviations — the performers had to adapt the ending on the last evening when some people didn't participate in the final tequila ritual. It was fascinating, however, to see a piece which played with and problematised questions of identity and place, which have tended to dominate representations of Irishness. Ireland is changing and our modes of perception, identity and representation are also changing: Companies like curious.com and desperate optimists offer challenging new performance and media languages through which to explore versions of identity, desire, belonging and displacement.

Anna McMullan is a lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

THE FOUR EUCLIDS OF SQUID AND THE FESTIVAL OF IMAGINATION AND WILD FANCY

by Ben Hennessy and Liam Meagher

Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford

and on tour

Reviewed 26 July 2000 at Garter Lane

BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

THIS SUMMER LITTLE RED KETTLE revived their inaugural 1996 production



FANCIFUL: The Four Euclids of Squid...

of Ben Hennessy's and Liam Meagher's *The Four Euclids of Squid and the Festival of Imagination and Wild Fancy* at Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford, prior to its presentation at an international festival of children's theatre at Toyama, Japan.

The play has a cast of 20 children and young people, and benefits from all of Red Kettle's production expertise: the playwrights (both old Red Kettle hands, including the company's new artistic director Ben Hennessy) direct; music — a dominant aspect of the production —

is by Jamie Beamish, lighting by the excellent Jim Daly, and costume designers Mona Manahan and Sinead Fox produce a truly exciting visual spectacle against a set for which only construction (Jim Whelan) is credited.

The Four Euclids... sets out to celebrate imagination and creativity as a transformative power within the lives of young people and a resource which is ever in easy reach, even if it is tantalisingly difficult to tap into. The play sets out to explore this vision by staging two distinct worlds — the real world and that of the imagination. In the former, the focus is on relationships between two boys and two girls who in the past made up a band called "The Four Euclids of Squid." Doogie (Christopher Dunne) now wants to re-form the band to enter a competition with a new song which as yet only exists as a title: "The Flying Boy." Baz (Paul Savage), the shy drummer, cannot imagine rivals Moll (Sharon Daly) and Angel (Susan O'Shea) agreeing even to enter the same room at the same time. Doogie has faith in the power of a common project: "They'll be friends if we get them to work together."

The world of imagination, in an echo of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is a realm dominated by Chimera (Roisin Murphy), a kind of Titania figure, who is accompanied throughout by Puck (Jack Doyle Ryan). Figures from myth, literature, art, and pop culture densely populate this zone. It also features Blindfold (Susan McMahon) a figure tugged hither and thither by four competing points of view; her turmoil presents an allegory of and comment on the Squids' volatile relationships with each other.

It is entirely in keeping with the play's concept of imagination as the location of creative harmony that all comes well in

the end, as a flying boy emerges fully formed, suspended above Chimera's observational platform, and the new song rings out, equally fully formed at last. Art brings order to chaos. Individual desires for uniqueness resolve in creative co-operation. The motif of flying, embodied in the production through the presence of white feathers — the play opens with Doogie chancing on a feather and finding the inspiration for the song — gives rise to a wonderful *coup de théâtre* at the end of the evening.

In narrative terms, the play is quite confusing at times, and might have benefited from some dramaturgical work. The performances are committed, disciplined and focused, with some excellent timing, particularly in the Squids' dialogue. Liam Meagher's sharpness in creating lively theatrical dialect from the local language, so effective in the company's recent *All in the Head*, is already apparent in this earlier work. Young actors need particular support in the production and use of the voice, however, and this challenge remains for the company, especially when words are spoken over a soundtrack.

Moll and Angel's arguments were carefully structured, their content keenly observed, but a lack of vocal sophistication meant that they were played throughout on one raucous note. This became intrusive on two levels: it framed the girls as irredeemably self-centred and superficial, and led to clichéd head-tossing and eye-rolling à la the mannered self-regarders of television's *Friends*. Experience of live theatre production could be about critiquing and moving beyond this type of naturalism, as much as it is about offering young people affirmative opportunities to work together.

And critical intention is an issue in

terms of content also. Hennessy and Meagher are clearly committed to the power of imagination as a human resource, but their account of reality as battlefield, and the world of imagination as an encyclopediac elsewhere with little concrete relationship to life, is limited. It endorses a romantic account of the world, in which expression of self — even when achieved with others — still dominates over communication of meaning. Little Red Kettle might usefully address the foundational assumptions of such explanations of the role of contemporary cultural production for young people in future productions.

Victor Merriman is the head of Musicianship at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

GOD'S GIFT

(A version of Heinrich von Kleist's
Amphytrion)

by John Banville

Barabbas... the company
The O'Reilly Theatre, Belvedere College,
Dublin, as part of the *eircom Dublin
Theatre Festival*, and on tour
Reviewed on 12 October 2000 at the
O'Reilly Theatre BY BRIAN SINGLETON.

THE GOD JUPITER'S SEDUCTION OF mortal women provides the humour of cuckoldry in what would be, were it televised, a divine situation comedy. John Banville, adaptor of Kleist's only other comedy, *The Broken Jug* (first performed at the Peacock in 1994), has here updated Kleist's 1807 version of the Amphytrion story, relocating it to Ireland and turning Thebans into English redcoats trying to tame Irish rebels. Molière's 1668 version (of which Kleist's is itself an adaptation), with its commedia influences, would have been more appropriate, one would have thought, to

the talents and skills of Barabbas.

Instead Kleist/Banville discourse on the unwitting love of the mortal woman Minna for the duplicitous god Jupiter, which creates a drama of the conflict between emotion and reason and between divine and human law. The feeling of the mortal for the god is acute, intense and painful, and made all the more so by the dramatic irony of Jupiter's deception, as he pretends to be the mortal's husband. Comic, in many respects, it is not.

Veronica Coburn's production begins in Barabbas' trademark anarchic style: The god Mercury sets model cut-out red-coats against rebels upstage, while sparks fly out of a model "big house" downstage. Groans of sexual pleasure from within the house add texture to the sounds of war. The lovemaking couple, Jupiter and Minna, emerge, Minna convinced that she has been making love to her husband, redcoat General Ashburningham, rather than a god. The situation worsens when the general appears, as his wife cannot tell the difference between god and man, and neither can the servants, to the point where the mortals believe the god is a man and the man an imposter. The dilemma is resolved by a benevolent Jupiter who puts the couple's love for each other to the test, while clearly demonstrating his total manipulative power.

Ashburningham, a colonial English general, asks the audience directly to position itself within the drama: House lights come up and we have to choose who is the real general, Ashburningham or Jupiter, in pantomime tradition. Of course we cannot reveal the truth because the play would end there and then, but also we are not inclined to do so since the general is abusive to his Irish



IS THAT YOU, DEAR?: Mary O'Driscoll and Paul Meade in God's Gift

servants and, though clearly wronged, is our historical colonial master and enemy.

The stock characters and comic situation would seem, on the surface, to be the natural stuff of Barabbas. In many respects it is: There is some repeated comic slapstick, glorious caricature, and very inventive physical reactions from the mortal characters to the power and commands of the gods. Yet the production as a whole fails to find an overriding unification of style. Ashburningham (Paul Meade) cuts a dashing figure with a pseudo-18th-century acting style, magnificently comic in its own right, and totally truthful. The Irish servant couple Souse (Raymond Keane) and Kitty (Lynn

Cahill) reverse the violence of what looks like a Punch-and Judy couple, with Kitty taking on more of Punch's attributes. The duped wife Minna (Mary O'Driscoll) is played realistically and, on another stage, this would be a touching performance. Playing real against the posed and stylised movements of her husband and servants, she seems out of place.

The representation of the gods, too, is troublesome. Mercury (Louis Lovett) looks cherubic and acts camp and at times fey, which suits his character well enough. Yet his father Jupiter (Mikel Murfi) is played straight, and this jars with his angelic appearance: how can you play straight in a nappy? Straight realism when in the mortal world is an

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appropriate choice for Jupiter, but letting us see the manufacture of "straightness" would have helped much more to confirm that this was a comedy.

As it was, for long periods, there was very little to laugh at. It seemed, almost, as if the text (and its philosophical discourse in particular) was being given prominence. Certainly the actors spoke it well, but this was at the expense of the extraordinary physical talents of Murfi who, totally underused, seemed caught in a textual trap with which his body could do nothing. Occasional moments of visual genius relieved the grip of language on the actors, such as when Jupiter went to sleep horizontally on the shoulders of a vertical Mercury. But for most of the time the gods posed upstage architecturally, as if part of the set.

The whole visual experience was one of great beauty and colour. Feargal Doyle's simple raked set offset the upstage crescent on which the gods stood. The downstage model big house was a constant reminder of the location, but after the initial explosion, was never brought into play again. The picture frame proscenium of the new O'Reilly Theatre cut us off totally from the action and created an almost filmic fairy-world, abetted by a lighting design (by Mark Galione) in which resided almost exclusively the theatrical translation of the power and magic of the gods. But because the scenography and text upstaged and replaced physical creation by actors, an overall corporeal design was regrettably absent.

Barabbas... the company have done much in the past six years to reinvent the practice of Irish theatre through their creation of a physical idiom for actors and their deconstruction of texts, but here seemed swamped by both scenog-

raphy and the presence of a living author/adaptor.

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

by Jonathan Swift,

adapted by Alan Leigh

Galloglass Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 29 June, 2000
at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin

BY ROSY BARNES

ON FIRST INSPECTION GALLOGLASS' LATEST production appears to have all the hallmarks of theatre for children: storytelling, puppets, monsters, and slapstick. But Alan Leigh's adaptation is no child-pleaser; it uses large chunks of the book as narration, with little attempt to find a new, dramatic form for Swift's wit. It ends up feeling longer than its already hefty two-hours-fifteen-minutes running time.

The use of puppets is highly problematic. The Lilliputians (only able to appear one at a time — or in the occasional pair from the back of the set) are crude and childish glove puppets, naïve in their design and operation. This would be fine if they had the anarchic violence of Punch and Judy, the charming wit of the Muppets or even — at a pinch — the child-friendly simplicity of Sooty and Sweep. But apart from solving an immediate problem of scale, these puppets have no real identity or function. Further, they're made to hold forth for paragraphs at a time. Even with the most brilliant writing, your average puppet can't sustain much in the way of monologue; when the speeches they're called on to recite consist of acres of Lilliputian gobbledegook (with the occasional explanatory word thrown in), the poor puppets don't stand a chance.

The production overflows with visual props, but, with the sole exception of a rather marvellous horse's head made by



LILLI-WHAT? Gulliver's Travels

Des Dillon, the rest are haphazard and shoddy. There is an 18th-century dress on coasters made from a mess of coloured netting, a puppet rat's head made out of a cardboard cone, a succession of sloppily made woollen false beards... Galloglass may be aiming for a quirky homemade look, but don't have the necessary wit, style or, well, quirk, to really carry it off.

Which goes for the production as a whole. With little in the way of dramatic action to sink his teeth into, John

Gannon (Gulliver) is forced to resort to acting by numbers: delivering one chunk of text in an excited way, the next in a thoughtful way, in apparently random manner. His Gulliver, although suitably pompous, has an affected English accent that overtakes the performance and fails to bring any colour to the text. Karen Scully valiantly ploughs her way through "Everyone Else": a succession of badly realised physical cameos, puppeteering parts, and beard-wearing roles. Whilst multi-role playing seems to be fashionable at the moment, this production highlights — through their absence — the precision and control needed to make this style successful.

Whilst the second half improves slightly (mainly due to the horse's head and Gulliver's accent lapsing into a more natural tone) it's a case of too little, far too late. Both adults and children need more in the way of dramatic action, theatricality, and sheer entertainment value to engage their interest. It remains unclear what audience Galloglass is aiming for. But one thing is certain: This production wouldn't survive two minutes in the playground.

JULIUS CAESAR

by William Shakespeare

Rattlebag Theatre Company

The Crypt, Dublin Castle

4 - 24 September 2000

Reviewed on 22 September

BY DEREK WEST

RATTLEBAG THEATRE COMPANY'S *Julius Caesar* offered a most intelligent reading and coherent production of the play. Director Joe Devlin transposed the action to millennium-year Ireland — men in suits, men in combats with

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mobile phones (used sparingly), with the back-up of an eclectic collection of props — hurleys, dustbin lids, and daggers.

Initially, the action takes place in a sporting environment, with a dominant post-match euphoria as the conquering heroes head for the club-house, but as the mood of the play darkens, it moves to a more overtly political zone. The men in suits inhabit a zone between the corridors of power and a criminal underworld.

Devlin found in Shakespeare a text for our times. He outlined his sources of inspiration in a director's note — primarily Duca Darie's Bulgarian production of the same play, which "resonated with the mistrust, uncertainty and fear of an abused state in its infancy." Devlin sees fear and mistrust in a contemporary Ireland and pursues this contemporary analogy with brilliant logic.

This is a Rome of unbridled ambition, greed for power, more upwardly mobile than noble. Cassius (not all that lean and hungry) appears at first to be pursuing an egalitarian agenda, but it is soon apparent that he is resentful of Caesar's controversial elevation to the status of Colossus. It's a case of sour grapes turning to rancour and jealousy. He gathers fellow malcontents and taps into the scruples of Brutus the Good. Kristen Marken's Brutus is not untainted: His sense of honour nods towards moral priggishness, but he is redeemed in his violent confrontation with Cassius and in falling on his blade.

The power struggle is conveyed in stark terms. There is opportunism, a jostling for positions; motives are suspect. Caesar exudes a confidence that is larded with arrogance. He sticks to a firm line on the exile of Publius Cimber and that seems to be the catalyst that unleashes the assassins, as if they really

needed pretext.

The concept of this production — a contemporary society riven by individual ambitions and conflicting agendas — is perfectly realised. There is a palpable and refreshing sense of lively intelligence at work, both in designing the play in today's terms (Sandra Butler) and in making the verse wholly intelligible. All the actors have invested their speaking with clarity of phrasing, a sense of rhythm and have given a high priority to meaning.

To revisit *Julius Caesar* is to be struck by so many lines that have the fatigued ring of familiarity, but Rattlebag has steered clear of nostalgic readings of these great passages. This is never truer than it is in the case of Aiden Condron's Mark Antony. The speech over the corpse of Caesar is fraught with theatrical tradition. Condron declines to be awed — his Mark Antony feels passionately the loss of his friend and the betrayal by the other noble Romans. The speech starts in an almost impromptu manner, but with the intensifying repetitions of "honourable" his anger and accusations come to the fore. The arguments over the assassination highlight the power of propaganda, the manipulation of media and crowd control... Without sacrificing the compulsive rhythms of Shakespeare's verse, Condron conveys a sense of contemporary demagogism that is alarmingly direct in its impact.

Likewise, John A. Murphy makes a striking Cassius, a shaven-headed roaring boy, laser-eyed, tetchy, and twitchy. His is a sustained portrayal of anger, a short-fused begrudgery. He is every inch the contemporary man — urbane of dress, direct in manner, and hugely driven by ambition. He tries to bluster his way through the accusations of corrup-

tion levelled at him by Brutus. He is too fired up to evade them gracefully, but for all that one can feel some empathy for him.

Ciaran Reilly's Caesar looks something like a hirsute William Hague, but with a great deal more "oomph." He is a chief executive on the make and if he plays games of false modesty with the crowd (read "Big Bonus") he is seen to want the top spot, albeit with some altruistic motives — his will is a model of political magnanimity.

It's a man's world — Shakespeare had not conceived of women in the work place. Calphurnia and Portia are cameos of connubial concern. They identify totally with their men. From a 21st-century perspective, this submissiveness is disturbing and must rate as a weakness in the play, however faithful to its sources. Within these limitations both characters are given more than adequate life by Regan O'Brien and Antoinette Walsh.

In the cramped confines of the Crypt the plebeian uproar is made vivid by the involvement of the entire cast, the muscular delivery of lines, energetic movement, and the percussive use of bin-lids, reminiscent of disorder in the Divis Flats. It was an aspect of the production which showed the sense of ensemble playing and the firm grasp of text.

I said some time ago (*irish theatre* magazine, Spring 2000) that I had reservations about the capacity of an Irish company to do justice to Shakespeare. Having seen this Rattlebag production, I have no hesitation in withdrawing my reservations.

Derek West is a teacher of theatre and drama and is currently working on a report on the promotion of the arts in second-level schools.

**THE KILKENNY ARTS FESTIVAL —
TWO PRODUCTIONS:
JUDAS**

**adapted by Maciek Reszczynski from
The Book of Judas by Brendan
Kennelly**

Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny
August 12-20 2000

Reviewed on 14 August BY JACK BYER

THE KILKENNY ARTS FESTIVAL HAS grown with impressive steadiness over the past years, in terms of increased audience numbers (which last year numbered 60,000), physical expansion into neighbouring towns, and international reach for artists and acts: the Festival has recently featured work from Poland, France, England, Mexico, Scotland, Spain, and Russia, as well as Ireland. This year they took a bold step into theatrical co-production, pairing with Theatre Unlimited on *Judas*, an adaptation by Maciek Reszczynski of Brendan Kennelly's poem *The Book of Judas*, which was undoubtedly the Festival's theatrical centrepiece and its most-awaited event.

Reszczynski probably seemed a sure choice to take on the daunting challenge of adapting a full-length poem for the stage — he had, by all accounts, successfully done just that with Kennelly's *Cromwell* in 1986 — but this time around, he failed to produce an effective theatre work. If we're to understand why Kennelly's book was praised as the "most ambitious work of literature since Beckett's trilogy... a labyrinthine confessional, clamorous with sin, guilt, and malice," (as Prof. Augustine Martin greeted it on its publication in 1991) we must unfortunately look to the original, not to the Watergate Theatre stage, where the work certainly remained labyrinthine but was sadly inert.

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The story wanders with Judas as our guide. We revisit the archetypal betrayal, briefly encountering along the way Brendan Behan, who crashes the Last Supper, and James Joyce, who entertains the Holy Family with *The Rose of Nazareth* and whom Jesus compliments for his "divine" prose. We also meet Michael Collins and there are allusions to Hitler and Marilyn Monroe.

Judas' scenes with the other two characters in this drama, Jesus (Phelim Drew) and the Stranger (David Collins), who plays multiple roles, are too underdeveloped to provide genuine insights into the infamous betrayer. In a scene in which Judas and Jesus exchange roles, Judas finds himself incapable of playing Jesus, but we never learn why. On the other hand, Jesus has no difficulty seeing into Judas' soul, but we never know what Jesus sees.

There are also hackneyed anachronisms of modern life that appear to give the story "relevance" — Judas "shops" Jesus using a public phone, a reporter shoves a microphone to Jesus' mouth as he lies on the cross and asks "how he feels," cable TV carries 24-hour coverage of the crucifixion. These anachronisms perhaps titillate the audience, but fail to help illuminate the impulses behind Judas' betrayal. Adrian Dunbar is shouldered with the burden of breathing life into this almost uninterrupted



BETRAYAL: Phelim Drew and Adrian Dunbar in *Judas*

ed 90-minute monologue, but lacks the vocal richness to make Kennelly's language take flight and the emotional range to make Judas' conflicts profoundly personal.

Judas' speeches are often so abstract and rhetorical that the audience can't clearly understand them, and therefore is unable to make an emotional connection with the character. Without such empathy, we can't discover ourselves in Judas. And that is crucial. For among the betrayals catalogued in the play, self-betrayal is among the most tragic. Judas, after all, meant well. He loved Jesus. He thought he was doing the right thing. Where did he go wrong? Where might we go wrong? These are the questions Kennelly wants us to ask ourselves. Yet for me, the question became — "Where



HAUNTING: The Girl Who Cut Flowers

did Reszczynski go wrong?"

The piece is presentational — the actors narrate and enact the story on what is clearly meant to be a stage. This concept fits the episodic nature of the work, which moves freely through time. More importantly, it underscores the idea that we, like Judas, are actors in our own dramas, forever typecast by the roles we're destined to play. But instead of the inventive use of props, set pieces, light, or sound to evoke place, the stage is littered with extraneous set pieces and props. Most irritating were three large, cumbersome pine ramps, which the actors were required to move so frequently that they ended up distracting from the emotional drama that was meant to be unfolding.

The technical mistakes were myriad:

BOB FRITH

Judas' interrogation, which began the play, was shown on a television screen that sat on a downstage corner of the stage, but most of the audience could neither see nor understand the sound coming from it. In fact, all the recorded voice-overs were extremely difficult to comprehend. And, most egregious, Dunbar, because of poor lighting, was forced to give most of his performance in shadow — a sadly appropriate metaphor for a production which failed to bring its subject to light.

A four-time recipient of American National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, Jack Byer is a college professor and covers the arts for a variety of journals in Philadelphia.

THE GIRL WHO CUT FLOWERS

by Bob Frith

Castlecomer Community Hall,
Co. Kilkenny

15 and 18 August 2000
Reviewed on 15 August

BY GERRY MORAN

THE THEATRICAL HIGHLIGHT IN KILKENNY'S Arts Festival 2000 didn't take place in the razzmatazz of lively city-centre venues like the Watergate or the new Castle Tower space in Kilkenny Castle. In fact it didn't take place in Kilkenny at all, but out in the Community Hall in Castlecomer, ten miles from the city, where I was privileged to attend one of the most exquisite shows that I have seen in a long, long time.

The show, *The Girl Who Cut Flowers*, was presented by Horse & Bamboo Theatre, a Lancashire-based company formed in 1978 who are dedicated to bringing innovative mask and puppet theatre to new and underserved audiences. They tour with a horse-drawn caravan (which cer-

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tainly attracted much attention while parked outside the Community Hall in Castlecomer) and walk from venue to venue, village to village, performing in local halls and theatres.

The Girl Who Cut Flowers, written and directed by Bob Frith, the company's founder and artistic director, is inspired by the paintings and etchings of Portuguese painter Paula Rego, which, Frith says in a programme note, intrigued him for their "peculiar mix of autobiography, sexuality, and innocence." Using masks, puppets, shadow, and light, the show tells the story of a young girl's rite of passage from the sanctuary of her bedroom — a bedroom that becomes a character in its own right — to her escapades in the forest where she encounters the big bad wolf — or, in this case, the big bad goat.

This world of nightmares and dreams, good and evil, innocence and loss of innocence came to life through the contrast of bright hypnotic colours and menacing dark shadows. The delicacy and grace of performers Nicky Fearn, Jenny Brent and Steff Ryan's almost slow-motion movements was mesmerising, as was their perfect synchronisation in some very exacting activities. The actors wear larger-than-life masks, with sad, fixed features, which are hauntingly beautiful and captivating. Equally engaging are gigantic Punch and Judy puppets whose antics evoked hilarity and cruelty in equal measures. The original music by Chris Davies — sometimes light and circus-like, moretimes dark and eerie — further enhanced and enriched the performance.

Described as a family show in the brochure (children under 12 to be accompanied by an adult), *The Girl Who Cut Flowers* was layered with meanings, pos-

sible interpretations and subtle sexual undertones. For children it is a simple story of good and evil. For adults — a reminder that life is a many-faceted thing — it offers images of good and evil, nightmare and dream, innocence and cruelty. And it reminds us that these are not all out there in the woods, but deep inside of us, in the dark unfathomable forest of the human psyche.

Gerry Moran is a Kilkenny-based teacher and broadcaster.

MUTABILITIE by Frank McGuinness

Theatreworks

The Samuel Beckett Centre, Dublin

4 – 23 September 2000

Reviewed on 19 September

BY DEREK WEST

WITH *MUTABILITIE*, FRANK MCGUINNESS has set out to write his magnum opus on matters Irish. It was more than 12 years in the making, and recently had its Irish premiere three years after its first production at Britain's Royal National Theatre. It treats of the clash between a passionate Gaelic world and a reserved English one. It treats of Catholicism and Anglicanism. It parades a series of literary models — from *sean nós*, through Spenserian stanzas and Shakespearean sonnets, to the tentative birth of Anglo-Irish literature. All that's missing is the kitchen sink.

The plodding agenda is loose and dreadfully over-crowded. An English playwright, William (Shakespeare, it would seem, played by Jude Sweeney,) is pulled from the river and recuperates in the Munster Castle of Edmund (Spenser, no doubt, an ex-patriate poet working on his own magnum opus — about a glorious queen). William's thespian compan-



PLOTTING REBELLION: *The company of Theatreworks' Mutabilitie*

ions are held captive outside the Pale, where mad King Sweeney (Brian McGrath) and Queen Maeve (Fedelma Cullen) hold sway. The wild File (Liz Schwarz) and Hugh (Denis Conway) play servants to the castle dwellers but hatred lurks in their hearts.

The play suggests that Ireland needs a Shakespeare and maybe that is how McGuinness sees himself. He strains for richness of texture and density, but there is simply too much in this play. He packs his literary, historical, and sexual concerns into an unwieldy package that harks back both in form and language. It is as if neither Beckett, nor

McIntyre, nor Murphy, nor Bickerstaffe's *True Lines* had ever been. The magnum is excessive and the opus is laboured. The play has solemn designs on its auditor and it rarely relents. When it does, it is to inject some banal sequences of "carry on camping" at the Globe. This serves to trivialise serious concerns about a diversity of sexual proclivities. It is as if McGuinness wishes to confront his audience with a wide sexual agenda, but fails to find the dramatic means to do so, except in the sequence where mistress and servant, Elizabeth and File, reach moments of intimacy.

There are some impressive creations. *The File* (played with unremitting seriousness here by Liz Schwarz) is burdened with the conflict of native Irish and English. She carries the passion, sorrow, and the intense hatred of the interloper. Edmund and his wife Elizabeth (Sharon Hogan) encompass many of the dilemmas facing the colonist. By turns they hate their adopted land and yet are wooed by it. They are estranged from home and ill at ease amid the alien woods. McGuinness has tried to find a verbal correlative for Spenser by having him speak in Anglican tongues, full of biblical resonance. Spenser is the bewildered Brit, besieged in savage territory, articulate even in his confusion, in contrast to the roaring ravings of mad Sweeney. But Spenser comes across as a parody of a Prod (McGuinness does not get under his skin, nor does Michael Wade in the part) and is saddled with an unfortunate pomposity.

It is as if McGuinness's literary and national preoccupations have become hopelessly enmeshed with his sexual mission, and much of the play becomes a private version of events, in contrast, say, with Friel's *Translations* which attempts to find a metaphor for the conflict between colonisation and native culture and which, in theatrical terms, is more successful because its lines are clear and its narration is succinct.

Having entered all these reservations, it must be said that Michael Caven's *Theatreworks* production was highly competent; there was much intensity and earnestness at play. Caven stripped the Beckett Centre stage back to bare essentials. By linking the permanent catwalk with a winding stair, he exploited the height, breadth, and depth of the playing space. His

blocking of human figures was wonderfully composed. The spatial relationships were defined broadly — the effect was to dignify the action. Paul Keegan's lighting served to define the magic spaces and yet to lose not a second in the story.

This is in contrast to the original RNT production, where Monica Frawley's setting, in the intimate Cottesloe space, was a treasure house of specifically-realised components: the stream, the castle, the wood. There Trevor Nunn made his production linear, so that the action could recede to a distance or end up in close confrontation. At the Beckett Centre the action achieved both an intimacy and a generous sense of space without any extraneous touches.

Caven encouraged his actors to impassioned articulation. Intensity became a virtue in the bodies and voices of Liz Schwarz and Denis Conway. It carried some of the weaker characterisations. But one longed in vain for a lightening of theme or delivery.

Theatreworks have done the play sufficient justice to afford the audience a fair opportunity to reach a view on the work. It can be seen as glorious in its solemn commitment to tackle themes which are central to our identity and which touch upon the plurality of our contemporary society; but it also must rate as a glorious failure in that McGuinness has not buckled his intuitions into a viable form.

Tom Murphy took that curate's egg of a play, *The White House*, and produced the pared-down but infinitely more effective *Conversations on a Homecoming*. Perhaps McGuinness should take a leaf out of the Murphy book: there is a great play here, trying to get out, but it hasn't found the exit.

THE QUEEN AND PEACOCK

by Loughlin Deegan

Red Kettle Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 30th August 2000 at

Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

RED KETTLE'S SECOND DIASPORIC DEATH play in a row (following Jimmy Murphy's *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*) is a challenging, outrageously funny, and provocatively painful examination of a group of Irish refugees left out of the histories of emigration. Loughlin Deegan's expatriates are "hiberno-queer," three Irish men seeking

refuge from the unacceptability of their homosexuality in a down-at-heel gay bar in Brixton. They gather to await the AIDS-related death of a mutual friend, a death which engineers the trauma, unmasking their true identities, sexualities, and secrets. A fourth young man newly arrived on the scene from Ballyfermot challenges the men's closetedness with disarming innocence and arrogance, and inadvertently helps the men cope to varying degrees with their "otherness."

Deegan's principal strength as a playwright is his skill in characterisation, and the production's success lies in its cast-

NEW KID: Tony Flynn (left) and Alan Leech in *The Queen and Peacock*



GERRY OCARROLL

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ing and the touching sensitivity of its director, Jim Nolan. Both carefully steer the play away from mawkish sentimentality and allow us to appreciate moments of tenderness without pity or shame. The three older characters are the product of a pre-1993 Ireland, when homosexuality was outlawed, discrimination rife, and self-loathing rampant. For many young Irishmen escape to England and beyond was the only way to cope. Deegan spreads out a scale ranging from self-loathing to total acceptance of self along an age-range, with the oldest character, Bob (played by John Hewitt as both loveable and twisted) totally denying he is gay, and separating his unsafe S&M sexual practice from his sexuality. Likewise, he totally rejects his friend Ciaran, who dies alone.

Mark (Tony Flynn) performs his sexuality by adopting the guise of an English drag-queen, Gertie. But even when he doffs the dress, we discover that his male persona is yet another construction. Deegan strips the character literally and metaphorically; the transvestite clown of the first act ends up as a sad young man named Fergal who was thrown out of his Irish home and developed an English alter-ego. Paul, from Donegal, (Charlie Bonner) also can't come to terms with his sexuality; he rejects what he sees as the shallowness and sex-driven ethos of the gay scene, and pines unrequitedly after the like-minded Ciaran. Yet despite Paul's "straight" approach to life he makes one of the biggest leaps in the drama. Finally, Willie (Alan Leech), with his urban, street-wise, plain-talking thirst for London's scene, is the product of a post-*Late Late Show* and Celtic Tiger Ireland, whose gay social life is limited only by a shortage of cash.

The four men's discourse mirrors the range of their coping strategies, from the

monosyllabic, to scathing shallowness, to post-denial sensitivity, to "out-and-proud." Through most of the play the characters revel in language, Deegan clearly enjoying his scathing attacks on rigid positionalities in verbal diatribes which assault and challenge us.

Probably the most revealing and theatrically exciting moment of both play and production is a momentary transition in writing style at the end of Act One. At this point Paul and Willie have rushed to the hospital, leaving Mark/Gertie and Bob alone. Bob decides to close the pub early. Gertie decides to earn some cash. Bob desires sex. Gertie complies. The transaction is monosyllabic. There is nothing to discuss. The lights are switched off slowly, one by one, as we come to terms with the knowledge that Gertie is a prostitute and that, despite his denials, Bob is gay.

The discourse change strips away the characters' pretence. It is a Deegan/Nolan *coup de théâtre*, chillingly executed, which disrupts and destroys the preceding humour. Apart from in this moment, the form of writing is recognisable realism. So too is the interior pub setting (by Moggie Douglas) impressively accurate, if a tad too over-dominant visually, upstaging even the larger-than-life Gertie.

At times wickedly funny, the play explores the pain of exile. The discourse is sexualised but the characters rarely touch. It will be a wonderful moment when we see mentally healthy gay characters on stage in the future, whose sexualities are a given and not sources of anguish. But for the moment they are the stuff of drama, and Deegan brilliantly captures the current moment of seismic societal shifts through a gay lens. As we call for our exiles to return home to service the rampant economy, Deegan's play signals that



SINGING THEIR MULTICULTURAL HEARTS OUT: *The company of Rent*

our country can embrace other than dominant sexualites. For the moment Red Kettle allows us to imagine "A 'Queer' Nation Once Again"!

RENT by Jonathan Larson

Hands Turn Theatre Company
The Olympia Theatre, Dublin
19 July – 16 September 2000;
reviewed on 19 July

BY SUSAN CONLEY

Rent IS A HIGHLY SPECIFIC FIN-DE-SIECLE story about the fortunes and misfortunes of a group of hip, urban young thangs,

who suffer variously from addiction, idealism, and AIDS. The show transfers the plot of Puccini's *La Bohème* to New York's East Village, where our group of burgeoning artists strive for love and success in a world that wants only to kick them out of their squat. *Rent*'s characters have sung their racially diverse hearts out into musical theatre history: the show was one of the most talked-about and successful American musicals of the '90s, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 and spawning duplicate productions around the world. Local company Hands Turn attempted to transport the *Rent* phenom-

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enon to Dublin this summer, but only succeeded in proving that the material is not production-proof.

Mark is a struggling young filmmaker, whose girlfriend Maureen has dumped him and taken up with another woman, Joanne, a lawyer. His flatmate Roger struggles not only to complete his latest song and to stay off drugs, but also to fight his attraction to neighbour Mimi, whom he immediately cops as a junkie. Their gay black friend Collins, having just been mugged, is picked off the pavement by a Hispanic drag queen named Angel; a feature in the romances between both couples — Collins and Angel, and Roger and Mimi — is the admission that they all are HIV-positive.

All characters unite in the struggle to prevent Benny, former friend to the group and now their affluent yuppie landlord, from clearing out a tent city in a nearby vacant lot. A riot ensues, and the beginning of Act II finds that Benny has locked the group out of their building in retaliation against their moment of unity against The Man. Post-protest, the group, and the show, splinters into each character's personal concerns: Mark is tempted to take a tabloid television gig; Angel dies and Collins grieves; Roger and Mimi are estranged and Roger leaves town. Mimi's apparent death unites them all once again — and her "resurrection" cements their commitment to each other and to their own individual dreams.

The show uses calendar holidays — Christmas, New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day — to mark the passage of time, and this points to one of the most important themes of the show, the creation of extended family. None of the group identify with their birth clans, and all are seeking, through their friendships and romantic relationships, to create that

perfect home base, in which they are seen for who they truly are, their talents nurtured, and their dreams supported without danger of mockery or dismissal. That they fail, and succeed, and continue to fail, and continue to try, speaks to a generation that no longer follows conventional rules of societal engagement. Grappling with the paradox of wanting that nuclear family without bowing to their parents' three-bedroomed-house-with-the-white-picket-fence vision, the group embodies very real, human concerns, always overshadowed by the virus that threatens their very lives, much less their dreams.

For its debut in a non-musical theatre culture, it is a shame that the show was woefully produced and directed. The high energy and attractiveness of the cast went a long way to engage the audience in the performance, but uneven direction and amateurish choreography fought the group's dynamism. Stodgy, unimaginative blocking reduced movement to endless marching on and off the enormous — and enormously underused — Olympia stage. Overwrought directorial choices abounded, best exemplified in a most unfortunate use of rainbow flags unfurling from the flies, and matching T-shirts for the cast, during what could have been a moving reprise of Collins' love song "I'll Cover You"; one of the musical's most moving moments was reduced it to a camper-than-tents take on gay unity and pride.

An additional problem was that the cast all appeared to be in their early to mid 20s, which distorts the meaning of Jonathan Larson's book and drains the audience's potential sympathy for the characters. In the original New York production, the characters were 30-something idealists who refused to compro-

mise their ideals; they all looked like they had some life under their tires. But the gorgeous young 'uns in the Dublin production look too young to complain, as they often do, of all the "baggage" they're carrying in their lives; in this respect the show felt like watching a live, musical version of MTV's "Real World."

In a culture that is only beginning to grapple with the issues surrounding the dissolution of traditional family structures, and in a nation that has not been affected by the AIDS virus as deeply as has others, one feels that the material was simply not handled in a way that provided more than a glossy glimpse into the lives of a bunch of wacky, arty kids. Despite the production's overall ham-handedness, the strength of the material shone through when left to itself: "Life Support" — the enactment in song of characters' feelings about living with disease — was a gut-wrenching, powerful moment of pure, truthful emotion. At best, *Rent* provoked thought and provided grounds for identification in a culture in which the issues presented are not yet entrenched; at worst, it threatened to create a new generation of musical theatre loathers who wouldn't be caught at another one of these naff things again.

Susan Conley is a filmmaker, reviews theatre for In Dublin and www.wow.ie, and is art director of this magazine.

VALPARAISO by Don DeLillo

Íomhá Ildánach

The Crypt Arts Centre

6 - 25 August 2000

Reviewed 18 August

BY PETER CRAWLEY

IT'S NOT THE STORY THAT'S IMPORTANT—it's how you tell it. This is both the mes-

sage of Don DeLillo's latest play, and the downfall of Íomhá Ildánach's recent production of it in the Crypt. The crucial elements of presentation and embellishment, so all-consuming to the former, are oddly overlooked by the latter.

Michael Majeski, played by Gerry O'Brien, is an ordinary man with what is actually not a particularly extraordinary tale. Filling in on a business trip for a colleague who's come down with an "unnamed rare disease," Michael finds himself on a convoluted travel itinerary; trying to get to Valparaiso, Indiana, he ends up heading for the same-named city in Florida and eventually ends up in Valparaiso, Chile. By the time he lands there, the media have got hold of the story, and transformed it and Michael into this week's "lighter side of the news" sensation. The focus of DeLillo's play is less Michael's travelling route than the media trail he follows, as he treads the fine line between resistance to, and acceptance of, the intrusive, exploitative, and always seductive glare of mass exposure.

Portraying an eccentric collection of attention-hungry "plain folk" as well as media movers and shakers, most of the cast deliver exaggerated performances, some more successfully than others. Stewart Roche hits the right mark playing the first of Michael's interviewers, alternately aggressive and then disinterested, coaxing and then censoring. Aoife Maloney is also impressive as the only ingénue media figure of the play, whose scrupulous protestations of "I'm not writing this" provide a counterpoint to O'Brien's mutating Michael, who begins to believe and regurgitate his own press.

Although Emma Lowe threatens to devour Bairbre Murray's (largely uninspired) set in the second act with her

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arrestingly satirical portrayal of the cruel and marvellously self-aware talk show host Delfina, this is truly Gerry O'Brien's show. As his story is extorted, reported, and distorted through a myriad of notepads, microphones and camera lenses, O'Brien deftly captures the slalom-pole transitions Michael must make. Humanity and celebrity are seemingly incompatible entities as DeLillo would have it, but O'Brien succeeds in portraying both, swinging from bewildered subject to pompous persona, and smug reporter to guilty confessor as he fabricates a personality from his own nonentity, revealing more and more of his private life on air until he has stripped himself bare.

Similarly unadorned, however, is John O'Brien's direction. Little in the way of the elaboration so crucial to Michael's burgeoning celebrity flavours the production. By simply putting DeLillo's pages straight on to the stage, O'Brien presents the writer's countless ideas, but fails to engage completely with them. If the central idea of the play is about the ferocity of the media, the production isn't invested with the same power.

In part the venue is responsible for some restrictions and the company try to compensate. A previous production of *Valparaiso*, at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, reportedly involved nothing less than a multimedia blitzkrieg. But the shrunken scale of the Crypt only allows one wide screen tele-



EATING THE MEDIA: Valparaiso

vision and a video projector on the back wall. It suffices to deliver the intensity and personal intrusion of the information age, but it softens the blow. Less effective, however, are slow lighting fades and cumbersome scene changes against a sedate trip-hop soundtrack

which add to an off-kilter pace in the entire first act, slowing the momentum of what should be Michael's rapid descent.

Simply put, the problem with the production is that it makes DeLillo's text do all the work, and it's not an unflawed play; while often clever, it's also sometimes pretentious. While DeLillo's fondness for repetition highlights modern reportage's tendency towards recycling ideas and thus stagnating meaning, elsewhere the repetition of "air safety" phrases by the three-person chorus invites interpretation but ultimately denies any real significance.

One cannot shake the feeling that the company fails to seize the overwhelming relevance of their subject and to directly involve the audience. Pop culture phenomena like daytime scandal talk shows and *Big Brother* revolve around an unhealthy fascination with the private lives of "real people." In Delfina's talk show a fleeting opportunity for implicating the audience in Michael's self-destruction is botched by poor sightlines and this production's awkward staging. Ultimately while Íomhá Ildánach's production does succeed in entertaining in some areas, it repeats the mantra "We need to know" without ever really asking "why?"

A graduate of Trinity College, Peter Crawley is studying for an MA in Journalism at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

WIDEBOY GOSPEL by Ken Harmon

Bedrock Productions

On tour; reviewed at Project Arts Centre,
Dublin on 12 August 2000

BY SUSAN CONLEY

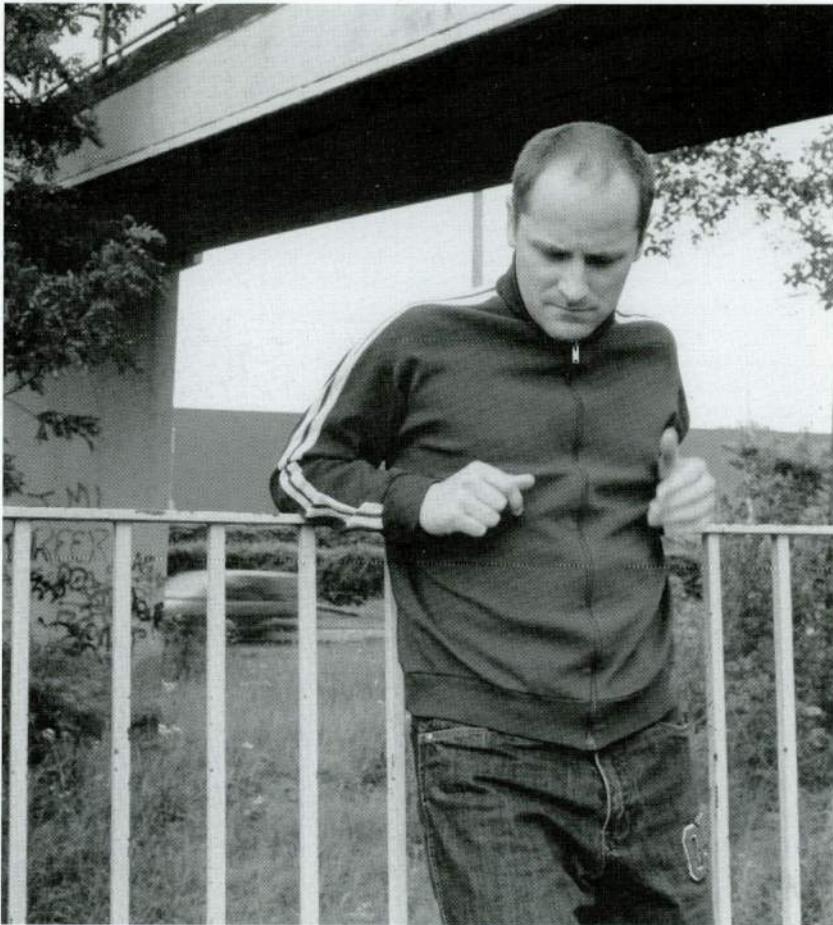
STORY? STORY: SNORKEY. CHANCER.

Ex-con. Dub. Full-out. Lotto winner. Spends all the dosh. Girlfriend — sister of thugs. Admissions made — he betrayed her brother yonks ago. Comes back to haunt. Girlfriend — breakup. Living on the edge. Living with the Ma and Da. Working. Graveyard. Boss man — chancer. Waiting for disaster. Disaster comes. Scarred for life. Lives to tell.

Ken Harmon's *Wideboy Gospel* uses language in an extremely idiomatic fashion to illustrate time and place: The time is now, in modern, bustling, drug-and-crime-ridden Dublin, and the very specific voice Harmon chooses for his only character, as demonstrated above, is staccato, slangy, and shorthand. The stripped-down form of monologue always privileges language, but this is particularly the case here; language immediately distinguishes itself as the play's most distinctive and important expressive element. Monologue also foregrounds plot and character, as the only action we're privy to is what we're told. This can be an absorbing form of theatrical endeavour, or it can be deadly dull. Thanks to an energetic performance by Ronan Leahy and tight, imaginative direction by Jimmy Fay, Bedrock's production of *Wideboy Gospel* is far from a bore... but it falls short of riveting.

Idiomatic language can express the essence of a generation; the "right on" of '60s hippies and the "stupid phat" of '80s rappers serve to encapsulate a moment in time, and have integrity insofar as they are in the past. Harmon's shorthand feels like it wants to join these hallmarks of youth culture. But one need only remember the feeling of learning a new language while reading Anthony

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CHANCER: Ronan Leahy in *Wideboy Gospel*

Burgess' droog-speak in *A Clockwork Orange*, or hearing it in the film; or the experience of reading Irvine Welsh's Glaswegian dialect, which demands it be read in that accent... Think of these watersheds and the voice in *Wideboy Gospel* starts to fall short. Part

of the problem is the play's extreme contemporaneity — Harmon is bravely trying to describe the world he lives in, in its own distinctive argot, but he seems to assume that he's giving his audience new information.

RUS KAVANAGH

The fact is that most of the play's Dublin audience has probably met or seen someone like Snorkey before, if not on one of the grittier inner-city TV soap operas, then on a foray into O'Connell Street or on the top of the number 10 bus. Harmon presents Snorkey's underworld, however, as if it's unknown to us, and he simply doesn't seem to have anything new to say about this world. Thus the play reinforces urban stereotypes, and the extreme use of slang actually results in a sort of reverse snobbery: Jaysus, are you out of touch or what? Getting old? D4?

A further problem is that, ultimately, our anti-hero Snorkey has some minor adventures but doesn't seem to change at all. Sure, he's scarred by his experience, but he's not transformed, and one imagines in a few years time, he'll be telling a similar tale, only this time maybe minus a few fingers. This is probably Harmon's point — that this world is a treadmill to nowhere — but because all his experience adds up to more of the same for Snorkey, the play ends up feeling anti-climactic to the viewer.

Leahy's commitment to the character is full-on. Fay's exceptional direction physicalises the monologue format to a degree that it should be required viewing for anyone interested in that mode. From the lighting (Lee Davis) to the costume design (Catherine Fay), all aspects are acutely observed and executed; indeed, this is one of the most ably produced shows of the year. Yet the text is wanting and all the stellar production values in the world can't hide it. Harmon seems to sacrifice the limitless possibilities of language as an illustrative tool to go for a quick-hit slice-of-life that we've all seen before.

WONDERFUL TENNESSEE

by Brian Friel

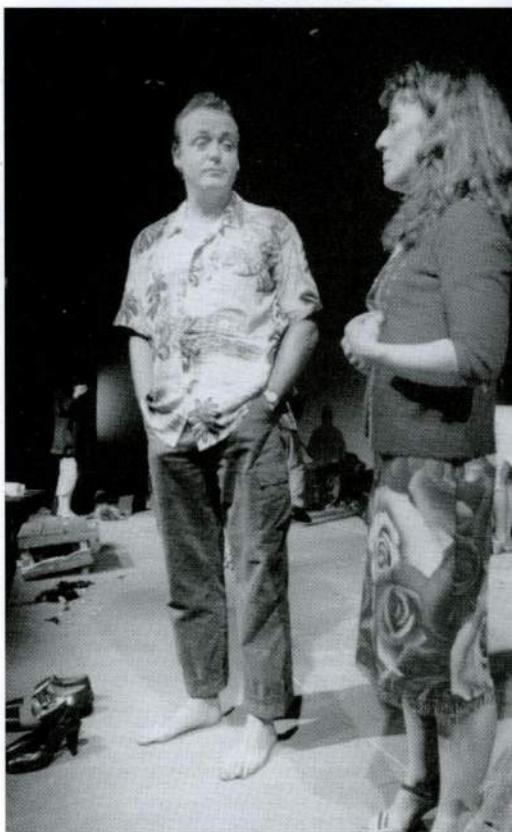
The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

29 September - 21 October 2000

Reviewed on 4 October

BY MIKELA FRENCH

THE CHARACTERS IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *Wonderful Tennessee* are, at the play's opening, looking for quick-fix spiritual gratification; they hope that an overnight



HOLIDAYMAKERS: Wonderful Tennessee

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visit to an "enchanted island" will bring them personal renewal without too much fuss. They come to realise, however, that they will not gain transformation through the favoured method of the day, consumption; rather, rejuvenation can only come as the fruit of one's own creativity. The message of the play holds true for its viewers as well; this is not a TV-dinner kind of play, easily ingested and digested; it requires the audience to work and participate. The play first opened at the Abbey in 1993, to mixed reviews, and then moved quickly to Broadway, where it closed after only nine performances. Perhaps in trying to redeem the play's bruised reputation as the poor young cousin of the Friel canon, the Lyric Theatre here tried to serve the play up to the audience with too much convenience, not trusting that viewers can and will add their imaginative juices to the total meal.

The play opens with the six characters waiting on a pier on the western coast of Ireland for a boatman to ferry them to a quasi-mystical island that one of them, Terry (Simon Wolfe), remembers visiting as a child. Initially, the audience expects, like the characters, that the boatman will come and adventure will ensue. No such action emerges, however, to enslave the attention of either audience or characters, and both are then left to consider what they are looking to gain from the play and from the pilgrimage, respectively.

As they ponder their purpose, the characters resort to singing, talking, and telling stories to pass the time. Again, what unfolds on stage at this point does not bury this question of meaning, but deepens it. Each character's lines are full of symbolic references to everything from Christianity and Greek myth to pagan rituals and superstition. The names of the

boatman and mini-bus driver (Carlin and Charlie) carry connotations of the ferryman of the dead, Charon, and the name of the island (Island of Mystery) recalls the mythical Underworld. Some critics of the play have decried this use of emblems as heavy-handed, didactic, and transparent. In fact, because symbols here are used so frequently and can hardly go unnoticed, they call into question their very meaning, which too often gets taken for granted.

The crucial flaw in this production was director Brian Brady's choice to have the actors assume a naturalistic acting style, wherein each action is clearly justified by apparently definite motivation. This goes against the grain of Friel's script, filled as it is with references to myth, mystery, and the unknowable. The result was a slowly paced production, whose tortuously long pauses were filled with the almost audible sound of the wheels in each character's head turning as they rationalised every move.

The ensemble thus seemed overburdened with the task of appearing credible, which, when juxtaposed against writing that works to achieve the opposite, made their performances, at times, seem silly. Nearly all the characters, for example, tell several stories of Greek mythology or make reference to legends as part of their "casual" conversation. This kind of talk may seem natural among a group of university professors at an academic conference, but is unlikely between close friends on a weekend holiday. It might have been more appropriate then, for the actors to break the fourth wall and address the audience more directly during these speeches. In another instance, Berna tells a story about a flying house, which she says she likes to tell because it is a "slap in the face of reason." Andrea

Irvine labors to tell it, however, with a melancholy that is natural to her character and not at all, then, a slap to reason; a more powerful moment might be had if Berna changed and became perhaps inexplicably animated and upbeat during the telling, giving her words more meaning.

On the other hand, Paul McCauley's set design did not try to re-create the real dull, grey stone of a pier, and instead suggested a phantasmal place with a backdrop that curved into geometrical shapes and peaks like cake icing, together with a drastically slanted platform surrounded with black netting to represent the pier. Added to Lucy Carter's lighting design of twinkling yellow lights under the netting and soft blue hues on the flats, the theatre looked like the setting for an Andy Warhol Factory Party. This would have been a wonderful backdrop from which to launch a complex acting style.

Despite the promise of the design, the overall production fails to inspire the imagination of the audience. At one point in the play, the characters plead with George (Alan Kelly) to "give us a story, George, give us a story!" Frustrated in the knowledge that his companions are demanding easy and immediate satisfaction, he plays a fast and dirty snippet of a symphony on his accordian, disgustedly thrusting upon them the McDonaldised version of Beethoven.

This deeply affects the others, who, by the end of the play, realize that the kind of renewal we seek from stories and music — indeed from drama — comes from working to create it for ourselves. It is too bad that the audience had to digest the ready-made theatre that the Lyric was trying to serve that night, instead of being able to dream after finer, more

mysterious dramatic cuisine.

Mikela French is an MA student of Irish Studies at Queen's University in Belfast.

YEEHAR!

The Ulster Association of Youth Drama

Waterfront Hall, Belfast

29 July 2000

Reviewed by PAUL DEVLIN

THE ULSTER ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH Drama's production of *Yeehar!* at Belfast's Waterfront Hall was a fiercely physical and dramatically stripped-down performance. While much youth theatre can have prosaic tendencies, *Yeehar!* was non-linear, episodic, and above all urgently contemporary. What must have seem like a logistical nightmare for the project's artistic director, Veronica Coburn — "just how do you mobilise 250 eager young performers in a creative way?" — resulted in a production that was not just experimental and entertaining, but also (and this is a word I'd never have imagined myself using in connection with youth theatre of any description!) sexy.

Yeehar! was the latest in a series of youth drama initiatives which UAYD undertook in partnership with the Linen Hall Library this year. The company had already worked their way through three centuries of script extracts of plays by Ulster playwrights; taken part in a ten-day drama residential workshop; and were looking forward to participating in the Linen Hall's Open Door Festival. The company was composed of 12 separate youth drama groups, as well as associated individuals, representing Newtownabbey, Balbriggan, Derry, Donegal, Belfast, Bangor, Dublin, Tallaght, Tipperary, Newry, and

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Loughbrickland.

Yeehar! was devised and written through a series of intensive performance workshops inspired by cowboys, who, it said in a programme note, the production's collaborators consider "pop-culture pioneers." The piece used the potential triumphs and challenges facing the pioneering cowboy as he traversed new frontiers as an extended metaphor for the possibilities young people encounter as they face the virgin territory of their own futures.

A few ironic nods and winks were given to conventions of performance and design that *Yeehar!* chose to ignore. The performance began with the appearance of a tiny young man — surely the smallest member of the cast — on the stage, emphasising the enormity of the performance space the company were about to attempt to fill. With that his fellow performers stormed on stage and it became very apparent why there wasn't any set — there was no room for it. A laconic young man then carried a tumbleweed, stuck on to the end of a brush shaft, across the stage in sarcastic homage to the production that might have been. Costume, too, was deliberately scaled down. Denims and white T-shirts reinforced the western theme while simultaneously underscoring the youth-feel of the piece and making everybody look good in the process.

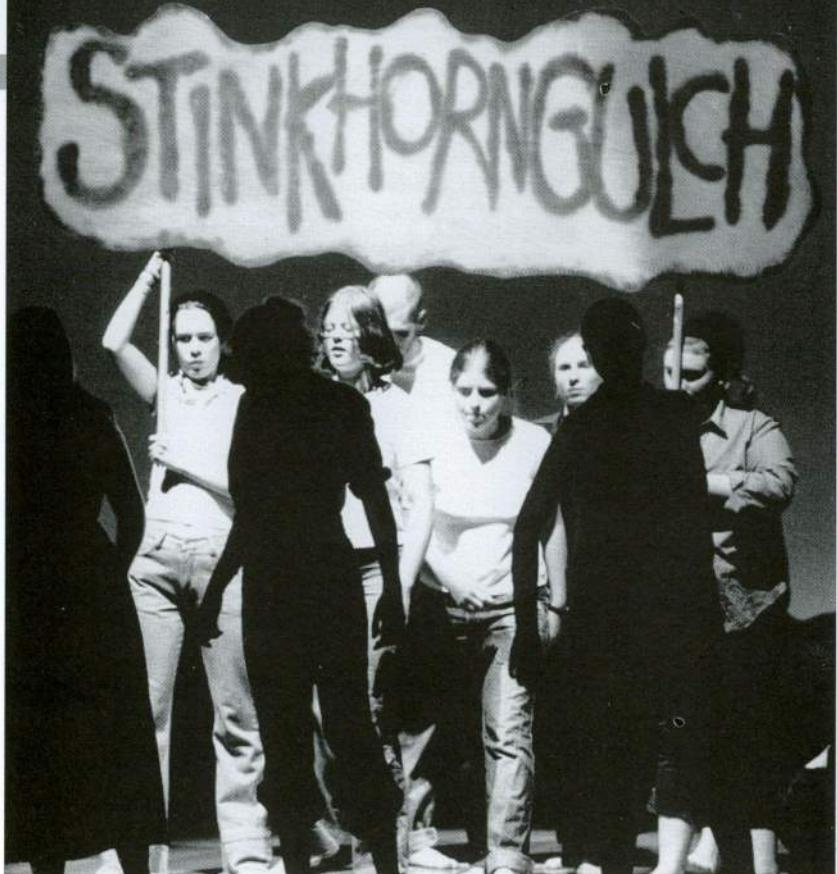
The entire cast then struck a massive tableau, a physical overture of what was to follow: shoot-outs, injuns, stake jumping, steam trains, bar room brawls, whiskey, and can-can girls. The ensemble used the considerable force of their 500 feet to stomp out the sound of hyper-convincing stampede. Timing in movement was microsecond-perfect

and the actors' collective use of voice was effective and commanding. The full attention of their audience for the remainder of their performance was now assured.

An ensemble piece, the work reflected the influence of the various associate drama tutors assisting the groups, many of whom hail from backgrounds in physical theatre and mime. Likewise, the creative input of Kids in Control, a company of four young actors who train with UAYD and who specialise in contact improv, street dance, and physical theatre, was keenly felt throughout the production. Choreography was sharp, cool, strong, and executed by the enormous cast with style and military precision. Individual performances were rightly indiscernible in this non-personality-driven, unpretentious work.

The collaborative authorship of *Yeehar!* was integral to the play's success in performance. The cast obviously enjoyed and were committed to their performances; there was a sense that they had ownership of what they were doing. Direction was concise and controlled, but individual performers were clearly afforded creative licence in their interpretation of their roles — no two cowboys swilled their finger of whisky alike, no two can-can girls can-canned quite the same way.

The overall structure of the piece, however, was relatively formulaic and, at times, repetitive. The huge cast, during the performance, largely functioned as a collection of smaller groups who were each given the opportunity to perform an individual section followed by a bridging scene performed by the entire cast before the next episode. As the audience grew familiar with the format of the work the rehearsal structure became too



URBAN COWBOYS: *The company of Yeehar!*

visible and individual scenarios — a day in the life of a cowboy, a shoot-out in a saloon — became slightly tired. The sense in which the pioneer was to serve as a metaphor for developing young lives also, in the latter stages of the performance, got lost beneath the director's understandable urge to give everybody a chance to "do their bit."

But what the play lacked in content it made up for in style. It was a hard, modern, sexy, and completely professional performance that left a lasting impres-

sion. The young actors themselves seemed much older than I had been expecting: one tough-looking hombre actually had an authentic western-style goatee beard that any self-respecting 20-something would have been proud of. Youth theatre, it appears to me, like everything else "youth" these days, seems to have grown up a lot since I was a boy.

Paul Devlin is currently completing an MA in Creative Writing at Queen's University.

continued from page 53

Unfortunately, whilst a good puppeteer knows the value of repetition, the company here — Two Hands Theatre — shows little restraint: creating similar effects and illusions until the hour-long show becomes more like watching a bad magician trawling through his very limited repertoire of card-tricks — seen one, you've seen them all.

Two Hands also has an uncomfortably eyebrow-raising attitude to race and gender: An Arab puppet is distinguished by a nose the size of his face; a multitude of enormous-breasted black women in grass skirts dance topless on a Hawaiian beach, before bringing out the cooking-pot for a bit of white-man stew. The eventual plot twist is not enough to excuse this excess of dubious imagery. There was a brilliant opportunity here to really explore issues of race and gender in a radical and revealing way — or even to offer an intelligent critique of political correctness itself. Instead Two Hands add bland insult to thoughtless injury by shamelessly exploiting dodgy dated stereotypes to say nothing at all.

DESPITE THE LARGE DIFFERENCES between these three shows, they basically share the same problem — an inability to come up with good, intelligent adult material to match their manipulation skills. Like so many art forms, puppetry is in danger of becoming too insular — referring to itself and its methods rather than using the unique nature of this medium to say something about the world we live in. This is partly due to the fact that puppeteers have to be, by the nature of their craft, highly specialised experts in manipulation. They are not writers, directors, or comedians. And they tend to work alone, isolated from other theatrical forms.

Some companies have started to break down those barriers. Improbable Theatre

Company, in the UK, stages shows that deal with subject matter that lends itself to puppetry: *70 Hill Lane* is a ghost story about the fears and memories of childhood; *Shock-Headed Peter* — a tongue-in-cheek reworking of a set of macabre morality tales for children — gloriously parodies the hypocrisy of Victorian values. Improbable harnesses the transformative powers of puppetry to explore very adult fears: of the paranormal, of societal control, of madness itself. They have found uniquely adult subject matter that can only be expressed in this form: making truly purposeful puppetry and fantastic theatre, full-stop.

The Lambert Puppet Theatre is making a good start in Ireland, merely by exposing audiences to the idea of adult puppetry. But there could be more variety on offer. Where are the home-grown innovations of the likes of Barabbas and Macnas? Where are Dublin's own Púca Puppets? The Puppet Festival could occupy larger theatres, embrace puppetry within theatre, and showcase mixtures between puppetry and other art forms.

This is a tall order for the Lambert Puppet Theatre alone. But unless bridges are built between puppet and conventional theatre, there will be little of the cross-fertilisation needed to create new and exciting forms and to expose adult puppetry to the writing, directing, and designing talent it needs to really bring out its full potential. Maybe mainstream theatre could also benefit from the influence of a form so immersed in the physical that even the inanimate world can come alive.

Satire, cartoon, fear, laughter, transformation, magic, mortality, control, monsters, demons, politicians, transubstantiation, the surreal, the grotesque, the hilarious, the insane... Puppetry (and theatre) could be doing so much more.

It's about time Ireland really took up this challenge.



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