

irishtheatre

VOLUME FOUR NUMBER TWENTY ONE ■ WINTER 2004



irishtheatre MAGAZINE

VOLUME FOUR, NUMBER TWENTY ONE ■ WINTER 2004

PJT Insurance Services Limited

17 Main Street
Swords
Co. Dublin
Ireland

Specialist Insurance Brokers to Irish Theatre

Theatres and venues
Arts Centres
Touring Theatre Companies
Youth Drama

*If you need an insurance quotation
speak to the experts.*

- Contact Peter Thomas or Claire Dumbrell for
Theatres, venues and arts centres
- Contact Emma O'Sullivan for touring theatre companies,
youth drama and amateur drama societies

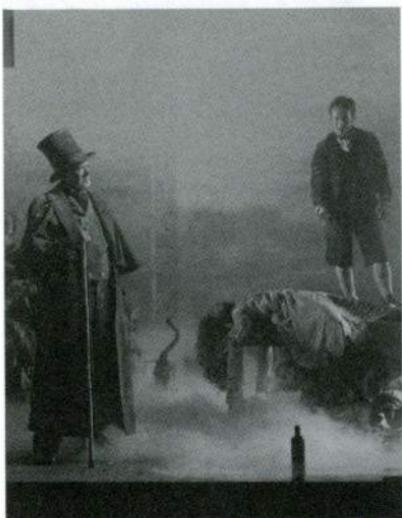
Irish Brokers Association Member

PJT Insurance Services Ltd is a multi-agency intermediary regulated by
The Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority.

Phone: (353) 1 840 1254

Fax: (353) 1 813 1070

Email: info@pjtin.ie



MODALITY IN COTTON'S METAPHORS



4 WHAT'S NEWS

11 SOUNDING BOARD Practitioners' voices must be heard in the current debates on Belfast arts venues, argues Stella Hall.

13 ON THE EDGE With the National Theatre on the edge of its new centenary, the fifth annual *itm* critics' forum focused on its *Abbey and Ireland* season. Here's the edited transcript of the panel's deliberations on the eighteen plays offered as either full productions or readings.

39 FRINGE FRONTIERS Three weeks. Six reviewers. One Fringe trail. *itm* staked out the Irish productions, and brought back these review essays on the techo, social, multi-media, and language concerns coming through at this year's Dublin Fringe Festival.

45 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Comings and goings behind the scenes.

47 REVIEWS Our critics review 26 productions from all the major summer and autumn festivals, as well as Irish work from around the country.

ON THE COVER: Iseult Golden (left) and Carmel Stephens (right) in *Tick My Box*. Photo: Eoin Stephens

ADDRESS: 44 East Essex Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2 Phone: (01) 677-8439

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

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

THE BEST WAY TO GET
irishtheatre
MAGAZINE



IS TO SUBSCRIBE



LOG ON TO
www.irishtheatremagazine.ie
OR RING 01 677 8439

irishtheatre
MAGAZINE

VOLUME FOUR,
ISSUE TWENTY ONE
AUTUMN 2004

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

KAREN FRICKER

GUEST EDITOR

OPHELIA BYRNE

PUBLISHER

NIK QUAIFE

ART DIRECTOR

SUSAN CONLEY

NEWS EDITOR

PETER CRAWLEY

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

AOIFE FLYNN

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR

PATRICK LONERGAN

BOARD CHAIRMAN

CIARÁN WALSH

DISTRIBUTION

NEW ISLAND BOOKS

SPECIAL THANKS

Tom Lawrence, Patrick
Lonergan, Layla O'Mara
Ciarán Walsh
Jennifer Wilson
and our subscribers

PUBLISHING PATRONS

COVER STORY

Moya Doherty

PROOFREADERS

Michael Collins
Barney Whelan and
Margaret Gowen
Peter Thomas

**CORPORATE
FRIENDS OF IRISH
THEATRE MAGAZINE**

Abhann Productions
Carolyn Compelli
Dublin Theatre Festival
Theatre Shop
Tyrone Productions

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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

Future Talks

TWO MAJOR FUNDING STORIES BREAK as *itm* goes to press. One north, the other south, each throws the other into sharp relief.

From the south comes the news that the National Theatre is to receive 2 million euro from government to alleviate its financial troubles after its centenary *annus horribilis*. This follows the recent announcement of a 16% rise in the Republic of Ireland arts budget to €61m.

The welcome increase — albeit with the caveat that even more is needed — serves to point up the very considerable seriousness of the comparative northern funding situation. Because the Northern Ireland arts community is reeling from the discovery of government proposals to slash its budget by £1.5m sterling.

Published government proposals show the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure faces reductions in its Treasury-allocated budget from £14.5m sterling in 2004/5 to just £13m sterling by 2006/7.

The seriousness of this situation may be gauged by the fact that the chair of the Northern Ireland Arts Council (ACNI) invited its annually funded organisations to a meeting on 3 November to begin a concerted lobbying campaign. Such a move from ACNI is unprecedented, but so too is the scale of the an-

ticipated reduction: a 10.4% budget cut over the next three financial years.

The proposed cutbacks are put into perspective by the fact that the combined annual support drama budget for NI for all of 2004 was £1.72m sterling. Theatre in Northern Ireland is already patently under-funded, and has no slack.

It is all too tempting, then, for the NI theatre practitioner to look with envy at the ROI situation, with its rising funding rates, and, as the Abbey example shows, a willingness to view theatre as a national resource.

But it would be more instructive to remember how the ROI got to that point. Its own stinging government funding cuts in 2002 saw fierce resistance from the arts community, with an intensely political, high profile cam-

paign, a strong lobbying body, the active support of practitioners, and perhaps most important, a willingness to pull together.

Doing so is never easy for any arts community, characteristically comprised of diverse organisations and practitioners. Not to do so, however, means theatre in the north faces, not just an *annus horribilis*, but a seriously compromised future. A lesson hard won in other contexts is therefore applicable here: trust, and talking to each other, may be the only future we all have. — Ophelia Byrne



The Northern Ireland arts community is reeling from the discovery of government proposals to slash its budget by £1.5m sterling.

Board Moves at Abbey

WI TH NEWS BREAKING AT PRESS TIME THAT THE GOVERNMENT is, on the back of Anne Bonnar's independent report to the Arts Council, planning to give the Abbey Theatre an extra grant of €2m towards its considerable financial and organisational woes, *itm* has also charted some significant changes to the Abbey's board and number. Board member John McColgan is stepping down, Bernard

Farrell already having left in August. Farrell, who has now served his full term as board member, must be replaced by a playwright in accordance with board policy. McColgan, who had served for four years prior to the Abbey's centenary, originally agreed to extend his term by one year in order to chair the fundraising committee for *abbeyonehundred*, the theatre's centenary celebration. He confirms that the board is now in the process of appointing replacements, with stage director John Stapleton already drawn from the 32-member Abbey council to replace box office manager Pauline Morrison who also steps down.

Work is also underway, McColgan

states, to expand the board beyond its allotment of nine members and to "broaden the talent and experience base and have more practitioners from the world of theatre on the board." While the board broadens its artistic makeup, the title of the theatre's chief executive has been shortened, with the word "artistic" dropped from recent advertisements seeking a replacement for Ben Barnes. The board's decision to advertise simply for a new "director", McColgan says, reflects "a desire to signal changes, and the fact that it is not necessary that that person be a theatre director. It can be somebody who has proven expertise in the world of theatre: a producer, an entrepreneur." It

does not, however, signal a rescinding of the director's control over the theatre's programming and artistic policy.

Following October's report by the Working Group on restructuring the theatre chaired by Des Geraghty, it is McColgan's understanding that the Abbey's restructuring will involve returning to 2003 staffing levels before the *abbeyonehundred* influx of new personnel. This will result in a loss of about 12 jobs, which, *itm* understands, will force areas such as the Literary and Outreach departments to function with reduced staff. Contrary to the widely reported fact that commissioning manager Jocelyn Clarke was to depart at the end of October at the cessation of his contract, Clarke received a last minute, one-year extension of his contract. The director of the Peacock, Ali Curran, has also accepted a similar extension.

Though he departs the board at the end of 2004, McColgan's presence will still be felt in the theatre with the revival of *The Shaughraun* which plays until the end of February. He is also partly responsible for a surprising National Theatre transfer from the independent sphere: Rough Magic's wartime Dublin musical, *Improbable Frequency*, which succeeds Boucicault



on the Abbey's main stage in March. McColgan's Abhann Productions sponsored the musical's development process (but with no financial input into *Improbable Frequency*'s subsequent premiere or revival), while McColgan himself recommended the production's transfer to the Abbey board.

OPEN HOUSE, CLOSED SHOP?

IT'S EASY TO BE CYNICAL about Open House. In early November the Abbey announced details of a pilot for a theatre "laboratory", in which the Peacock Theatre and its resources would be made available to a select group of theatre makers from the independent sector. This came after the December production of Paul Mer-

cier's new play *Smokescreen* had been pulled from the Peacock schedule because of deficits incurred by the costly, and widely criticised, *abbeyonehundred* programme. It also followed rumours that the Peacock might remain "dark" next year for up to three months as reper-

cussion of the Abbey's financial crisis. Open House, now confirmed to involve six separate groups, may have stemmed from the Abbey's Facing Forward scheme, "a division of *abbeyone-*

what's news

hundred engaged with professional development such as new writing initiatives, acting master classes and director in residence programmes," but to the jaundiced eye, it looked like filler. On closer inspection, however, it may give the bruised theatre a new sense of purpose.

The Peacock's director, Ali Curran, readily agrees that Open House is making the best of a bad situation. But she also insists that it presents "the opportunity to facilitate something that I've been trying to get off the ground for three years"; in short, encouraging artists to divine new ways of approaching theatre-making on a working stage, with the full dramaturgical and technical resources of the Abbey. All this, and no production targets or deadlines.

Such interests dovetail neatly with those of the Arts Council, which has not only aided Facing Forward, directed at the Abbey by Sharon Murphy, to the tune of €265,000 but has also coordinated the efforts of its seven projects. Enid Reid Whyte of the Arts Council was a member of the four-person selection panel for Open House, together with Curran, Murphy and, interestingly, Paul Mercier himself.

Although Open House had been established at the Abbey "pre-summer", according to Curran, the invitation for applicants went out as recently as the start of October, leading some to suspect it has been a rushed exercise.



IMPROBABLE FREQUENCY

Selected from about 30 applicants, the six projects include Michelle Read's exploration of scene transitions using video and still image; Paul Meade and David Parnell's investigation into "sound driven staging technique"; and Caroline McSweeney's interrogation of the performance methodology, View Points. Raymond Keane of Barabbas explores the application of the principle of the "golden ratio" between theatre, design and staging; Gavin Kostick and a "crack team" of theatre specialists will rework the per-

former, writer, director, and designer relationship; and Jimmy Fay and Amanda Coogan will create a one-off performance incorporating various different media.

"I suppose it's like a surrogacy," Curran says of the Abbey's involvement. "We're not carrying the baby to full term." There is for instance, no expectation for public demonstrations of the works in progress, unless the participants wish to display their work, as Kostick and Fay expressly do. But, when Open House depends on keeping audiences out of the Peacock, Curran understands obvious public misgivings.

"I know all the arguments against it. Finally though, through a rather unfortunate set of financial circumstances, I've got to the kind of work that we should be doing."

One wonders how much can be achieved in such limited time, however – the maximum stay is just two weeks. By the end of the project, if it proves successful, Curran may be keen to continue the cost-effective programme later in 2005, regardless of improved financial circumstances. "Hopefully we will have broken the misconception, at board level, that if a theatre doesn't have an audience it's not really a theatre," she says.

The Abbey is not committed to producing any results that the laboratory may yield, but participants are asked to credit Open House in the event of an independent production. The Abbey benefits, Curran says, from having a hand in realising "potent ideas" at their earliest stage.

"This is about honouring independent artists and the breadth of their ideas," Curran says. "It's not about the National Theatre prescribing what we think is good and what we think is not good because we do far too much of that."

Doing it for Ourselves

Did you know that in Ireland...

- There were 3 million attendances at performing arts events in 2003?
- The main type of event being attended was drama?
- 60% of performing arts income is estimated to be generated through ticket sales, sponsorship and programme/bar sales?
- Of the remainder monies received by the performing arts from the Exchequer, half is returned through taxes?

These, and other details, from Theatre Forum's *Economic Impact of the Professional Performing Arts in Ireland*, which presents the findings of an independent economic survey of the Irish performing arts. Proving that the performing arts has an economic role in the economy alongside its artistic and entertainment role, it's essential reading and downloadable at www.theatreforumireland.com

CAFÉ CURTAINS?

WELL-KNOWN BEWLEY'S CAFÉ THEATRE closed when Bewley's flagship Oriental Cafés stopped trading on November 30.

For ten years, the café had hosted theatre in the atmospheric Oriental Room of Bewley's Grafton Street café. Its artistic director, Michael James Ford, was appointed in 1999, and since then it has been consistently programmed as a theatre space during lunchtimes and evenings. The 55-seat space has most

what's news

recently presented shows like Inis Theatre's hit, *Tick My Box*, and Donal O'Kelly's *Jimmy Joyced!*

The Grafton Street and Westmoreland Street branches of the Bewley's group are reported to have incurred losses of €4m. Announcing the news, the Campbell Bewley Group said the cafes could no longer be subsidised by its other activities.

The final show at Bewley's Café Theatre was Oscar Wilde's *The Remarkable Rocket*; but, the theatre says, watch this space...

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

AT HOME...

KABOSH'S TALL TALES STORIES ARE on a telephone near you to 15 March 2005, at 0044 870 243 0179... Big Telly tours Synge's *In The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker's Wedding* over January/February... CoisCéim's Nutcracker by David Bolger is also touring in January/February... Second Age Theatre Company's *King Lear* plays the SFX City Theatre 17 Jan - 11 Feb... Brian Friel's *The Home Place* premieres at The Gate, 1 Feb... Classic Stage Ireland presents *As You Like It* at the Helix, 7-26 Feb... *Cross My Heart*, by Mary Elizabeth Burke Kennedy in collaboration with TEAM, is on tour from mid-February... POC Productions tour *Paris, Texas* to various venues over spring... Inis Theatre's *Tick My Box* also tours nationally this spring... In March, Rough Magic's *Improbable Frequency* transfers to the Abbey, while the Peacock stages a Shelagh Stephenson premiere, *Enlightenment*... Bruiser Theatre Company's *The*

Threepenny Opera by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil, tours in March.

... AND ABROAD

Druid's *Playboy of the Western World* headlines the Perth Festival, Australia, in March 2005, while the entire DruidSynge

PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD



programme premieres in Ireland next summer... The Performance Corporation is working on a devised co-production with the Amani People's Theatre in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 2005... Kabosh brings Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* to London's Hammersmith Theatre in March, and Thessaloniki Theatre Festival, Greece in April.



THANKS FOR LISTENING

SPEECH-

* We'd like to thank?; *

Eduard M. STRAUSS, Schumann, CHOPIN
Tchaikovsky, BRAHMS, Rossini, Haydn
Mahler, DEBUSSY, Elgar, WAGNER,
Handel, BACH, Mozart, VERDI,
Schubert, OFFENBACH, Grieg, Bizet
Paganini, PUCCINI, Prokofiev.
Boccherini....

The Liszt is endless!

RTE lyric fm



set designer

props



costumes



arts admin



reviewer



audience

Get your kids off to a good start!

draíocht ...passionate about the future of theatre in Ireland

www.whatsoninblanch.com

draíocht



Practitioners' voices should not get lost in the current debate on arts venues for Belfast, argues **STELLA HALL**, Director of Belfast Festival at Queen's.

AS DISCUSSIONS RAGE ABOUT THE requirements of a new building for Northern Ireland's producing theatre, the Lyric, and a purpose-designed arts centre in the city's Cathedral Quarter, we need to consider how best to fulfil the artist's quest to encounter audiences where they naturally gather, or to take them to a place they would not normally go.

One could argue that audiences should be transported by the beauty of the text and the skill of the acting rather than location. But increasingly, the urge to make theatre which truly connects with its audience has meant finding new locations as well as new forms of expression.

Hence the extraordinary Tinderbox production *Convictions* in the Crumlin Road Courthouse, and *Vote! Vote! Vote!* in Belfast City Hall's Council Chamber. In 2002 the Belfast Festival staged Kabosh's *Sleepshow* in a vacant shop unit; this year that company absent-ed itself entirely from the physical space with *Tall Tales* at the end of a phone line.

In Dublin Semper Fi presented *Ladies and Gents* in the redolent toilets of St Stephens Green and the Performance Corporation's *Doctor Ledbetter's Experiment* saw us walking through the atmospheric streets of Kilkenny listening to the thoughts of performers on headsets as they acted before us.

In St Petersburg last year I was actually moved by Ache Theatre Company which heaved the seating block and all 300 audi-

ence members along a 500 yard track to watch a show that could only be staged in the huge warehouse it had found. In Belfast, the only venue where the Queen's Festival could stage Japan's Ishinha was the wonderful (but icy!) Harland and Wolfe Paint Hall Studio, pioneered as a venue by the *Playing for Time* project.

So, what sort of a building, and what level of flexibility can be planned at the beginning, so that artists are able to make the best possible use of all the tools at their disposal? One way of course, is to ensure that these theatre adventurers are fully involved at the planning stage so that, when they are invited to present their work, there is inbuilt flexibility to respond to their imaginative requirements.

Opportunities are missed if the simple expedient of ensuring artist and theatre maker are working alongside architect, developer and planner to create the environment in which they will work is not followed. I have visited too many new theatre spaces which neither connect performer with audience nor serve the diverse needs of contemporary produc-tion.

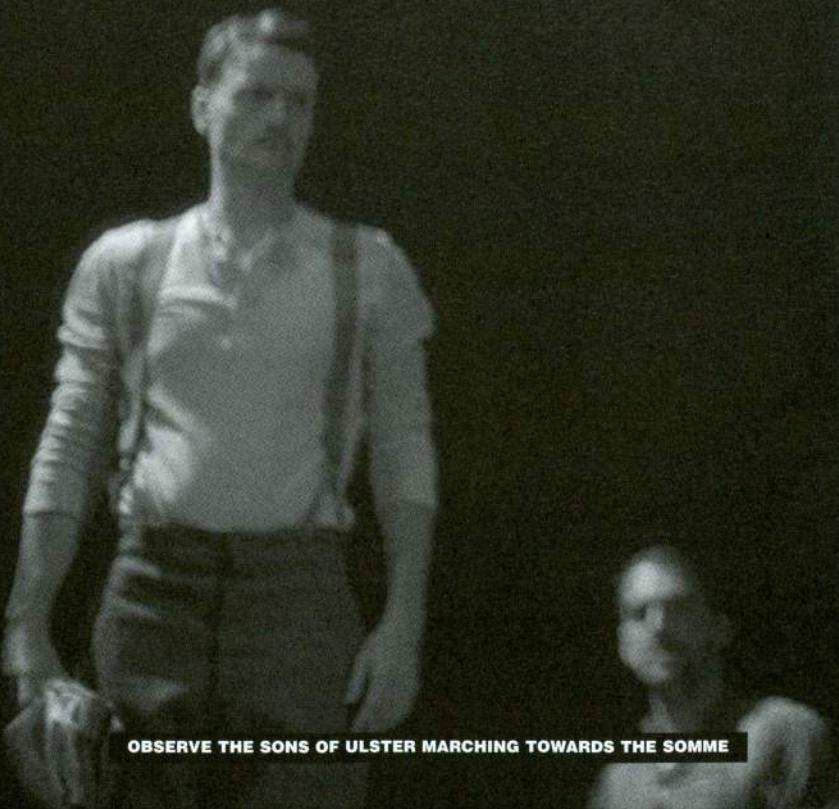
I profoundly hope that any new theatre buildings we see in Northern Ireland, permanent or temporary, can be as flexible as the minds (and some of the bodies!) of those who create our theatre. 

Stella Hall was also recently appointed Head of Culture and Arts, Queen's University Belfast.



On the Edge

The fifth annual *irish theatre magazine* critics' forum was held on 9 October 2004 at the Dublin Fringe Festival's Spiegeltent. With the National Theatre on the edge of a new centenary, six critics and commentators offered their views on its *Abbey and Ireland* season, which played as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. Here's an edited transcript.



OBSERVE THE SONS OF ULSTER MARCHING TOWARDS THE SOMME

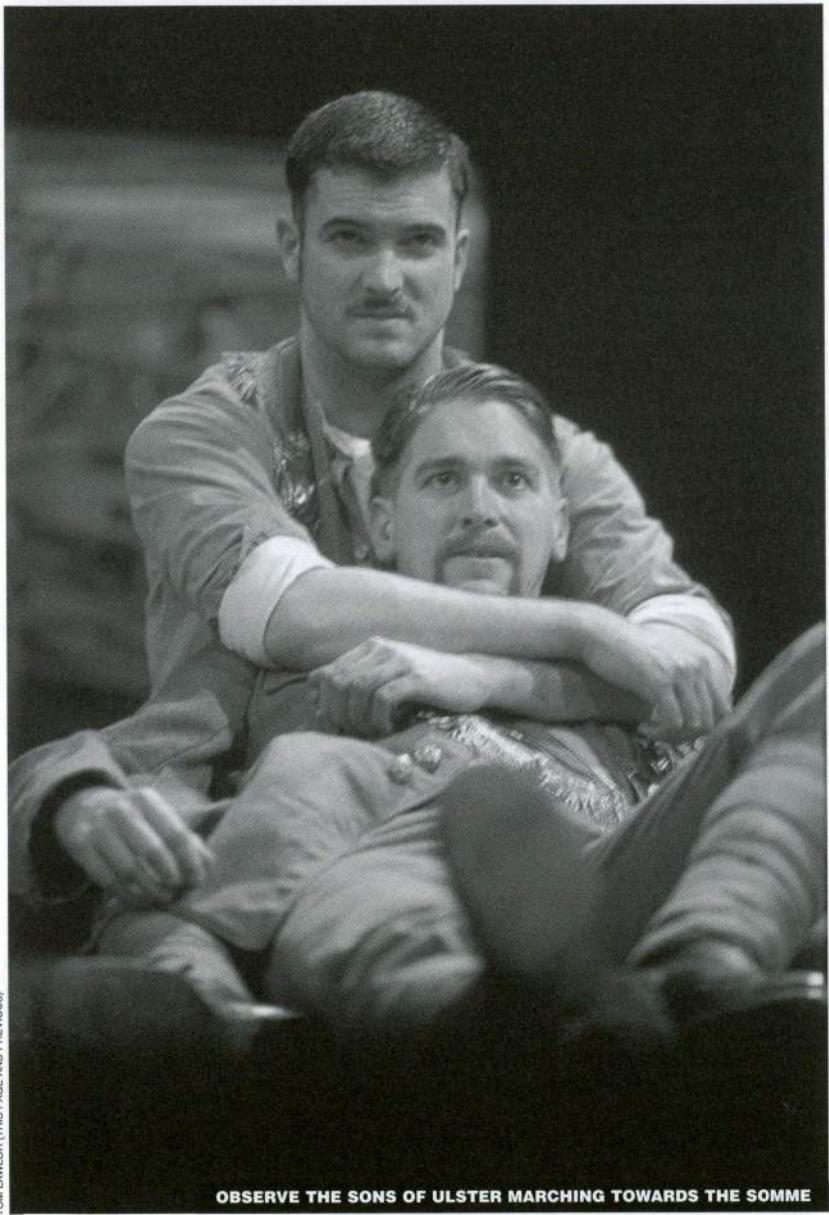


AT THE DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL'S SPIEGELTENT on a cold October Saturday morning, a hardy band of *itm* panellists took the stage before a lively audience for two hours of debate and discussion. Chair Brian Singleton kicked off the proceedings:

BRIAN SINGLETON (*Head, School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin, and chair*): So, *The Abbey and Ireland*, a hugely ambitious project offering eighteen plays in fourteen days. We're going to take each of its five major productions in turn, including one triple bill, and then look at *Reading the Decades*, the series featuring readings of eleven plays.

The whole season opened with a production of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, by Frank McGuinness. The play premiered at the Peacock in 1985 and was revived very notably in 1994 on the main stage of the Abbey. This was a very significant moment in the peace process and, at its opening night, there were many unionist politicians from the north in the audience. A student of mine said to me afterwards: now I know what a national theatre is for. So, is the particular cultural moment ripe, Mark, for reviving this play?

MARK PHELAN (*lecturer in Drama, Queen's University Belfast*): I think the play has an ongoing relevancy and resonance in Ireland, far beyond its 1985 context. To me, as a son of Ulster, so to speak, what struck me very strongly in the context of the centenary celebrations of the National Theatre, was McIlwaine lifting up his big lambeg drum and battering it. There is an extraordinary percussive charge to that moment, when you consider that in 1916, there was an alternative blood sacrifice from the one that took place round the corner in the GPO. And then you hear



OBSERVE THE SONS OF ULSTER MARCHING TOWARDS THE SOMME

Anderson making that speech to the audience, saying we will not recognise this republic, we will fight this republic. When you consider that the founding play of the modern Irish drama is *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, and her exhortation to audiences to go out there and drive the strangers out of the house and to reclaim the fourth green field, it was extraordinary to see the strangers from the fourth green field centre-stage, and challenging that legacy. I thought this marked how much things had changed over the last century and more.

When you consider that the founding play of the modern Irish drama is *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, and her exhortation to audiences to go out there and drive the strangers out of the house and to reclaim the fourth green field, it was extraordinary to see the strangers from the fourth green field centre-stage, and challenging that legacy

But I do think there were problems. The sexual politics were excised from the play, unlike the Lyric production last year which foregrounded that aspect, making the subtext of the play very evident. Also, there was no effort to tune the accents into the different locations, though McGuinness is specific and explicit that they come from Enniskillen, from Derry, from Coleraine, from Belfast. In this production they all gave a very generic northern accent. When you go and see *Portia Coughlan*, there is a very strong tuning of that Midlands drawl, likewise O'Casey's or Synge's plays are very specific. And I thought that missed the point of the play in the sense that this Ulster identity is not a homogeneous collective grouping. There is a very specific infractious identity, the men being fiercely protective of their individual villages, or towns, or rivers. But they are fused over the course of the play into a collective which shouts "Ulster, Ulster", and then goes over the top. And again that is something I missed, though overall it was a very strong production, particularly in the context of the centenary celebrations.

BS: Fintan, in your review in *The Irish Times*, you picked the first word of the play title as being significant. Was this production observing dispassionately? Is that how you see it?

FINTAN O'TOOLE (*chief theatre critic of The Irish Times*): Yes, what I find very interesting about the play is that it is so counter-cultural in the Abbey context. It has really different resonances, in different contexts, but it is an Abbey play, in the sense that it did start in the Abbey and is also of course very much the work of a Donegal catholic looking at a culture that to him is alien.

This goes right to the heart of the argument within the Abbey about what writers should do. Think about the famous argument between Yeats and O'Casey around *The Silver Tassie*, which of course was also about the First World War as a central experience in Irish national consciousness, although a suppressed one. Yeats' insistence to O'Casey that he doesn't really know about this, and therefore shouldn't write about it, was

actually part of a self-definition of the Abbey. It pretended somehow that the work of theatre, the work of writing, was very much about reflecting one's own experience, rather than the outward gaze, looking at things which do not officially constitute part of one's own experience.

Which of course is the position of the Ulster loyalist culture within the nation as it has been traditionally represented by the Abbey. Within the Abbey tradition, there is an over-emphasis on the direct political impact of what the Abbey does, and its idea of itself as representing the nation. And what is wonderful about *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is that it has a very ambivalent relationship to those questions. It both represents the Abbey as being a national theatre — in the sense that this is what a national theatre *does*, it has that resonance in terms of contemporary politics — and at the same time of course, it's a play about the limits of the Abbey's idea of a national theatre. Because it is also saying that this institution has never represented this part of what Ireland claims as part of its nationality. This gets at the extremely ambivalent political response of southern catholic nationalism to northern protestant nationalism; on the one hand these people are Irish, and we claim them as part of our polity, whether they like it or not, and on the other hand we find them extremely alien and distant. The play, which came at a really dark moment in the history of the Troubles, has I think an extraordinary force for the way in which it cuts right to the bone in relation to all that. It really hits a very delicate nerve.

The play gets away with it, I think, by the virtue of its form. It needs aesthetically to have a certain kind of distance from its audience, which goes very much against the Abbey grain; that sense that we are defining the nation as you and us, that the stage and the audience is brought together in some form. Putting a play up which says this is part of the Irish experience, and which is completely alien to this Abbey audience, full of really provocative gestures in terms of what the Abbey audi-

TOM LAWRENCE



**The play, which
came at a really
dark moment in
the history of the
Troubles,
has I think an
extraordinary force
for the way in
which it cuts right
to the bone ... It
really hits a very
delicate nerve.**

It doesn't allow
you to see
this as a love
story, or to
sympathise in
any kind of
simple or easy
way with these
characters.
It confronts
you with
difference ...

ence is, actually achieves a certain kind of coldness which is not very much part of our theatrical tradition. I was thinking of Brecht's definition of his ideal audience member, who was not the person who was stuck up the front, utterly engaged. He had this image of somebody he had seen at a boxing match, this big guy sitting at the back smoking a cigar, taking it all in and observing in a cold rational way what was going on on the stage, or in the boxing arena. I think *Observe the Sons of Ulster's* ideal audience is like that. It's addressed to an audience that's going to receive it in quite a cool way.

So while it does suppress the sexuality, I saw that in quite a strategic way: it doesn't allow you to see this as a love story, or to sympathise in any kind of simple or easy way with these characters. It confronts you with difference, with something that you are being invited to sit back and observe. That I think, both politically and aesthetically, is a very, very good frame in which to put Irish nationalist, or post-nationalist audiences into, and I thought the production actually achieved that well.

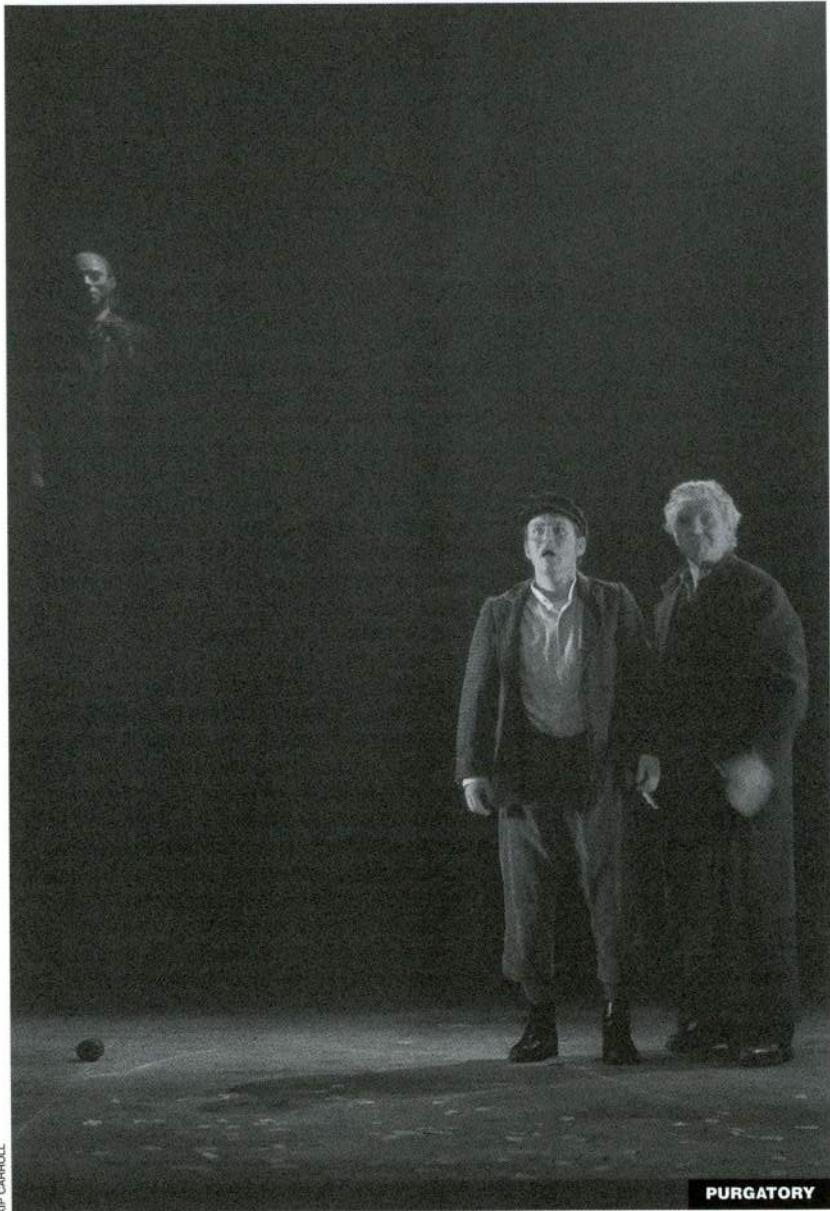
BS: What about the decision not to have an interval, the first time I had seen that done with this play, so that it ran right through, inexorably, to its end?

SUSAN CONLEY (*Dublin-based writer and journalist*): I thought it was a great choice not to break it up, because McGuinness gives us a sort of colloquial environment in which the men are bonding as a group, and then in pairs, and then again as a group in the trenches. The framing notion of all that, I think, is extremely symbolic and ritualistic, so to be able to go straight through allows that ritualistic quality to keep its integrity.

But I wouldn't say that I thought that this production really approached the piece as fully as it might have from a ritualistic perspective. I felt that the staging of Moore and Millen's scene, flat up against the wall on a cliff edge as opposed to the bridge, was not a very strong choice. I also felt that some of the scenes were a bit too solid, a little bit too concrete, in many ways.

BS: Were there any performances that stood out?

MP: Risteárd Cooper gave a very strong performance as the younger Pyper, continually bucking the expectations of both the audience and his comrades on the stage. And in the pairings, I thought David Pearse and Anthony Brophy as Moore and Millen were very good. But one key pairing which did not work for me at all was Craig and Pyper; there was no strong sense of affection or attraction between Cooper and Branwell Donaghey. There is a



KIP CARROLL

PURGATORY

irishtheatre MAGAZINE 19

very strong class politics underpinning the play, and they have this relationship which is transgressive not just because of sexuality, but also because of the class disparity between them, but Donaghey was very well spoken.

BS: While I agree with you in terms of accents, I did think the whole experience was very moving, and a very strong opening to the whole season. Moving on now to the triple bill in the Peacock of *The Dandy Dolls* by George Fitzmaurice, *Purgatory* by W.B. Yeats and *Chun na Farraige Síos/Riders to the Sea* by J.M. Synge, directed by Conall Morrison. This was a strange tripling of three plays from three different decades.

There was a masterful sense of pacing, building up to the keening at the end, which, from where I was sitting, exhausted people the way that art engaged with loss on the scale of this family's should.

VICTOR MERRIMAN (*lecturer in contemporary Irish theatre at Dundalk Institute of Technology*): Yes, and one of the tasks is to try and make some sense out of the choice. It seems to me that there is a kind of a trajectory through the three plays, from frenzied appetite in Fitzmaurice's *Dandy Dolls*, to total exhaustion at the end of *Chun na Farraige Síos/Riders to the Sea*. I think the overall sense of the sequencing of the plays is that there is a gauze dropped at the beginning of each play which seems to invite us to look through a glass darkly; we are now going into the past. Our fervent hope as persons who have signed up to sit in the theatre, of course, is that we are not going into a museum.

In 1913, when Fitzmaurice was writing *The Dandy Dolls*, the famine was part of recent experience, and staging starvation and appetite together makes a powerful statement. Using the same kind of theatrical language that he developed in his landmark production of *Tarry Flynn*, Conall Morrison creates an elaborate dumb show to help the audience with the exposition. The actors deliver a highly physicalised style, almost exhausting even to watch.

Yeats' *Purgatory*, first performed in 1938, really is a drama of exhaustion. Fittingly, it follows the wild excesses of *The Dandy Dolls* in this triple bill. Historically, *Purgatory* comes after the effort to formulate a state which would give form and meaning to the nationalist anti-colonial struggle. In it, we encounter the enervation of those who believed that after the colonial moment something better would emerge. So this is a kind of "rage against the dying of the light", to quote Dylan Thomas. It is a play of huge interest socially and dramaturgically, and a very fine piece of work, but here I felt that it was the least successful of the three.

Purgatory offers a rich dramatic poetry; we have onstage a dense dramatic metaphor, requiring hard work from audiences and great attention to detail from actors and director. And it seemed to me

that this production was found wanting; there was an energy that was lacking. *Purgatory* embodies an unflinching critique of the foundational moments of the state, focusing on the — literal — mixing of the blood of a feckless Catholic carpetbagger class with that of the Big House. The old man — child of that 'original sin' — occupies a liminal, purgatorial space from which no deliverance is possible. So the evocation of that liminal space is crucial, and there is a need, in the first encounter between the old man and the boy at the very beginning of the play, to signal clearly the movement into it. Crucially, that opportunity was missed in this production. So too, perhaps by framing the triple bill via the gauze, as a series of products of a past, the production sacrificed the reality that in the theatre, every play is also always about its present moment of re-production. In this case, what was obscured by the gauze was the sharpness of *Purgatory's* critique, and its contemporary resonances.

Which brings me to *Chun na Farraige Síos*, the Irish-language translation of *Riders to the Sea*. Here, you could almost have thought the play had translated itself, a compliment both to translator Tomás Ó Flaithearta, and indeed to Synge's grasp of the structures of the Irish language, the basis for his poetic Hiberno-English. This production featured a towering performance from Joan O'Hara; sometimes Maurya is played as just a nasty old hag who annoys her daughters, the death of her son becoming a pretext for another layer of nastiness. What we actually saw was this woman absolutely hollowed out by eight days of waiting for the body of her fifth drowned son to be washed up by the sea.

This production conveyed a real sense of the collective exhaustion of the women, and of the daughters not as antagonists of the mother, but sharing viscerally in horrible, monumental, epic grieving. It had a wonderful attention to detail; Conall Morrison's decision to stage the exterior of the cottage was more than justified, underscoring the feeling of a family keeping a vigil for the return of Michael. And there was a masterful sense of pacing, building up to the keening at the end, which, from where I was sitting, exhaust-

TOM LAWRENCE



You could almost have thought the play [*Chun na Farraige Síos*] had translated itself ... The decision to perform an Irish-language version of the play was fully vindicated by the quality of the production.

ed people the way that art engaged with loss on the scale of this family's should.

The decision to perform an Irish-language version of the play was fully vindicated by the quality of the production, but was accompanied by a hand-out which amounted to an apologia for using Irish in the national theatre. A detailed English-language synopsis was offered, "for those who might find the Irish in *Chun na Farraige Síos forbidding*" (my emphasis). This to me put a question mark over how the Abbey feels about the Irish language, or how it feels its audiences feel about the Irish language.

I would have liked to have seen it [Purgatory] done with more formality. This is a piece of highly poetic writing, and is dense and formal, nothing to do with naturalism. I would have liked a more ritualised, simpler staging

BS: The night I was there, I didn't get a handout, but didn't need it, because this in itself this was a very moving experience. Helen, did you find there was a museum-like effect to the whole production? Did you too feel exhaustion at the end?

HELEN MEANY (*freelance arts journalist*): No, not at all. I didn't think it was a museum piece, and I felt utterly exhilarated by the whole thing. I thought the choice to play *Riders to the Sea* in Irish was really exciting; it was inspiring to hear the language that lay underneath Synge's language and to hear it so clearly enunciated in such beautiful performances. The production itself had a kind of condensed intensity, which gave it the mythic quality that is in the play — certainly my favourite of Synge's works — and I just thought it worked beautifully.

I also thought that the production of *The Dandy Dolls* was very full of life and seemed to me very contemporary. It's a play I had only ever read, and to see it brought to life in that way was incredibly exciting. I do agree that *Purgatory* was the weakest of the three, but I would have liked to have seen it done with *more* formality. This is a piece of highly poetic writing, and is dense and formal, nothing to do with naturalism. I would have liked a more ritualised, simpler staging, and possibly different casting; I just didn't find the language came across.

But I thought the three plays worked beautifully together. Fitzmaurice's language is so redolent of Synge's, but also almost in a more extreme form, being very convoluted with the inversions and his use of dialect words, proving so very rich. And then we ended with Synge, in a different language. In general, I thought it was just fantastic and one of the best things in the Abbey's programme.

BS: I agree, I too was totally exhilarated by it. Moving to the next production, we go to the main stage of the Abbey for Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*. First performed in 1983, this particular production was a revival of a recent revival. Fintan,

has anything changed since we last saw it?

FOT: *The Gigli Concert* is a strange play, in that its original production was so wonderful that it actually made the play unperformable for almost 20 years in Ireland. Certainly for people of my generation, its opening night at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1983 was the only equivalent experience we have had of being at the first performance of *Waiting for Godot*, or being at the first performance of *The Plough and the Stars*, one of those absolutely extraordinary moments of revelation. This has also been true of *Bailegangaire*, where Siobhan McKenna's performance was so definitive that it was very difficult for anybody else to play the role.

I think Ben Barnes' production is in a way quite an odd experience. If you had seen the original production it's not nearly as powerful a piece of theatre, and yet on the other hand, I felt very warmly towards it. It is a production that makes *The Gigli Concert* a performable play again, part of the repertoire rather than this extraordinary miraculous occasion that comes along once in a lifetime. It's a very solid, very clear production of the play, though you could argue about the choices made in terms of the way the play is represented. What it doesn't get is that extremism of the work.

Because this programme reminds us of something really quite interesting about Irish theatre: the usual framework for discussing contemporary theatre, which is about some kind of contrast between a mainstream and an *avant-garde*, doesn't work in Ireland. This whole Abbey season is incredibly wild, and the sheer strangeness of the vast majority of the plays which form a central part of the Irish canon comes across quite remarkably. The scale of imagination, of just sheer lunacy which is unleashed in most of these plays, is extraordinary.

The trajectory of *The Gigli Concert* is quite literally the trajectory of a nervous breakdown. It's very much a psychological play about breakdown and recovery in a most profound and ecstatic way. And to some extent I think this Ben Barnes production lev-



I felt utterly exhilarated by the whole thing.
I thought the choice to play *Riders to the Sea* in Irish was really exciting; it was inspiring to hear the language that lay underneath Synge's language

els it out; you don't get that really deep sense of absolute despair and blackness towards the last twenty minutes of the play. This is where JPW is a whimpering creature lying in the dark; then the amazing moment of transcendence when he does sing like Gigli, and you know that the record player is unplugged and some miracle has happened. It's that extremism that you do miss, but it's also that extremism that actually made it quite hard for audiences. *The Gigli Concert* full on is like being put through a nervous breakdown yourself: you have to go with it all the way. This production doesn't do that.

I thought *The Gigli Concert* was a much stranger play, even seeing it for a fourth or fifth time, than for example Romeo Castellucci's

Tragedia Endogonidia.

That was self-consciously *avant-garde*, and self-consciously trying to disturb us ...

But I do like the way this production replaces it in the Abbey repertoire, particularly when you see it in the context of the other plays. It says that our mainstream is much more *avant-garde* than is most people's *avant-garde*. I thought *The Gigli Concert* was a much stranger play, even seeing it for a fourth or fifth time, than for example Romeo Castellucci's *Tragedia Endogonidia*. That was self-consciously *avant-garde*, and self-consciously trying to disturb us, while it seems to me the Irish mainstream as represented by somebody like Murphy is just much more far out than somebody like Castellucci can even imagine.

MP: I saw the production two years ago, and it made much more sense to me this time around. While I don't have that canonical performance to compare it to, it's a magnificent symphony of a play, and here I was totally transported by it, by that magical moment of theatrical transformation as JPW soars above it all and sings. It was a sublime moment of theatre and I just felt privileged in a modern production to actually have been there and present. For me it was a real high point.

VM: I had a feeling coming out that I had really seen some really great theatre. Owen Roe, who played Irish Man, is at the moment giving us the sort of things that people said we would never see again when Tony Doyle died. He's now that mature performer, an artist to his fingertips, completely committed to his role and with an immense power without striving for it. It was a great pleasure and privilege to see the way in which he calibrated that breakdown that Fintan was talking about. But Mark Lambert, who played JPW King, and whom I admire as a really good and intelligent actor, didn't seem to be on his form as much.

BS: Well, certainly the night I was there, Mark Lambert for me gave a very clear reading of the character. Reading the play, I am not very sympathetic towards JPW at all, and he irritates me intensely, but I thought Lambert gave a very, very sympathetic reading of the part. The next production for consideration, still on

the main stage, is *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell* by Bernard Farrell. This dates from 1979, and so is marking its 25th anniversary, and of course a play much loved by the amateur circuit and much performed all over Ireland and in the UK as well. Susan, a play the national theatre should put on again?



I DO NOT LIKE THEE, DR. FELL

SC: That's such a difficult question to answer. The night I was there the audience loved it, and I think I was the only one that did not. It gave the people what they wanted, though I think it's a point of argument whether a national theatre is there to educate or just supply. But this was, without fail, the most packed house I saw and certainly the most responsive.

The work itself is a basic comedy poking fun at humanistic psychology, which in 1979 would have been perhaps experiencing something of a backlash. The humanist perspective itself is person-centred, about talking through your feelings and giving the person the agency to make change in their life. As such, it's antithetical to Freudian psychoanalysis, where you try to excavate the subconscious and become emotionally healthy. Freud himself very famously said of the Irish that this is a race for which psychoanalysis is of no use whatsoever. That's something I found, very proudly bannered, on about 15 Irish-themed websites so I don't think that as a race, the Irish

have any trouble taking ownership of this diagnosis.

In Farrell's text, we have a group of people who exhibit or embody various specific kinds of stereotypes; who are literally locked in a room overnight, work out their issues to no great effect, and then leave the next morning. In the midst of all of this is the threat of a bomb that one character, Joe, has smuggled in his rucksack, because he is on a personal vendetta against the therapeutic community.

None of this is explicated, I think, with any sort of real satisfaction. If there were ever an argument for employing stereotypes, it would be in a play about psychology, but narratively here it proves unsatisfactory. There's no pay-off. We don't really know why the character Joe is on a vendetta, for example. We get cursory investigation into Peter and Maureen's marital stress. And then we have Roger, who I think offers an example of how dated the text is. The most 'gung ho' member of the group, and an apparent habitué of group therapy, the play doesn't really tackle the issue of his closeted homosexuality, but it doesn't just accept it either, which one would expect of a play on therapy were it reaching for some level of acceptance. The whole play seems a bit meretricious.

In production terms, the performances were perfectly pitched and the set perfectly realised, for what they were meant to do. But on a deeper level, as a piece chosen to represent a time period in the centenary celebration, I really question that myself.

BS: Mark, essentially, it's a situation comedy, which were all the rage in the 1970s. And the subject, of course, was all the rage too. Did you think it was more than a situation comedy?

MP: I enjoyed the performance. It works as a lightweight kind of comedy. Perhaps in the context of the centenary, it's hard to see the rationale, but I think the fact that everybody around me was loving the play is justification in itself.

But there's an interesting point here. If you do even a cursory survey of Irish drama, the *dramatis personae* are quite dysfunctional and maladjusted. Look even at this programme: serious trauma therapy is required in *Riders to the Sea* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster* while with *Portia Coughlan*, one wouldn't know where to begin. Everybody in Irish drama seems to need this type of therapy, and then when you do see it, it's just to say: "we don't need this, it is just for Americans." So that is a discrepancy — still, though, I did enjoy it as a brilliantly performed farce and very enjoyable piece of entertainment.

SC: But that's the whole thing in this debate. What is a nation-

That's the
whole thing in
this debate.

What is a
national theatre
supposed
to do? Is it just
supposed to
entertain
people?

al theatre supposed to do? Is it just supposed to entertain people? If so, then this play did that.

BS: Well, perhaps if it is reaching out to a whole new audience, which may not go to the Abbey ordinarily, and bringing them in, it may be a wider ambit. The next play was the final of the series: *Portia Coughlan* by Marina Carr, from 1996. It's a very audacious and fearless play in many ways, with a strange structure and characters. Helen, how did it fare for you?

HM: I was really surprised, having seen the original production in 1996, at how many laughs there were from the audience in the first part of this production. The laughter does peter out, and maybe there was a certain nervousness there, because the play is simply so extraordinarily dark. People were latching on to the occasional comic lines from Bríd Ní Neachtain, particularly — in her beautiful performance as Portia's godmother of sorts — and perhaps it was the sheer relief that there was anything at all to find remotely light.

The first thing to say is that this play is extremely difficult to stage. Part of Marina Carr's exploration of contemporary tragedy is to ask whether it is possible to write a tragedy now and in a world where there are no gods. She is interrogating ideas about life and death, about destiny, about fate, and she has continued to do this in her more recent plays. So it was really great to have this opportunity to go back to her earlier work, and to see how consistent she has been and how these themes have preoccupied her for so long.

This is a play which reminds me a lot of Bill Viola's work in visual art, such as the *Messenger* cycle on life and death. The boundaries are blurred, everything is in a state of flux, and all is fluid and unstable. Portia's extreme identification with her environment, with the natural world, with the Belmont River, has the primitive power of myth and fairytale. The challenge therefore is what kind of a physical world you create on the stage. And I was disappointed, I have to say, in what director Brian Brady did, even though I acknowledge it is really, really difficult.

TOM LAWRENCE



If you do even a cursory survey of Irish drama, the dramatis personae are quite dysfunctional and maladjusted. Look even at this programme ...

Everybody in Irish drama seems to need this type of therapy.

There is a very specific challenge — I won't call it a problem, because I really admire Marina Carr's work — that she presents to practitioners. That is the fact that she is telling this hugely Greek story in a setting that we recognize.

He created a raised platform that bisected the stage horizontally, and I loved the abstraction of it — abstraction is the only way to go with Marina Carr. But it was terribly cramped and very limiting for the actors. They were mainly splayed out in a line towards the front, and there were occasions when they actually turned their backs on the audience altogether, such as the scene where Portia and her husband are having a very tense meal, for example. And the exits and entrances were really elongated and protracted, and there was a sense of sterility, which is a different thing from a sense of abstraction. I am not sure whether Brian Brady was trying to add alienating effects to a play that is actually extraordinarily alienating to start with. So maybe he overloaded that; I think it probably was conscious, but obviously I don't know.

And for me, everything hinges on the performance of Portia, this young married woman who is clearly deeply troubled and has an obsession with her dead twin, with whom she had an incestuous relationship. As we discover, she comes from a long line of inbreeding and extraordinarily complicated close family relationships, and you know from the beginning that she is doomed. But I found Eileen Walsh really playing the darkness, playing the damage, and not showing us the redeeming features in the character of Portia that would make so many people care about and love her. I did have to compare the performance with Derbhle Crotty's in 1996, whose extraordinary mercurial energy wasn't so unremittingly dark, and felt that Eileen Walsh was striking one note. The production was too, and so I was a bit disappointed.

BS: Quite a number of people have said that perhaps we haven't yet found the way to direct Marina Carr's plays, that realism doesn't work.

SC: Yes, I have to say the same. There is a very specific challenge — I won't call it a problem, because I really admire Marina Carr's work — that she presents to practitioners. That is the fact that she is telling this hugely Greek story in a setting that we recognize. To stage Greek tragedy through the filter of a real place, like Offaly, is really difficult and I don't think anyone has figured that out yet. We have never seen Jason and Medea have dinner, so we don't have a touchstone there. Something has to happen with the way that people approach her work that will make it as vital on stage as it is on the page and would be in a reading. Because given this was the only female playwright who was produced in the entire centenary year, it's particularly disappointing that Carr didn't get a better outing.

FOT: I haven't seen this production, but one of the interesting



PORTRAIT COUGHLAN

things about the season is that by reminding us of how strange the Abbey tradition is, it has also reminded us of how actually poorly appropriated that tradition has been. How often do you see a Yeats play? And yet you realise actually, if you could do Yeats, you could do Marina Carr. We actually have in our supposedly founding figures ways of problematising from the very start the whole idea of non-naturalistic theatre: how can you present a poetic theatre, how can you actually present incredibly dense language, how can you make action move on stage in a way that has the same weight that the words have?

Yeats was a serious thinker about all of those issues, and tried to construct a set of different ways that it might be approached which are completely unexplored within the Irish theatre, including within the Abbey. So when you see something like *Purgatory*,

The aesthetic problems that Yeats was trying

to explore in terms of theatrical form at the beginning of the 20th century are still in many ways the problems for Irish theatre at the beginning of the 21st century.

here within the Abbey centenary year, there's no real engagement with the Yeatsian aesthetic in terms of how theatre works. It's not about doing Yeats just because he was a founder of the theatre: it's about the fact that the aesthetic problems that Yeats was trying to explore in terms of theatrical form at the beginning of the 20th century are still in many ways the problems for Irish theatre at the beginning of the 21st century. Perhaps if we did more of it, we might get directors, actors, musicians, designers who are actually used to thinking in a very rigorous way about the problems of actually presenting what our really good younger playwrights are doing. If we don't do that, then Irish theatre has a real problem in doing their work.

BS: Good point. And finally to the *Reading the Decades* series, with Jim Culleton as series director, in which we heard 11 plays in 10 readings. Could any of these plays be performed if the Abbey was doing another *Abbey and Ireland* season? And which ones would you pick and why?

SC: I thoroughly enjoyed the series of readings. It allowed close engagement with the actors, which I really found appealing. And it allowed for different styles of direction to emerge; even in the time constraints that they were working under, I think several of the directors really made a mark or showed their own particular style. The series also enlivened plays that would be really hard to read. I don't know if *Autumn Fire* would make a good staging, for example, but I think David Horan had already started making a good fist of it, just in the way that he cast the reading, and in the way the actors already presented themselves in the readings in character. If these plays are not all stagable, they were certainly listenable. This is something that could involve the theatre-going community in a more intimate way throughout the course of any year, not just the centenary year.

BS: The three hour play, taking up a whole evening, is not something now that younger people necessarily want to invest in with so many competing media and forms of entertainment. Abbey actress Kathleen Barrington was suggesting after one reading that we could go back to having curtain raisers, like the 30 minute play of gossip which is *Spreading the News*. That went down very well and the audience absolutely loved it.

MP: What I thought was extraordinary about the season was the wonderful, generous, democratic demographic of it; you had older and younger people from everywhere there, and it was

very affirmative regarding how the Abbey is actually perceived and its tradition valued by its constituent audience. As to the plays chosen, the Abbey has staged a huge amount of new work in a hundred years, so we could all quibble over which works to select. I personally would have had my own mini-season of plays, mainly the plays that the Abbey didn't do, like *John Bull's Other Island*, *The Silver Tassie*, *The Old Lady Says No* ...

FOT: *A Whistle in the Dark*, John B Keane ...

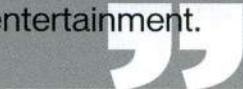
MP: You could do a whole alternative Abbey season! I read these Ulster comedies all the time, like *The Passing Day*, and it's wonderful to see, when they are actually resurrected, how well they work with an audience present and good actors saying the lines. I had some problems with the fact that in the last thirty years, a lot of the plays were viewed as being representative of cultural and political changes, yet there was no reference to the north and the Troubles. There were also no women included, apart from Lady Gregory.

But in general the series promoted debate about these hidden lacunae of different authors and voices and narratives and histories, which I thought was a very positive thing. It was a great demonstration of what the literary department should be about. It's a very cheap, economic and effective form of in-house outreach work, and it should be a permanent feature of the Abbey's programme. This was a wonderful adjunct to the Festival, and for me my other high point, even though it was supposed to be the side-show.

FOT: Just two things. It really is important to make the point of how disgraceful it is for the Abbey Theatre to be talking about essentially getting rid of its literary department [*applause*], because what we have seen over the last fortnight is that we haven't begun to understand the extraordinary range and richness of the Irish repertory. It's an extraordinarily diffuse and unexplored repertory, and there is such a need for a



The three hour play, taking up a whole evening,
is not something now that younger people necessarily want to invest in with so many competing media and forms of entertainment.



There is a huge interest on the part of the Irish public in this institution and its living history. Almost all of those readings were full, with really interested, enthusiastic, intelligent audiences



continual dialogue about what it is, what's good, what's bad, what works and what doesn't work. There has actually been some kind of genuine attempt by the Abbey to reflect the northern experience, and more from a Protestant point of view than a Catholic, which is really interesting. And there is a problematic set of questions around the relationship between the Abbey and women writers, for example, and it would have been really interesting for the reading series to take a more proactive line on that.

But the other thing that came out of this for me is that there is a huge interest on the part of the Irish public in this institution and its living history. Almost all of those readings were full, with really interested, enthusiastic, intelligent audiences. How many times were any of those people ever in the rehearsal room before? So just at a simple level, and politically, one of the most powerful things the Abbey could have done was bring people into that room; people can see *this* is where people have to rehearse in our national theatre, this space which actually bears no relationship to the stage space? It's an incredibly educational process for the audience about the limitations that have been falsely placed on this institution.



The last point is that I thought the season pointed to a possible salvation for the Abbey in the repertory form it adopted for this fortnight, not just in terms of readings, but also opening five productions in a fortnight. Some kind of model whereby you have an acting company employed for six months or a year to do a body of work. Where you can open plays in a different way, genuinely allowing the popular successes to support the more difficult work, and plays to build their own lifespan.

There are all sorts of possibilities in so doing which could actually generate a huge excitement around the place again, and give a sense that this is a place people want to hang out in. To see what's going on in the afternoon, maybe go to a play in the Peacock, and then come back to the main stage, and have the different elements of the theatre actually talking to each other. Like *Purgatory* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster* here, both talking about the death of Protestant Ireland in very different contexts, but bouncing off each other in all sorts of ways. Or *I Do Not Like Thee Doctor Fell* and *The Gigli Concert* as Irish 'takes' on psychology in the late '70s and early '80s. All sorts of odd connections being made which opened up the repertory in an exciting and interesting way.

TOM LAWRENCE

If the theatre is not beaten down by the proposals which have been put forward for it, this could be a moment of potential rebirth for the institution after 100 years. So they can actually embrace this and say, for all its horrendous faults, it hasn't done a bad job as a national institution over 100 years, certainly compared to most other national institutions. It has given us a body of work that still engages us, and has given us a lot of pleasure and a lot of food for thought. The next 100 years could be just as exciting if it gets its act together, just takes its courage in its hands.

My own sense is that the idea of a literary theatre is given real meaning in relation to that kind of a series. It could and should be toured; the readings ... could also help develop a much broader appreciation in the Irish public for what now exists as a body of work within drama.

HM: I totally agree. It is so important to see the theatre being used in the day time, to see people going in during the afternoon, and to have a building that is alive many hours a day. And the series was important too in rethinking ideas about decades from the past. For me, looking at Walter Macken and the 1950s, I realised that I had such fixed notions about Ireland in the '50s, most of which were wrong, and that was a fantastic discovery. And when people came up afterwards and were talking about their memories, I learned a huge amount. It was so exciting to be with people who were really turned on by what they were seeing.

VM: My own sense is that the idea of a literary theatre is given real meaning in relation to that kind of a series. It could and should be toured; the readings could also be a way of getting directors and casts in different parts of the country to work together. They could also help develop a much broader appreciation in the Irish public for what now exists as a body of work within drama.

And the format of each session was very friendly towards the audience. As well as coffee, and an opportunity to reflect on what we had heard and seen, we also got a critical essay delivered by a speaker. I heard Christopher Fitz-Simon, Brian Fallon and Fintan speaking about the plays, and they brought very different critical discourses to bear on them. The work of the literary and outreach departments on this occasion therefore also enabled us to engage with how people talk about Irish theatre — the ways of reading that we bring to Irish theatre, and how it is that theatre is framed for the public. To sum up, more of the above please.

BS: Generally speaking, everyone was very taken with the whole series. Since Vic has mentioned the discourse of Irish theatre, we want to open up the discourse to the audience in the last ten minutes.

SPEAKER (Anthony Roche): What emerges from the plays we've

seen, especially with the wonderful opportunity to put them alongside Druid's productions of *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints* in the same Festival, was that what has been left out of the equation in Irish theatre is the sectarianism that divided this country for so long. As in Russia, where you could not talk about these things, you had to go the fantasy route.

FOT: That's a very interesting point. At one level, this state was quite like the Soviet Union, in the sense of having a kind of totalitarian ideology which was enforced by law. Granted not quite as harshly — we didn't actually have a gulag — but it was enforced with the same sort of rigidity in terms of censorship. The big difference though was that the Soviets took art incredibly seriously, and therefore tried to construct an official art, with enormous effort and money and official critics thinking about what an official art should be like, and so it was both promotion and destruction.

Whereas here, really strangely and I think almost uniquely for a new state, art is treated as a problem; the state tries to say, let's keep out the bad influences of art, but does almost nothing else. This has the weird effect that the mainstream is forced to be counter-cultural. Instead of constructing an official tradition, people are brought in, in a kind of suspicious way, and allowed to say a few things, but they are not given any respect whatsoever. So somebody like M.J. Molloy ends up as a small farmer in Galway, with no real official status. Fitzmaurice, one of the great, interesting playwrights of the 20th century in this country, is treated with incredible brutality, just sort of dropped, in the cruellest, most vicious way of treating art. And in a way that's what we are still struggling with; can we somehow make official that unofficial tradition without destroying it, without taking away what makes it interesting.

TOM LAWRENCE

AUDIENCE QUESTION (Paulo Eduardo Carvalho): I am from Portugal, and find it a bit strange that even within the context



One of the things about the readings was that ... listening to them without them being staged revitalised them.

We weren't being oppressed by 'kitchen table' imagery.

J

of a festival like the Dublin Theatre Festival, there is a lack of curiosity in programming some foreign productions of Irish drama. Even work as, if not a help, then a *challenge*, to those problems you have been identifying concerning Yeats and Marina Carr.

I find it a bit
strange that...
there is a lack of
curiosity in
programming
some foreign
productions of
Irish drama.
Even work as, if
not a help, then
a *challenge*, to
those problems
you have been
identifying
concerning
Yeats and
Marina Carr.

MP: I would love to see some of the more physical and visual idioms of European theatrical practice used to revivify the naturalistic body of plays that we have. That would be a very fruitful hybridization. But I would be very worried about productions which wouldn't challenge the plays or the context or our selves, but would actually just reinforce and reclad the old myths.

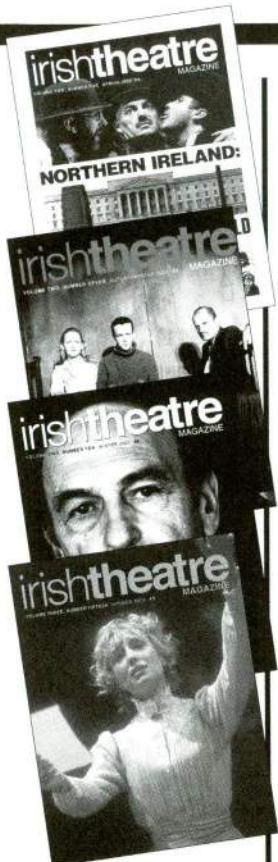
SC: It would be interesting to see what other sorts of theatre practice could be wedded properly with the plays. Because one of the things about the readings was that many were of essentially Irish 'kitchen table' plays, and I think the fact that we were listening to them without them being staged, revitalised them. We weren't being oppressed by that imagery.

FOT: You have hit on something really very important. Part of the myth of Irish theatre is it is *sui generis*. But the Abbey was directly inspired both by the Norwegian national theatre and by contemporary French symbolist drama, for example, which itself has also connections with wider European plays. And by nationalising folklore, the Abbey occluded the fact that folklore is *European* folklore. So there is a whole set of innate connections which are almost completely unexplored. There were these strong influences from abroad, and there was a dialogue. That has I think been cut off by the branding of Irish culture as something we create as an expression of ourselves to the outside world, not necessarily either to ourselves, or in terms of any kind of real expression of what our connections with the outside world are. So I would love to see a season of Irish classics, done by major European directors, or major European companies.

BS: My own response to that is to recall Garry Hynes' production of *Plough and the Stars*. I thought that was one of the most amazing and memorable versions of that particular play, but it was vilified by the press because of its stark expressionism. So when European theatrical forms were impinging on our representation of ourselves, the press didn't like it. But it was wonderful, and I would seek to reclaim it as the best production in my recollection at the Abbey.



Become a Publishing Patron!



irish theatre magazine is a quarterly magazine devoted to the coverage of theatre throughout the whole of Ireland. The magazine provides a lively and topical forum for discussion of the field and disseminates information about artists, plays, productions, and trends that are shaping Irish theatre today.

irish theatre magazine is much more than just four issues a year! Each year we push the boundaries of debate, criticism, and commentary through our criticism, our coverage, our live events and through new media developments.

**Please help us to keep the debate alive
and become a Publishing Patron.**

For further information on levels of support contact us at info@irishtheatremagazine.ie



THE MAN WHO

Fringe Frontiers

Three weeks. Six reviewers. One Fringe trail...
Intrepid *itm* critics staked out the Irish productions,
and brought back these reports.

HEATHER JOHNSON talks techno

THE WRITING AND ACTING DUO OF SKIPALONG THEATRE Company, Mary Kelly and Noni Stapleton, presented the second in their series begun at last year's Fringe with *One for Sorrow*. Performed in the suitably intimate space of Bewley's Café Theatre, with minimal production and few props, *Two for a Girl* proves that quality writing and acting can often create the most satisfying theatrical experience. In a year which saw many productions using new technology, and particularly visual media, as a feature of their performance, this play's declared interest in pared-down storytelling came as a somewhat welcome relief.

Co-writers Kelly and Stapleton, directed by Maureen White, gave confident performances as the two central characters. Josie, a traveller woman, falls for her employer, a settled farmer; on becoming pregnant, she is shunned by her own community, and must then relinquish her baby to the farmer and his wife. The other main character is her daughter Frances; we see her grow up unsuspecting the truth about her birth, becoming friends with Josie during occasional visits by the traveller, and ultimately struggling with the question of whether travellers' wanderlust is genetically determined or if Frances simply feels the need for escape of many rural teenagers. Set in the 1970s, dealing with secrecy and morality, this story steers dangerously close to an over-familiar tradition-

alism. The actresses' performances of the principal (and secondary) characters is at times distinctly moving, however, and creates the hope that a third in the series will appear in next year's festival.

Also set in Ireland, though more contemporaneously, is Ciaran Taylor's devised play for BDNC, *Spellbound*. Loosely based on the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows, the play relies on the allure of a Deirdre character to account for the effect of a 'geis', or spell-like enchantment. This enthrals her lover and a father figure, causing the former to run away with her and the latter to initiate the deaths of the couple. Here, Robert Lane's set design of inverted table and chairs which hang at angles above the stage promises an Alice-like dimension, a place where possibilities of the lyrical 'geis' might reside. The frozen moment captured by the suspended set nicely mirrors transitional intervals in the play, in which set changes are carried out by the actors. In his effective direction, Taylor has the actors swing the table and chairs through the air and fall around in a dream-like fashion suggestive of a spell.

A connective thread between these silent movements and the narrative scenes might have better supported the 'spell' idea in the main thrust of the play, however; neither the expressive set design nor the choreographed set changes alone can generate the promised sense of "vigour" necessary to enliven this exposition of people's compulsions. Obsessive behaviours provide mildly diverting material but do not seem to connect clearly to the more mythological 'geis', and the central Deirdre figure, played by Lucy McBride, is less than beguiling as the dark-haired seductress.

The play's more successful moments are provided by the comic performances of other actors, notably Mia Gallagher, who is highly entertaining in her role as a hair-phobic woman who wangles a job at the local Spar. Karl Quinn (as Alphonsus and Deirdre's lover) and Joseph Moylan (as the girl's 'uncle' and the Spar manager) similarly deserve praise for persuasive performances. Ultimately, the parade of freakish characters carries a comic punch which eclipses the notion of a Celtic 'geis' advanced by the programme notes.

Another production where ambitions seem overstated in the accompanying programme is Oops Theatre Company's *Falling Over*. The work's impact arises from its cross-over status between theatre and live art. Wordless, it consists of three distinct 'scenes': three performers fall heavily off crates, career around the stage slamming into objects and each other while wearing the crates over their heads, and, on being confronted by an avalanche of bananas from above, try to stand and inevitably slip. Director/creator Philip MacMahon states that this work originated following a drunken fall when, making notes, he contemplated the requisite post-fall act of "realignment" in the world. This existential element

Theatre here
is located
in bodies in
motion ... and,
in addition to its
avowed themes
of humour,
aggression and
even pain, there
is a pleasure to
be found in
the wordless
articulation of a
random force
unrestrained.

remains unexplored, however, while invoking Beckett ("he's down!") brings a risk of appearing to stretch toward an elusive exemplar.

Nevertheless, *Falling Over* is an innovative piece made memorable by the sheer energy expelled in the performances by the trio



TWO FOR A GIRL

of Dylan Tighe, José Miguel Jimenez, and Aidan Corcoran, and by the sound effects created by the reinforced crates, as their steel corners creak and bang on the stage amplifying the performers' repeated crashes earthward. Theatre here is located in bodies in motion (as with the brief movement scenes in *Spellbound*) and, in addition to its avowed themes of humour, aggression and even pain, there is a pleasure to be found in the wordless articulation of a random force unrestrained.

Video throughout echoes the action on stage: the third scene is essentially an exaggerated version of a video clip in which one man repeatedly slips on a single banana skin. This device does not entirely succeed in giving a depth to the piece; it works best in the middle section as the performers miss each other in frustration or collide heavily, accompanied by a video showing the same figures running around aimlessly and blindly on a beach. Here the film's open space contrasts with the confines of the stage, augmenting a sense of tension between the restraint and release inherent to movement.

Employment of visual media in fact proved to be a common feature of several of the Fringe productions. While in some shows it illuminated the on-stage action, in others it was the on-stage action.

Employment of visual media in fact proved to be a common trend in some of the Fringe productions. While in some shows it illuminated the on-stage action, in others it was the on-stage action. Employment of visual media in fact proved to be a common feature of several of the Fringe productions. While in some shows it illuminated the on-stage action, in others it was the on-stage action. In Scarlet Theatre's *Chair Women* (a joint production with Pan Pan and Ludowy Theatre of Krakow), the use of video is central to its presentation of a "reality theatre show." Throughout the first half of Werner Schwab's play, some of the actors (dressed in black as stylised 'camera operators') film the audience's reactions to the dialogue of three women sitting on chairs watching TV. The second part consists of the original three women sitting as audience, while the camera operators slowly transform into 'actresses' who reproduce at double speed the 'play' already enacted by the three older women. They now watch a version of themselves, and we are simultaneously faced with the footage of ourselves, filmed earlier, and projected on stage.

In her obviously modernist engagement with theatrical artifice, director Katarzyna Deszczy's use of video undermines audience suppositions about appearance and reality, foregrounding the medium of theatre itself, and breaking down boundaries between audience and performers. In turn engaging, surprising, even kitsch, with slick production values (the digital "immersive environment" by SDNA, in which the audience is unwittingly incorporated, is highly polished), the play's structure throws up a disquieting contrast between the world of impersonal technology and that of the homely cleaning women surrounded by religious iconography and plastic flowers. The company members all give strong performances, with Gráinne Byrne brilliant as Mariedl, a character both pitiable and hilarious who expresses a romantic yearning for transcendence through a material world of excrement and sexuality. This *avant-garde* treatment of, among other themes, repression and morality proved a demanding, but ultimately rewarding, night of theatre.

Instead of a screen, the set of *Why Is Comedy?* features a flipchart as visual aid. The play is structured as a lecture with illustrative skits, the intention being, as writer/performer Mark Cantan states, to investigate the sources of humour and explore different kinds of comedy. The only problem is that the lecture format shares the usual pitfalls of all lectures accompanied by flipcharts and bullet points — the audience most often only remains engaged for a limited period of time before losing interest, no matter how fascinating the subject matter. So while several of the sketches are highly entertaining, the 'explanations' that precede each sketch eventually become wearisome, and frequently deflate the more vibrant material. There is certainly clear evidence of strong comic writing ability here from Cantan and co-writer Davy Banks, and so it is a pity that at times the play pitches toward a sophomoric cleverness,



THE CHAIR WOMEN

as in the self-referential opening to the second part ("We apologise for the first half.") Elsewhere the script is taut (a very funny scene deftly integrates familiar film speeches, including one by Pacino in *Heat*) and both Cantan and Mary McCarthy's performances do it justice with a well-developed sense of comic timing.

Similar to the scene topics announced by the flipchart in *Why Is Comedy?*, Untitled Theatrics' *The Man Who* projects scene titles onto a large screen that dominates the symmetrical set of a clinician's office. Based on Oliver Sacks' exploration of a number of psycho-medical conditions in his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, this Peter Brook adaptation presents snapshots of patients suffering from these conditions. Individuals with no memory of the immediate past, or who are unable to make connections between words and objects, deliver monologues or undergo brief tests by medical researchers to illustrate their particular psychological phenomenon. As well as the scene titles, other projected visuals are nicely incorporated into the production by director Patrick Stewart. Performers use hand-held cameras both to afford the audience access to aspects of the patients' conditions (we see from overhead a patient's hand obsessively drawing a circle; we see the face of a woman who cannot sit up), and to emphasise the cool impartiality of the clinical staff who interview and test these patients.

Yet some aspects of the production are disappointing: the sound is often clumsy (a sound effect of the sea was more reminiscent of airplanes), the camera work unreliable, and scene changes, in which performers 'switched sides' by donning white coats, became ponderously slow. The actors' performances go some way to compensate for this, however: Marie Ruane gave a moving speech as a paralysed woman lying prone on a bed, while a truly exceptional performance came in Paul Congdon's portrayal of a patient with Tourette's syndrome. His angry, halting speech provided the most arresting moment in the production, the performance matching writing notable in the Tourette's case for its insight into an individual's torment, and because the patient is knowing about professional (and artistic) attraction to his condition: "Everybody wants Tourette's ... take mine."

This points to comparable cultural fascination with conditions such as autism evident in films such as *Rain Man* and *Shine*, and topical with this year's bestseller, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. Here, Brook's adaptation of Sacks' work throws up a question about the fetishisation of psycho-medical conditions. Watching this play's accumulative presentation of 'symptoms' gradually becomes akin to viewing a circus side-show — there may be diversion in the patients' compelling differences, but these glimpses do not provide much insight into lived lives, or tell us much about ourselves looking in. The play is in large part about

While it can offer structure and supplement a play's exploration of theme ... the use of new media is no longer interesting simply of itself, as it is ubiquitous and inexpensive.

the complexities and frustrations of human communication, yet itself does not communicate a coherent message. The angry speech by the Tourette's patient in a sense challenges the play's own intentions — if intended to make us think about the marvel of the human brain, it instead simply throws up questions about the ethics of such dramatic treatments in the first place.

The Man Who's incorporation of new media demonstrates both the potential strengths and pitfalls of using such media in theatre. When not coherently germane to the work (as sometimes in the case of *Falling Over*) it can appear a gimmick rather than an amplification. If the operation of the media is less than expert, it only impedes the staging of a play instead of facilitating it. While it can offer structure and supplement a play's exploration of theme (which does occur in *The Man Who*), the use of new media is no longer interesting simply of itself, as it is ubiquitous and inexpensive. Exceptions can be found, as in *The Chair Women*, where cool professionalism and genuinely fresh application mean that it contributes to new dimensions of theatre.

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

FINTAN WALSH goes social

T MAY HAVE BEEN THE LUCK OF THE DRAW, OR IT MAY have been that social realism was this year's must-have festival genre. Whatever the reason, this critic's schedule served up a generous helping of issue-based theatre, predominantly concerned with race, social injustice and alienation. Sometimes directly related to contemporary Irish life, and other times implied, many of these topics were treated reflectively, an approach not always considered typical of the 'reactionary' margins. As an aesthetic counterpoint, some groups exploited these issues for comic relief. And though this year's programme also offered a welcome injection of more experimental performance, there were some painful reminders that innovation comes with its own dangers.

Writer and director Orla Dunne brought her show *Seven Deadly Teens* to SS Michael and John. Like many a zealous fringe artist, Dunne discloses in the programme blurb an ambition to unsettle the status quo of theatre in Ireland. Largely comprised of a teenage cast, her production with Independent Theatre Workshop took the audience on a journey down the bumpy road

of adolescence, paved with a thousand old chestnuts about young love, friendship and existential angst. And if watching seven hyperactive youths hurtling through life was not enough, the audience was also forced to endure them in death, when they were condemned to purgatory to learn lessons about loyalty and group responsibility the hard way.

Though the young cast was to be admired for its exuberance, the saccharine zing prevented the audience from taking anything seriously, despite the plot's insistence on teaching these teens some old-fashioned values. Combined with a large cast and open performance space, the gusto often rendered lines inaudible. This problem was exacerbated by the meandering speeches, which, if the play wasn't so derivative and repetitive, would have prevented the audience from understanding a word. If the production is to be applauded, it is for upstaging Dante in its frightening evocation of damnation. I can't help thinking, however, that that wasn't the plan.

Hot on the heels of *Seven Deadly Teens* came *The Poe Project*, a play for those of us still wondering where the fringe stops and chaos begins. Office Supplies Theatre Company took theatre, and the audience, to this frightening threshold where reason holds no sway. Unsurprisingly, no author was credited with writing this piece (though the title and content would suggest a debt to Edgar Allan Poe) and the audience was left to assume that this performance began as a joke that got horribly out of hand.

Narrated in verse, the plot was unforgivably inscrutable, although it was clear that some characters were killed, screamed and died, usually in that order. There was also an epileptic raven ... I think. The production made use of multi-media in the form of video footage, but the effort seemed pointless as it failed to illuminate the obscurity. While Phoebe Toal, as Bernice, could act, her ability was rarely harnessed, as she remained off stage for most of the performance. Instead, we were left with an all-male cast to render their gothic tales with the steely engagement of a newsreader.

Though it is much easier to establish an eerie atmosphere in the cavernous SFX space than it is at the Teacher's Club, where *The Poe Project* was staged, Spacecraft expelled the theatre's familiar shadows by unleashing a troop of vivacious clowns on the audience, before the performance of *Bleeding the System* began. It was a colourful gesture that whetted our appetites for the ensuing revelry.

Written and directed by Fearghal Leddy, the play was a comic insight into the life of Bean, played by Simon Toal. Like his television namesake, the protagonist was most hilarious in his failure and folly. As well as being duped into a get-rich-quick scheme by conman Jim, Bean's wife, played by Nicole Rourke, lost her inheritance and fell pregnant to the Bosnian plumber of the couple's animatedly realised, but malfunctioning toilet.

This critic's schedule served up a generous helping of issue-based theatre, predominantly concerned with race, social injustice and alienation ... many of these topics were treated reflectively.

While the romp won many audience laughs, particularly at the hands of Toal and Rourke, efforts were made to counter bouts of lunacy with pedagogy. For his greed, Bean was quite literally flushed down his own toilet. Unfortunately, the exposé went little further, and the play failed to exploit its full potential for social cri-



SEVEN DEADLY TEENS

tique. Though the characters who initially greeted the audience were eventually revealed to be struggling foreign nationals, not clowns, no attempt was made to give their stories of discrimination an appropriate platform. Instead, their tales of woe punctuated the narrative as musical interludes, seemingly rendered strictly for laughs. Not only did the collective conform to racial stereotypes of flower sellers and street performers, but the play closed with plumber Marius, played by Paco Enterria, seducing Bean's wife and stealing a policeman's money. Though a highly entertaining production, it was a shame that the racial context was not more responsibly tempered or resolved.

Similar themes were more successfully explored in other productions. Under the direction of Alan King, Purple Heart Theatre Company brought *The Indian Wants the Coombe* to Andrew's Lane. A rewrite of Israel Horovitz's *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, Michael Sheridan's play opened in inner city Dublin, with a young Indian man waiting for a bus to take him to his brother in the Coombe. The colourfully clad visitor, played by Rodrigo Rodrigues, is spot-

ted by two male youths who approach him with a curiosity that rapidly turns to violence.

The most impressive aspect of this play was its complication of the subject matter. Here, violence is not borne in an irrational vacuum; the young men who attack the Indian are revealed to be damaged themselves by parental neglect, self-hatred and social marginality. These are not offered as excuses, however, but pitted as viable explanations.

Emmet Kirwan
as Joey
delivered one
of the most
powerful
performances
of this year's
Fringe, his giddy
antics a vivid
portrayal of
an idle youth
always on the
brink of a violent
outburst.

While all the performances in this simply realised production were accomplished, Emmet Kirwan as Joey delivered one of the most powerful performances of this year's Fringe, his giddy antics a vivid portrayal of an idle youth always on the brink of a violent outburst. Unfortunately, the small studio space found it difficult to contain the unruly verve both of Kirwan and his counterpart Stephen Kelly, who played Murph. During moments of explicit violence, menace risked being lost to less affective mania.

Though the performers usually secured the audience to the fiction, the Indian's relative silence and passivity in the face of his attackers remained unconvincing, as did his failure to move on to another bus stop, hail a taxi or call for help. If anything, this strategy reinforced the suspicion that this play was less concerned with the victims of racism and more with the perpetrators of violence.

Just as *The Indian Wants the Coombe* complicates the relationship between those who execute violence and those who suffer its affliction, Athol Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys*, set in 1950's South Africa and performed at The Helix, emotively unravelled the delicate dynamics between master and slave. Bairbre Ní Chaoimh's measured direction guided her cast in presenting the kind of sensitive subject matter characteristic of Calypso.

In a sturdy and detailed set, designed by Carol Betera, the play opened in a café where Sam and Willie, two middle-aged black workers, are joined by the young white Hally, whose parents own the business. Hally's closeness to Sam is apparent upon his entry and it is clear that Sam offers the boy the support that his own father does not. When Hally feels particularly subjugated at the hands of his dysfunctional father, however, he is quick to redefine any parity in his relationship with Sam. Directing all his hatred at his black elder, the play builds to a chilling climax with the young boy reminding Sam who the master in their relationship really is.

The strength of Fugard's text lies in its tracing of the delicate balance of power between the characters. These subtleties found skilled expression in the performances of George Seremba, who played Sam and Conrad Kemp, who played Hally. Like Joey and Murph in *The Indian Wants the Coombe*, when Hally is consumed by hurt and insecurity, racial privilege is the only card he has to play. However deplorable, it affords these characters a sense of power



BLEEDING THE SYSTEM

irishtheatre MAGAZINE **49**

lacking in other areas of their lives. In many ways this play resolved the exposition of *The Indian Wants the Coombe* more effectively — not only did it illuminate some root causes of racism but in contrast to the Indian's silence, it afforded victimised parties a platform for contestation.

In a similar fashion, Susan-Lori Parks' Pulitzer-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* explored the power dynamic between two black Americans living in New York. Chuk Iwuji and Anthony Ofoegbu play brothers Lincoln and Booth, who cohabit the latter's one-bedroom apartment. Lincoln is a recovered three-card trickster, currently suffering under the grind of a broken relationship and deepening poverty. Meanwhile, his younger brother is keen to learn his sibling's skills, and to vie for position as top-dog.

As with some of these other plays, the struggle for supremacy is not without its own complex history. The brothers have been abandoned by their parents and forced to carry out similar survival tactics all their lives. Their efforts to re-imagine failed relationships are further testament to deep inferiority complexes, which can only be resolved in a battle till death.

In their rendering of this tale, the actors delivered commanding performances, flooding Project Cube with a dazzling spectrum of emotion. From the outset, Booth arrested the audience's attention, compelling us to watch his psychological decline, the steady movement from charisma to madness. This tension was magnified by the set, designed by Steve Neale, which evoked the choking claustrophobia of the living conditions, and gave a sense of foreboding from the outset that something in this world must give.

Thankfully, not all was doom and gloom in this year's Festival with Inis Theatre's production of *Tick My Box* reminding us that there is more to life and Irish theatre than hatred and violence. Devised and written by the group, the piece explores the highs and lows of the Irish speed-dating scene. The company, directed by David Horan, is not only to be commended for its intelligence and wit, but for infusing these qualities to a subject with contemporary relevance.

In the intimate Bewley's space, Iseult Golden and Carmel Stephens introduced us to an expansive range of colourful characters, beginning with the hosts of the speed-dating event, Stephen and Siobhán. Cast in the role of participants, the audience was acquainted with some of the other lonely hearts in our midst, from the insufferable Claudia to the perseverant Mark. And while the hosts of the event were initially busy playing Cupid with the participants, it is ultimately their own relationship which becomes the focus of attention.

As in this company's previous work, *Tick My Box* involves

With inspired precision and
gorgeous theatricality the
actors morph before our eyes
... Despite the fact that no
one ticked my box, I left the
show assured that this was
the best date in town.

multiple role-playing by Golden and Stephens. As ever, the performers rise to this task with tremendous skill. With inspired precision and gorgeous theatricality the actors morph before our eyes, invoking, disbanding and reviving different characters until the audience is satisfied. Despite the fact that no one ticked my box, I left the show assured that this was the best date in town.

If theatre can serve as a socio-political barometer, then this programme revealed that anxieties over social injustice and isolation, notable during the Celtic Tiger, still endure. More specifically, the programme indicated that Irish society is still struggling with its racial anxieties. Interestingly, these concerns were often examined from the racist's perspective, in a bid to understand prejudice rather than merely present it. While this angle did not always afford the victim with a platform for expression, it is nonetheless an important internal dialogue, which should, and did, resist the lure of justification.

The festival also showed that a spirit of experimentation continues to unsettle not only the mainstream, but also the fringe itself, pushing its own boundaries and expectations. Though innovation is always welcome, it is not always immediately successful, and those companies who strained under the weight of less conventional approaches should not be discouraged. It is only by boldly marking the precipice that we can re-imagine and redefine the playing space.

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



MASTER HAROLD...

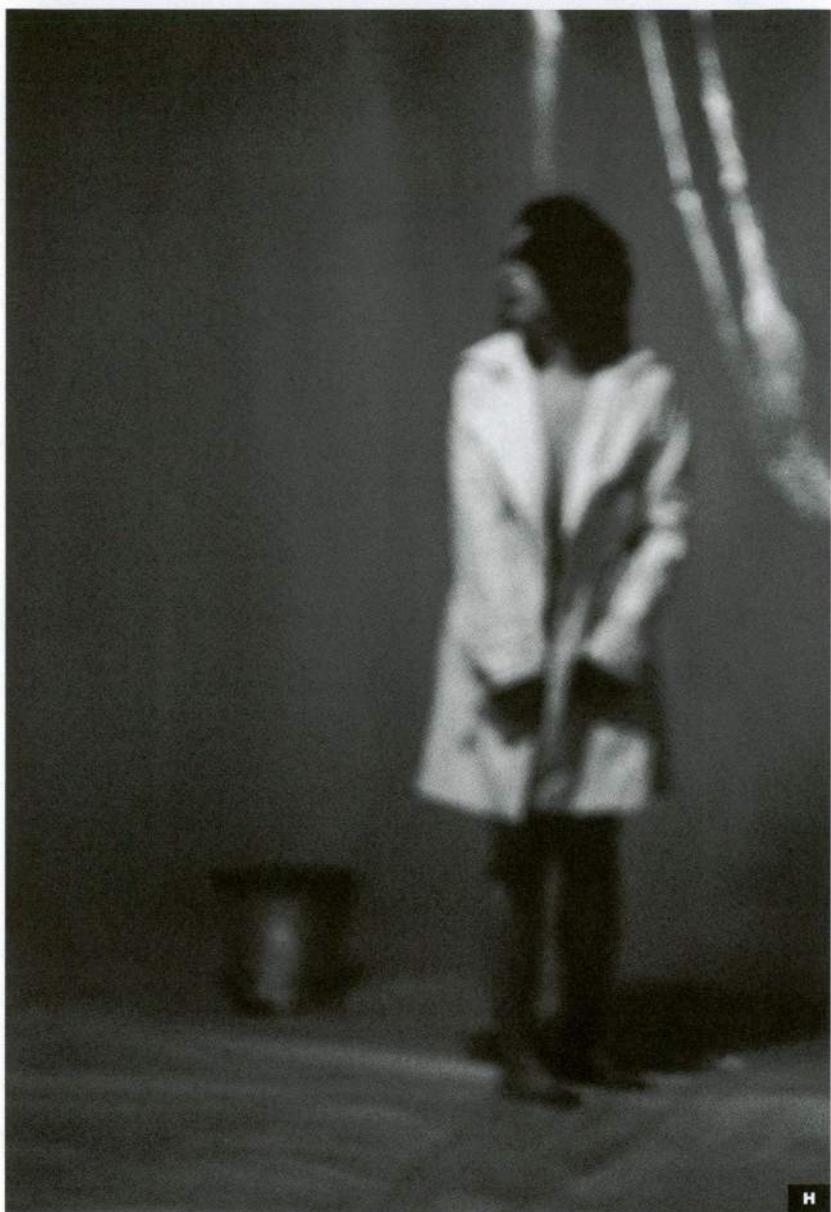
EAMONN JORDAN hangs tough

MANY CRITICS ENDEAVOUR TO CONTEXTUALISE theatre in performance, but few give the spectator much context at all, other than an experiential one, in terms of reception. Apart from the financial consideration, why attend a show, and why opt out of something else are questions worth considering. For many people, with full-time jobs, families or whatever their circumstances, leisure time is hallowed, and theatre should not only be entertaining, valued, valuable, and vigorous, but sacred in a way as well. And if not that, at least worthwhile, in all meanings of the word.

For many people, with full-time jobs, families or whatever their circumstances, leisure time is hallowed, and not only should theatre be entertaining, valued, valuable, and vigorous, but sacred in a way as well. And if not that, at least worthwhile, in all meanings of the word.

Viewed in this context, Nervoussystem's *Aversion*, directed by Aiden Condon, left a lot to be desired. In this re-working of the Phaedra myth, the two actors Regan O'Brien and Marián Araujo showed a good deal of talent, and the musical score by Denis Conway was expressive and creative. But while both actors impressed vocally, their physicality seemed to be grounded in the extremity of emotions they were trying to generate. The myth's tragic impulse remained unexplored; energy cannot be a substitute for passion, and ultimately this piece failed to communicate. Though the company prides itself on physicality, immediacy, and on an "impulse-based theatre language", the difference between their mission statement and the reality of the performance is problematic, because the internal impulses are performed and articulated but not truly organic or spontaneous. Further, the company needs to reimagine thoroughly the actor-audience relationship before it can move forward. Despite these criticisms, this company still deserves encouragement and funding to further their experiments. Something unique is possible for this group; the talent is there.

Tyger Theatre Company presented two plays by Christian O'Reilly. Both pieces have good comic moments, but neither carries the subtlety of his best-known work, *The Good Father*. The first drama is about a group of women, who establish the eponymous business *Problem Solvers Anonymous*, which kills men for their misdeeds. The anarchic sensibility of the piece is dampened by an inability to find the appropriate surreal, transgressive tone in performance. The shorter second piece, *It Won't Be Great When I'm Not Here*, about the relationships between a writer and the stage, and creativity and performance, is theatrical and Pirandellian in emphasis. At times, some of the acting was very persuasive, especially the work of Aideen O'Donnell, but neither piece is strong enough to merit a production; these are no more than extended sketches really.



H

George Higgs's *Hongongalongo* utilizes choral singers, orchestra, and percussionists, and some occasionally striking visual moments, but is overlong and repetitive. It proved a failed experiment in many respects, despite the individual talents and professionalism of all involved. Some of the staging was extremely unimaginative, particularly a scene when Higgs wanders around the stage bound and blindfolded. As I watched this piece, I longed for an interval and I longed to be a spectator rather than reviewer, without the onus of staying until the end. However, had I done so, I would have missed the brilliant banjo and guitar playing of Higgs himself, something that will stay with me for some time.

Loose Canon is one of the most extraordinary companies operating today in Irish theatre. This production confirms their eminence. With *H*, director Jason Byrne brings together *Hamlet*, Greek tragedy, extracts from Antonin Artaud's theatre theories, and much more besides to stunning effect. Both visually and verbally, this is an excellent piece of work, with the potential to be an extraordinary one if given a greater coherence. It certainly contrasted favourably with Romeo Castellucci's at times visually stunning *Tragedia Endogonidia* in the Dublin Theatre Festival; both plays deal with the same topics of tragedy, hallucination, aging, cruelty and deploy many similar staging strategies. But *H* is the superior piece, earning a resonance and a relevance that the main Festival show failed to achieve. If its meshing of professional actors and amateurs didn't especially succeed, because the gap in talent and presence is too great, the company's attempt to broaden its creative remit has merit. Deirdre Roycroft, particularly, has the vocal range and physical presence to be one of the great Irish actors; she would make a great Portia Coughlan, for example, in a Loose Canon stylistic version of Marina Carr's play.

Despite my distrust of the general veneration of Antonin Artaud and the sentiment of radicalism that his work offers — indeed *H* is dedicated to him — theatre does need a physicality and an urgency that conventional narrative theatre finds difficult to access. Much of what the Fringe offers is subversive in aspiration, but in terms of delivery, something altogether different is often provided. Because there are too many shows on in Dublin at this time of year, the gap between quality professional work and much of fringe output is just too vast; it is not easy to celebrate difference.

If production companies are making sacrifices here, there, and everywhere, audiences are doing likewise, in terms of generosity, support, time, money, and other life choices. If there is so little real quality work on offer, why should punters bother? And when there is quality work, why is it so difficult to track down, with many companies describing their productions in promotion materials in much the same way? Word of mouth is often the most useful indi-

There are too many shows on in Dublin at this time of year ... We need to ask tough questions about our theatre. We need to be just as passionate about our time.

cator, even more important than reviews in newspapers at this time.

When I teach reviewing, one of the questions I ask of students as a measure of quality is if they would recommend a show. I like then to take it a step further. I ask if they would consider going back again, if offered a free ticket. On that basis, I would recommend one show, *H*, and I would go back and pay the admission price. We need to ask tough questions about our theatre. We need to be just as passionate about our time.

Eamonn Jordan works for the Institute for the International Education of Students and is editor of Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre (Carysfort Press: 2000).

LISA FITZPATRICK finds frustration

THE ESB DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL OFFERS A VALUABLE and rare opportunity to theatre artists, providing a public forum for experimentation with form and style. The production values may tend towards the basic, but the thought behind the work should, at the very least, be interesting enough to hold the audience's attention for an hour.

It is disappointing therefore, that the quality of the shows can be so variable. Of the nine shows reviewed here, some were interesting but flawed; some were bizarre but not entirely unpleasant to watch, and some were quite startlingly dreadful. It is also disappointing to see the productions rehearse much the same forms and styles — even in their experiments — as the mainstream theatre, while the new plays fitted fairly neatly into already over-familiar dramaturgical categories.

Of the quite startling shows seen, *The Miracle of Love* was, happily,



THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

The reinterpretation of Chekhov is an ongoing obsession in the Irish theatre but what would be really innovative would be a good interpretation of the original text. Here the impulse to stage Chekhov's melancholy comedy as "an avant-garde musical" proved misguided.

ly, the shortest. The audience files in to a funeral scene, with a woman in an open casket, the mourners behind her, and the priest delivering a eulogy. After they leave, the husband speaks to his dead wife, gradually losing control and proclaiming he is glad she is dead. Finally screaming "Give me back my ring", he yanks at her hand, whereupon she draws in breath, sits up, and comes back to life. It is her husband's love that has revived her. Together with the astonished mourners and the dejected husband, the revivified corpse sings *Amazing Grace*. This is a show that in many aspects heads towards the extreme, from its basic premise to the staging style. Nonetheless, and albeit not for the reasons the company may have intended, it was worth spending the twenty minutes to have the story to tell.

A lesser entrant in the same league as *The Miracle of Love* is *The Seagull After Anton Chekhov*, by Wonderland Productions. The reinterpretation of Chekhov is an ongoing obsession in the Irish theatre but what would be really innovative would be a good interpretation of the original text. Here the impulse to stage Chekhov's melancholy comedy as "an avant-garde musical" proved misguided, the problems being the clumsiness of this particular adaptation and the uninformed, clichéd insistence in the publicity material that Chekhov was traditionally interpreted with "grave realism." In this production, the dialogue is interrupted by song and dance routines that communicate the subtext in an overtly comic fashion.

The result is that the humour and humanity of the original text is lost. Chekhov's stories are comic and his characters are absurd, but they are so recognisably human that the audience is moved by their self-imposed anguish. Here, the introduction of song and dance numbers creates an almost Brechtian outcome: the audience is alienated from the action and characters, who therefore appear merely foolish. The final result was a show that even the always edgy and compelling Elaine Fox in the role of Masha could not rescue. Indeed, there were a number of good performers in this production, and good musicians playing Anna Rice's musical score; it is a pity their talents were not better used.

In the bizarre but not entirely unpleasant category is Light/Switch Theatre Company with Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*. The play tells the story of Sebastian Venable, a poet who travels the world with his adoring mother, writes one poem a year, and is murdered in strange circumstances while in the company of his cousin Catherine. Mrs Venable refuses to believe Catherine's story, insisting that Sebastian drowned, and incarcerating her niece in a psychiatric hospital.

Light/Switch is a new company which hopes to bring "excit-

ing non-naturalistic and innovative theatre to Dublin and abroad", a laudable if vague objective. The performance style of *Suddenly Last Summer*, described in the programme blurb as "visual with mounting percussive rhythms", was certainly unusual. Una McEvitt gave a high camp performance as Mrs.



1+1=1 OR HOW TO AVOID WAR

Violet Venable, and did so very well, but the rest of the cast seemed to be in different plays. Against McEvitt's expressionistic make-up and declamatory, *grande dame* style, Catherine's mother and brother, played by Eileen Cahill and Cathal Sheehan, were a bumptious comic duo à la P.G. Wodehouse, and Catherine herself was played with psychological naturalism by the talented Elaine O'Dea. *Suddenly Last Summer* was well performed, well received by its audience, and quite interesting to watch, but under the direction of Kieran McBride, it lacked a consistent style.

Similarly lacking in a unifying vision was *1+1=1 or how to avoid war* by Grail Co-Op. Grail is an international co-operative of artists from different disciplines, and this performance was an interactive event between a sound artist at his keyboard, and a clown working with minimal props in a small fixed playing area, in an exploration of loss and creation. Armelle du

Roscoat skilfully creates several distinct characters, including a soldier, a crippled woman, and a child; her images and the soundtrack by Michael McLoughlin were sharp and evocative, and sometimes very memorable. But the production does not develop beyond these fragments; it lacks structure. Although the company has contributed to performances in the past, this is its first independent project. If the members plan to develop this aspect of their work, they need to focus on creating structure and an overall vision.

Described in the programme as exploring the connections between citizenship and industry, this darkly comic short play actually works best at the level of a sinister little folktale.

Written by Jose Sanchis Sinisterrá and translated by David Johnston, Bare Bones' *Ay Carmela!* is a very different reflection on war. Set during the Spanish Civil War, it tells the story of Carmela and Paulino and their travelling cabaret act. Such a play should resonate with an audience which, after all, is living at a time of war; that it fails to do so is due to problems with the pace, which is far too slow. The comic exchanges fall flat because they are not properly timed, and the effect is soporific rather than energizing.

Three new plays also featured amongst the work seen: *PamElla*, *The Robb'd That Smiles* and *The Bird Trap* by Alice Barry, Gemma Doorly and Darren Donohue respectively. The first two have a disturbed female character at their centre, while the third is a dark little fairy-tale.

Noggin Theatre Company's *PamElla*, a presumable bilingual title pun on Pam Eile, is a one-woman show written and performed by Barry, previously performed but reworked for the festival. The play opens with a gunshot in the dark, before the lights come up on Pam at her office desk. Pam is a dowdy, naive Irish country girl, who travels to England to take up a job with the law firm, Chesterfield and Byrne. She develops an infatuation with Mr Chesterfield, but her feelings are not reciprocated. Fired from her job, she continues to enter the company secretly to spy on her beloved. Pam, however, is never alone; she brings with her the aggressive, wanton Ella, the stifled other half of her identity. As her monologue becomes angrier and more distressed, she reveals certain traumas: she was raped as a child; her mother didn't love her. Meanwhile, Ella begins to take over. Finally, Pam breaks into the office and sees Mr Chesterfield and Mr Byrne having sex; Ella grabs the gun from the desk drawer and shoots them. The play closes as it opens, with a gunshot in the dark.

Though yet another Irish theatre monologue, the play is well performed and well written, and the Chesterfield/Byrne love affair offers an unexpected plot twist at the end. Barry performs well, distinguishing Pam from Ella adeptly by body language and voice. But the play is built from blocks of standard Irish

dramaturgy: the character speaking from beyond death, the childhood abuse, the emotionally unavailable mother, the final — still comic — descent into disaster. It would be nice to see Barry's talents used as a platform for something more innovative.



PAMELLA

Block One's *The Robb'd That Smiles* also depicts female violence. The play features a nameless Woman who has had a nervous breakdown, her guest Martha, and Kasia her Polish maid. The Woman and Martha, both actresses, dislike each other, and Martha cannot see or hear Kasia, who it seems is the ghost of a girl murdered by the Woman. Finally, in a shocking moment, the Woman stabs Martha, who also becomes a ghostly maid. The final scene of the play repeats the first scene verbatim; the implication is that this is a cycle that will begin afresh.

The performances by Gemma Doorly, Sonja Byrne and Bren McElroy were good, and the dialogue was well written. But there were missing links in the structure of the play. While the individual events hung together in a narrative, the larger world the characters inhabit was not clarified, and the overall sense of the work was unclear. The strong suggestion was that this is a psychological study of the disturbed Woman, with cool blue lighting used near the beginning and end of the production suggesting memories of events that happened long ago.

and far away, rather like the murder ritual in Geraldine Aron's *The Donahue Sisters*. However, the clever device of having Martha reveal that Kasia is a ghost introduces elements of the supernatural, while the choice to make both Martha and the Woman actors introduces the symbolism of the theatre and questions of theatricality and performance. *The Robb'd That Smiles* would be a stronger play if these issues could be clarified even a little more.

Produced under noticeably different circumstances, the shows range from the politically radical to the downright frivolous. But all raise questions about the conditions under which action becomes not only desirable but essential.

Crooked House's *The Bird Trap*, like *The Robb'd That Smiles*, stages a strange world that recalls the weird universe of Roald Dahl's children's fiction, or Grimm's fairy tales. The characters work for the mysterious Mr Bull, in an office that trades in human organs. On his first day at work there, Max (very well played by Neil Connolly) encounters a range of people; these include sleepy Sophia, the eerie, paranoid duo of Bell and Rivendale, and the doleful Mr Crème, not to mention the man in the filing cabinet. Jillian Bradbury performs the role of Sophia adeptly, while Joseph O'Malley and Nick Devlin work well playing against each other as Bell and Rivendale, and Paul Winters is good as the sad Mr. Crème. Described in the programme as exploring the connections between citizenship and industry, this darkly comic short play actually works best at the level of a sinister little folktale. Although the ending was inconclusive, of the shows seen it was one of the strongest and most original.

Idol by Spotlight Theatre was cabaret entertainment starring two humans and a range of puppets notably depicting one Joe Camel, and some very amusing women in a hairdressing salon. The story centred on Laura-Ashley Rock, very well played by Sinead Beary, and her quest for stardom, and was cleverly staged on a revolving set. It included Sinead's imaginary interview with Gay Byrne, whose voice, like all the other voices, was convincingly provided by Walsh. *Idol* was harmless fun, and did not attempt to be anything more; the International Bar was the ideal setting for it. There is certainly a place in the Fringe for shows of this kind: odd but enjoyable.

Overall however the Fringe is a hit-and-miss affair, with some shows that simply are not ready for public presentation, and are really works in progress, and some shows that will never be ready. It is already difficult for a Fringe show, in competition with the Dublin Theatre Festival and with 140-odd other productions, to find an audience; when many of the shows are so weak, and ticket prices relatively high, members of the public might feel justified in going elsewhere.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama and in Cultural Studies at the Waterford Institute of Technology.

PATRICK LONERGAN gets philosophical

DECISION MAKING — AND THE LACK OF IT — FORMS PART of every drama. Here, four fringe shows are produced under noticeably difference circumstances, and range from the politically radical to the downright frivolous. But all raise questions about the conditions under which action becomes not only desirable but essential.

This is obviously the case in *Buridan's Ass*. The play takes its title from the fourteenth-century French philosopher, Jean Buridan, who suggested that, when given two choices, people will always choose the greater good. This hypothesis was later represented



satirically as involving a donkey's choice between two equally distant, and equally filling, bales of hay. Unable to decide which of the two it wants to eat, the donkey starves to death.

Blending the philosophical and the absurd, the title nicely sets up this two-hander from S.R. Plant. Taking his cue from Beckett's early novels, Plant names his lead character Mahone — a taxidermist whose business is not doing well. He and his assistant Ernest debate the relative merits of action and inaction — and engage in

some revolting business involving dead animals. There are many amusing exchanges between Arthur Riordan and Frank Bourke in these two roles, while their ability to bring out the well-timed, quirky humour of the script is appealing. And the decision to stage a play about taxidermy at lunchtime? An example of the very best kind of bad taste.

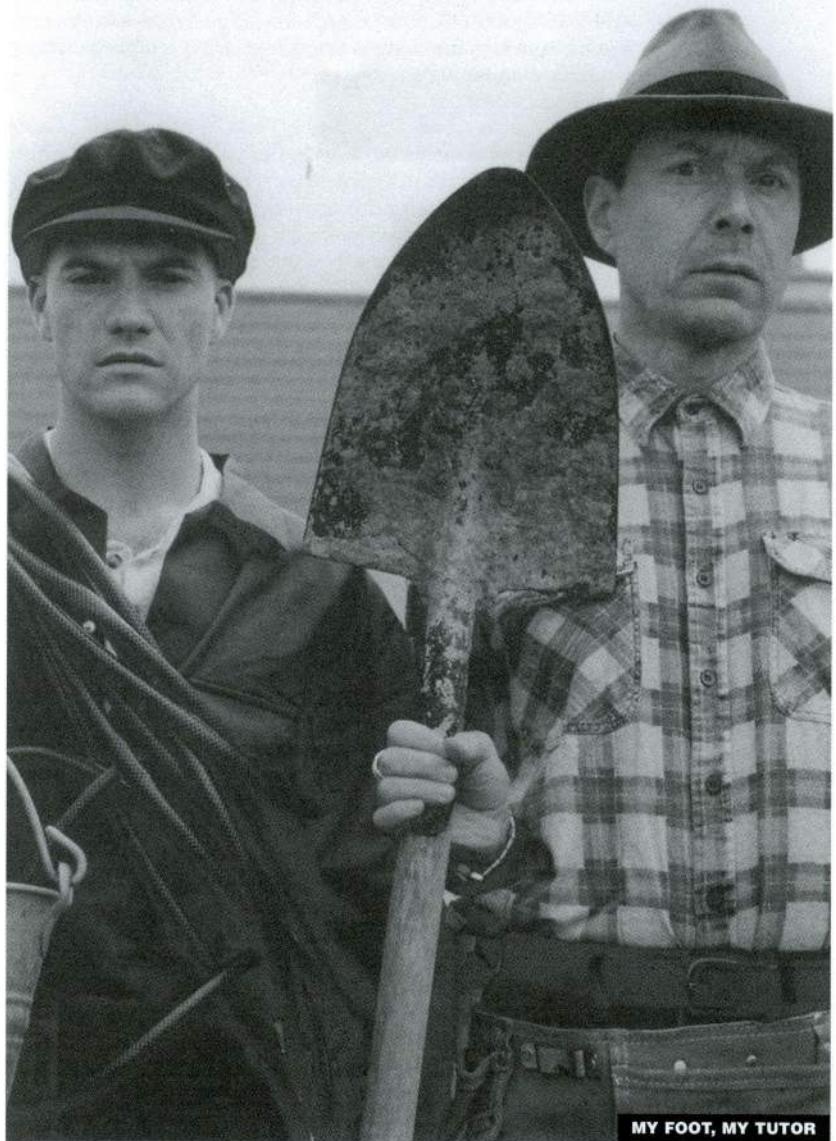
Another famous indecisive ass is of course Hamlet, a character whom Charles Marowitz dismisses as a "slob, a talker, and analyser, a rationalizer." Marowitz achieved notoriety in the late 1960s for this deconstructed version of Shakespeare's play, which presents Hamlet's inaction in a quasi-Freudian light. No doubt this was a powerful gesture forty years ago — but the problem with the *avant-garde* is that, eventually, it becomes *passé*: *Hamlet* has been so thoroughly deconstructed that, at this stage, we could do with a production of the play that would give it coherence for our own times.

The problem
with the
avant-garde is
that, eventually,
it becomes
passé: *Hamlet*
has been so
thoroughly
deconstructed
that, at this
stage, we could
do with a
production of
the play that
would give it
coherence for
our own times.

Caroline Staunton, who directs this production of *The Marowitz Hamlet*, acknowledges this problem in her programme notes, stating that she finds this version of the play attractive for its humour and theatricality. She captures both characteristics very successfully, presenting the action with a fine sense of visual style and a sensitive use of music. But it's hard to work out what the significance of the production might be. There is a lot of gratuitous snogging, fondling, and simulated sex, which quickly becomes tiresome for the audience and, one presumes, tiring for the actors. And though the show is performed with good-spirited gusto and a charming lack of anatomical accuracy, we often get the impression that the cast are playing to each other rather than the audience. Staunton seems an interesting director, but she needs to evoke more discipline and focus from her actors. We also need more from a production than outmoded iconoclasm — such as a sense of why we are being invited to consider this perspective on *Hamlet* at this specific time.

One of the most impressive examples of theatrical discipline I've seen recently is Articulate Anatomy's *My Foot, My Tutor*, which is performed as a dumb show by two characters, both working on a farm (as we are helpfully told by signs shown to us intermittently by the actors). A clear power dynamic is established between the pair: Andy Crook plays the 'warden', who initiates the various activities carried out by both men, and Brian Burroughs is his 'ward', who imitates much of what he does.

There is some interesting work here about how people are trained to occupy particular roles; Burroughs' placid grin, which he maintains unfalteringly for over an hour, becomes increasingly disconcerting as we watch him experiencing arduous (and apparently pointless) tasks. The question raised by this production is



MY FOOT, MY TUTOR

why people are content to follow the arbitrary dictates of routine and tradition. There's an interesting tension here between the discipline of these actors' performances, and Handke's consideration of coercion and power relations. He's not so much insulting the audience as tormenting his actors here — which makes the actors' skilful performance both impressive and mildly disturbing at the same time.

Finally, we have an adaptation of Beckett's short story *Enough*. The show is presented by Gare St Lazare, a company establishing a strong reputation for its adaptations of Beckett's prose for the stage, particularly with its version of his *Trilogy*, starring Conor Lovett. Those adaptations worked because of Lovett's expressiveness — his ability to use gesture and expression to help bridge the gap between being a reader and forming part of an audience. The success of Lovett's performances might have overshadowed the fact that there are, however, many important differences between Beckett's prose and drama.

Those differences become very evident here. The narrator of Beckett's original piece tells us of a relationship with an older man, which ended at a moment referred to repeatedly as "the scene of my disgrace." The gender of this narrator is ambiguous, which encourages the reader to speculate about many aspects of the story, and particularly the sexuality of its protagonists. It's impossible to achieve this kind of ambiguity with a visual representation of the character, however; here the performance is delivered by Ally Ní Chiarain, making the narrator's gender explicit in a way that narrows our interpretative frame.

The decision to have the narrator played by a female actor also presents some difficulties. In Beckett's plays, physical expression is often denied to the actors, who are frequently subjected to severe physical constraints. This is particularly true of Beckett's female characters: like the men, they are left in urns and rubbish bins, but we also find them buried up to their necks in sand and reduced to a pair of moving lips. The need for fidelity to Beckett's stage representation of women might explain the direction of Ní Chiarain, who remains almost entirely motionless while she performs this piece. She stands on a plinth in the Shaw Room of the National Gallery, and recites the story in a voice that at times is barely audible.

Perhaps we are being encouraged to see her as a living sculpture, to compare the presentation of one female character with all of the two-dimensional women on canvases on the walls around us. This may be the case, but — if so — the problem is that we are not so much witnessing the performance of a piece of drama as the recitation of a work designed to be read. And because the story is more interesting when the identity of its narrator is indeterminate, it could be argued that this is the first Gare St Lazare production

In Beckett's plays, physical expression is often denied to the actors...

This is particularly true of Beckett's female characters: like the men, they are left in urns and rubbish bins, but we also find them buried up to their necks in sand and reduced to a pair of moving lips.



STAIR NA HÉIREANN CINEÁL (THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF IRELAND – SORT OF)

that actually diminishes Beckett's prose. So although there are lots of interesting ideas here — and lots of brave directorial and performative choices — the piece doesn't quite come off.

*Patrick Lonergan is *itm's books editor, and teaches at the Department of English, NUI Galway.**

RÍONA NÍ FHRIGHIL spies subversion

The Irish-language drama festival *Borradh Buan*, which took place in The

Axis Resource Centre in Ballymun, was on the fringe of "the Fringe"; at a

remove, both physically and metaphorically, from the hub of the Fringe

Festival's dramatic activities.

AS EAVAN BOLAND HAS NOTED, "MARGINALITY WITHIN a tradition, however painful, confers certain advantages. Above all, the years of marginality suggest to such a writer the real potential of subversion." The Irish-language drama festival *Borradh Buan*, which took place in The Axis Resource Centre in Ballymun, was on the fringe of "the Fringe"; at a remove, both physically and metaphorically, from the hub of the Fringe Festival's dramatic activities. A distinguishing feature of this mini-festival's programme was the emphasis placed on productions for young people. This is representative of Irish language theatre, which, with the growth of Irish-speaking schools and the audience of young Irish speakers they provide, has seen the emergence of a number of companies providing theatre and theatre workshops specifically for children.

Hence school children from various Gaelscoileanna around the city became dedicated theatregoers at The Axis for a week, eager for an alternative to classroom activities. They were not disappointed. The productions *Cinnín Óir* by Ababú, *Stair na hÉireann Cineál* by Fíbín and *Gael agus Gaul* by John Gribben were designed for young audiences.

Máire Andrew's one-woman show offered a contemporary rendition of the fairytale *Goldilocks*, which certainly stirred the children's imagination. They volunteered enthusiastically to help Cinnín Óir smash the three bear's CDs and to break their beds. Although Andrew's performance was on the whole energetic and entertaining, there was nothing particularly notable about this production. Greater use of props and less dependence on illustrations would have added dramatic quality to this performance, which tended at times to drift towards storytelling.

The same could not be said of Fíbín's production *Stair na hÉireann Cineál* (*The Complete History of Ireland – Sort Of*), a comic presentation of Irish history covering 11,000 years in 45 minutes.

Clever and imaginative use was made of puppets, masks, music and the young audience, as a myriad of characters was depicted. Fíbín offered high calibre acting from Darach Ó Dubháin, Breandán Ó Murraí and Alistair Mac Aindreas and clever direction from Rod Goodall. The set, puppets and costumes were an



ANRAITH NEANTÓIGE (NETTLE SOUP)

attraction in their own right. One would, however, have to question whether this particular production balances entertainment and educational goals. Admittedly, as the title indicates, this show does not purport to give a factual account of history, but the satirical representation of many of Ireland's iconic figures and its undertones were, occasionally, beyond the critical abilities of a young audience.

Young teenagers are the target audience for John Gribbin's solo performance of the play *Gael agus Gaul*, which deals with the topical theme of languages in conflict. The play is set in Lisburn in 1720 where a young, French-speaking, Huguenot boy sets out to find his grandfather. He meets an Irish-speaking scribe and much of the play deals with their attempts to overcome language difficulties. Ironically, many of the language issues were actually avoided in the play as much of it was through the medium of English. From the outset the lack of props, the dark attire of the main character and the minimal use of lighting created a drab atmosphere. The biggest problem for

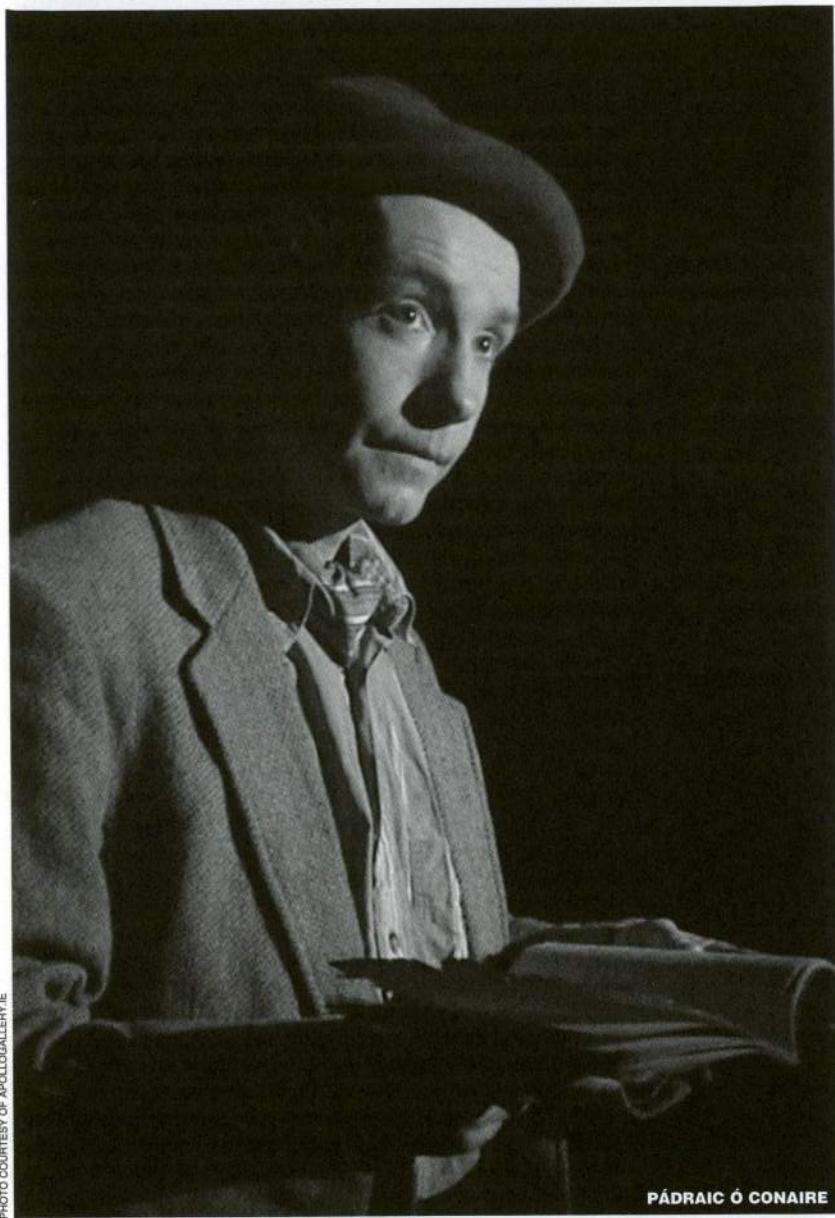
the audience, though, was trying to identify the different characters intended by Gribbin. Easily recognisable characteristics and distinguishable accents are of the essence when one actor plays many roles. The weakness of this production lay in its lack of colour and characterization, which diminished the play's potential.

Although not advertised in the Fringe brochure as such, one company proved to feature a combination of young people and professionals. Given recent developments in Irish language youth theatre, it seemed appropriate however that young people's participation in the festival was not confined to the role of audience. The youth theatre group from Dingle, Annóig, took the stage to perform a one-act play written by J.M. Synge, *When the Moon Has Set*, translated by Domhnall Mac Síthigh as *Le Luí na Gealáit*. These young actors and actresses, supported on and off stage by professionals like Áine Moynihan (who played the part of Méaraf Ní Choistealbhach and who founded the theatre), warranted their place in this mini-festival as they show signs of being the future wellspring of artistic talent in the Irish language. Although Mac Síthigh's translation is excellent, a play nearer to these young people's own experience might be advisable. Closer attention to detail was also needed in this play. All the characters entered the Big House bone-dry and presentable, for example, although the ferocious weather outside is highly symbolic and therefore much emphasised in the script.

War and the toll it takes on human emotion and experience were central themes of the plays *Geasa* (*Spellbound*) performed by An Comhlachas Náisiúnta Drámaíochta agus Aisteoirí na Tíre and *Anraith Neantóige* (*Nettle Soup*) performed by Aisling Ghéar. This topic posed a major challenge to both companies.

The front line on the Western Front during 1918 is the setting for *Geasa*. The ultimate question is whether a battalion, under the command of one Major Guerin (Gearóid Ó Mórdha) will shoot their comrade Ranger Bruadar (Neil Sharpson) on charges of desertion. Although Gearóid Mac Umfraidh's script is well-written, there is nothing particularly original about its content; soldiers who have left their sweethearts behind them, the cynicism of older soldiers compared to the high morals of young idealistic soldiers, the harsh army code contrasted to the human subject's story. Neither the acting nor the production brought this script to life, while the bright lighting and the set design were reminiscent of a domestic scene and did not convey the wartime atmosphere. The actors did not seem fully comfortable or acquainted with the actions of soldiers and there was no sense of the required frustration or tension between the soldiers and their superior. As the audience was not emotionally engaged with the

War and
the toll it takes
on human
emotion
and experience
were central
themes ... this
topic posed a
major challenge



PÁDRAIC Ó CONAIRE

events on stage they did not empathise with Ranger Bruadar, and the climax therefore proved an anti-climax.

The director of the play *Anraith Neantóige*, Bríd Ó Gallchóir, had considerably greater initial success in evoking a wartime impression. The play is set on a mountainside; a young girl and an older lady are taking refuge in a hut, where they take a soldier prisoner. Although the war remains unidentified and the location is purposely vague, Celia de Fréine's script explores recognisable human emotions and, particularly, the women's astuteness and brutality that has made it possible for them to survive thus far. Though Máire Hastings as Vera and Dorothy Cotter as Aimée portrayed these emotions quite well, the audience did not sense the same degree of aggravation or panic from the soldier Max, played by Barry Barnes. And despite the impressive start, with clever use being made of film shots to create an atmosphere of terror and violence, the set design generally was unsatisfactory. Given the theme of the play, an abstract, non-naturalistic set would have been more effective. Steps that were seen on the left-hand side of the stage throughout the play served no purpose and were blatantly at odds with the mountainside setting, for example. Similarly, when Guy, the ladies' friend, arrives with food provisions from the city and wants to show them his latest magic trick, a multi-coloured box rolled on from the side of the stage with no attempt made to explain its sudden appearance.

The resolutions in the second half of the play, too, were disappointing: all the characters get drunk one night and recount their individual stories, the old lady falls conveniently in a heap in front of the prisoner, who then steals the keys and escapes. In the context of the play this ending seems simplistic; the female captors predictably are portrayed as having been so touched by the soldier's humanity that he survives long enough to escape. The dehumanising effect of war, which is portrayed earlier in the script, is undermined by this ending.

That the plays *Pádraic Ó Conaire* by Diarmuid de Faoite and Darach Mac an Iomaire's adaptation of *Lig Sinn i gCathú* (*Lead us into Temptation*) were scheduled for the end of the Festival was highly appropriate as they were in a league of their own.

Lig Sinn i gCathú, presented by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, is an adaptation of Breandán Ó hEithir's eponymous novel which traces a young man's coming of age against the political background of the declaration of the Irish Republic, Easter 1919. Since the appointment of Darach Mac an Iomaire as artistic director of the theatre, work from the Taibhdhearc has been synonymous with acting of the highest calibre, imaginative set designs and terrific productions. This production was in many

The success of this mini-festival bodes well for Irish language theatre. Modern and indeed post-modern approaches were invoked to explore a range of topics of contemporary interest and urgency.

respects no exception. The stylised set design was very much in keeping with the satirical tone of the original novel, as were the sharply directed performances by Darach Ó Dubháin, Eoin Mac Diarmada and particularly Brídín Nic Dhoncháin, who played the parts of various different characters impeccably.

Marc Mac Lochlainn had the more onerous task of portraying Máirtín Ó Méalóid's coming of age and his rebellion against all forms of authority; though these events are not particularly convincing in the source text, his performance was impressive. The adaptation of the novel itself appears to have been problematic, however. As a play, this lacked dramatic quality and a strong narrative. For those who had not read the original, it was difficult to keep up with the various different characters that appeared on stage and to comprehend immediately their interconnection.

This reviewer's vote therefore goes to Diarmuid de Faoite's production entitled *Pádraic Ó Conaire*. This was a truly marvellous experience. De Faoite traces Ó Conaire's life in the context of the political and social history of that time while Ó Conaire's literary works, the inspiration for them, and their reception are cleverly woven into the narrative. De Faoite changes character with clear distinction from Ó Conaire to Michael Collins to Dubhghlas de hÍde, to name but a few. Yet when the audience is laughing its hardest, and this is quite often, the tragedy of Ó Conaire's existence is most apparent and poignant; de Faoite brings us on a roller coaster of emotion.

Yet he is careful to make us aware of the fact that this is but one telling of the story. Just when we are convinced that Pádraic Ó Conaire himself is on stage, de Faoite puts his character-defining jacket and hat on a stick, which then becomes Ó Conaire. The production ends in this deconstructive mode as de Faoite steps back from the character and the spotlight focuses on a bust of Ó Conaire. True to the tradition of sean-nós singing and storytelling, de Faoite credits his source. But while the story may be Ó Conaire's, the genius in this particular work is undoubtedly de Faoite's.

The success of this mini-festival bodes well for Irish language theatre. Modern and indeed post-modern approaches were invoked to explore a range of topics of contemporary interest and urgency. This throws, for example, the other major opportunity for Irish language theatre this year, the Abbey Theatre's centenary programme, into sharp relief. Its marginalisation of Irish language work, given the evident presence of talent at the Fringe Festival, cannot be due to a dearth of ability. Compared to the innovativeness of these various productions, it was frustrating to note that the only Irish-language production staged by

the Abbey was yet another production of another translation: *Chun na Farraige Síos*, Tomás Ó Flaithearta's translation of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Before its image of the exotic, pre-modern native speaker — this, the only portrayal available in the National Theatre to a contemporary Irish-speaking audience — the contemporary Fringe Festival programming seemed almost like a rebuke. The irony of this act of marginalisation is that it confers more authority on the margin. The fringe or "the Fringe" truly becomes a locus of truth, authenticity and subversion.

Ríona Ní Fhrighil lectures on contemporary poetry and drama in Irish in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Bhí sí [Borradh Buan] ar imeall na Féile Imeallaí, scoite go fisiciúil agus go meafarach ó mhórbealach na drámaíochta agus saoirse aici dá réir.

Téann RÍONA NÍ FHRIGHIL a bealach féin

CHAN AR NA MÓRBHEALAIGH A FHÁSANN NA sméara dubha is milse ach ar na cosáin chuíil", a mhaígh Seosamh Mac Grianna tráth. Bhí an mhionfhéile Ghaeilge *Borradh Buan* ar siúl le linn an Fringe Festival san Ionad Ealaíne Axis i mBaile Munna. Bhí sí ar imeall na Féile Imeallaí, scoite go fisiciúil agus go meafarach ó mhórbealach na drámaíochta agus saoirse aici dá réir.

Murab ionann is an Fringe Festival féin, bhí tábhacht ar leith ag roinnt leis an aos óg san fhéile Ghaeilge seo. Bhí trí léiriú diríthe ar pháistí go speisialta, mar a bhí, *Cinnín Óir* le hAbabú, *Stair na hÉireann Cineál* le Fíbín agus *Gael agus Gaul* le John Griffen. Is nós é seo a bhaineann le drámafocht na Gaeilge trí chéile le blianta beaga anuas, mar a bhfuil freastal á dhéanamh ag compártais éagsúla ar fhoghlaimeoirí óga na teanga. B'ontach an rud é gur thapaigh gaelscoileanna difriúla an deis amharclann an Axis a lónadh le páistí scoile i gcaitheamh na féile.

Léiriú aonair fuinneamhach a thug Máire Andrews uaithi agus an scéal *Cinnín Óir* á aithris aici. Bhain na páistí sult as cuidiú le *Cinnín Óir* teach na dtrí bhéar a scriosadh. Gí go ndeachaigh an seo i bhfeidhm ar na páistí ní raibh aon rud thar a bheith suntasach faoin léiriú. Is léaráidí amháin a bhí mar fhearas stáitse ag Andrews, rud a chiallaigh gur dhruid an seo i dtreo na scéalaíochta corr uair.

A mhalaírt ar fad a bhí fíor i dtaobh an dráma *Stair na hÉireann Cineál*. Cur síos greannmhar comhaimseartha ar stair na hÉireann i 45 nóiméad a bhí i geist anseo agus úsáid chliste bainte as ceol, aghaidheanna fidil, puipéid agus ranrnpháirtíocht na bpáistí chun na críche sin. Bhí gairmiúlacht ag siúl le haisteoireacht Dharaígh

Uí Dhubháin, Breandán Uí Mhurraí agus Alistair Mhic Aindreasa agus le léiriú cliste Rod Goodall. Tuigeann an compán-tas seo a ghéire atá lucht féachana óg agus cuireann sé léiriú den chaighdeán is airde ar fáil dá réir sin. É sin ráite, áfach, bhí cuid d'ábhar aorach an dráma seo thar raon tuisceana páistí óga.



STAIR NA HÉIREANN CINEÁL (THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF IRELAND - SORT OF)

Dfrithe ar dhéagóirí óga atá an dráma *Gael agus Gaul* le John Gribben. Is séo aonair eile atá anseo a théann i ngleic le hábhar cig-íteach, mar atá, coimhlint teanga. Tá an dráma suite i gCúige Uladh sa bláthain 1720, áit a bhfuil buachaill óg, cainteoir Fraincise d'iaróibh na nÚgónach, ag iarraidh teacht ar a sheanathair. Bualann sé le scriobháil ar cainteoir dúchais Gaeilge é agus baineann cuid mhór den dráma leis an dóigh a sáraíonn siad deacrachtáil tuisceana. Rinneadh na deacrachtáil cumarsáide seo a sheachaint sa léiriú fein, ámh, trí úsáid leitheadach a bhaint as an Bhéarla! An locht is mó a bhí ar an dráma, áfach, ná nach raibh sé soiléir in amanna cén carachtar a bhí i gceist ag an aisteoir. Is de dhlúth agus d'inneach an tseó aonair blas ar leith agus geaistí sainiúla gach carachtair a phorbairt sa dóigh is go bhfuil siad inaithreanta láithreach don lucht féachana. Ní dhearnadh dóthain cúram den charachtracht sa dráma seo, rud a bhain go mór d'éifeacht an léirithe.

Bhfí aisteoirí proifisiúnta agus daoine óga ag obair as lámh a chéile agus dráma aonghnímh J.M. Synge *When the Moon Has Set*

Bhí cursaí cogáfochta go mór chun tosaigh mar théama sna drámaí Geasa ... agus sa dráma Anraith Neantóige ... Is ábhar é seo a thug cáithnín don dá chompántas.

a léiriú ag amharclann na n-óg, AnnÓg, faoin teideal *Le Luí na Geuláit*. Is údar misnígh go bhfuil aisteoirí óga a bhfuil an teanga i mbarr bata acu á n-oiliúint i gceird na haisteoireachta. Is ábhar lúcháire go bhfuil réamhtheachtaithe, dála Áine Moynihan, aisteoir gairmiúil a raibh páirt Mhéaraf Ní Choistealbhach aici, sásta a taithí a roinnt go fial. Bhí locht nó dhó le fáil ar an léiriú seo, áfach, lochtanna a bhain le heaspa círaim a bheith déanta de mhionsonraí. Tá tábhacht mheafarach ar leith leis an doineann sa dráma seo. Bhí tulcaí gaoithe le cloisteáil ag an lucht féachana i rith na chéad leithe den dráma agus rinneadh tagairt iomadúla don bháisteach throm, ach mar sin féin, shroich Sorcha (Sláine Ní Chathalláin) an teach mór de shiúl a cos gan braon uisce ar a cuid gruaige ná clábar ar a cosa noctha. Tá gealladh faoin ghrúpa seo agus gí go bhfuil Domhnall Mac Síthigh le moladh as an aistriúchán fileata a rinne sé ar script Synge, ba dheas na haisteoirí óga a feiceáil ag tabhairt faoi dhráma comhaimseartha Gaeilge a bheadh níos dílse dá dtaití féin.

Bhí cursaí cogáfochta go mór chun tosaigh mar théama sna drámaí Geasa a léirigh an Comhlachas Náisiúnta Drámaíochta i bpáirt le hAisteoirí na Tíre, agus sa dráma *Anraith Neantóige* a léirigh an compántas Aisling Ghéar. Is ábhar é seo a thug cáithnín don dá chompántas.

Tá an dráma *Geasa* suite i dtrínse sa líne tosaigh ag deireadh an chéad chogaidh dhomhanda. Is í mórcheist an dráma ná an gcurfidh an cathlán, faoi stiúir an cheannasaí Guerin (Gearóid Ó Mordha), a gcomhleacaí féin Bruadar (Neil Sharpson) chun báis ar chúis tréigín. Cé go bhfuil script téagartha scríofa ag Gearóid Mac Umfraidh, níl aon rud thar a bheith nua ag roinnt le hábhar an dráma — saighdiúir a bhfuil a ghrá geal fágtha sa bhaile aige, fear óg idéalach nach dtuigeannt suarachas na cogáfochta, an cinneadh dian a bhíonn le déanamh idir rialacha an airm agus cás an duine aonair. Ardaíodh an cheist chigilteach faoin easpa measa a bhí ar na saighdiúirí Éireannacha seo sa bhaile ach ní dhearnadh móran plé ar an ábhar. Níor éirigh leis an aisteoireacht ná leis an léiriú an script a thabhairt chun beochta. Níor fhóir an soilsú geal ná dearadh na seite ar chosúla le seomra suí ná le buncar é, do shuíomh cogaidh. Níor chuir na haisteoirí suntas i bhfuaim na gunnádoreachta a bhí le cloisteáil ó am go chéile i rith an dráma. Is beag rian den eagla, den fhrustrachas nó den teannas idir na saighdiúirí agus a gceannaire a bhí le brath. Toisc nach ndeachaigh na caractair éagsúla i bhfeidhm orainn i rith an léirithe, is beag comhbhá a bhí agaínn le Bruadar nuair a daoradh chun báis é ar deireadh.

D'éisigh níos fearr le stiúrthóir an dráma *Anraith Neantóige*, Bríd Ó Gallchóir, suíomh cogaidh a chruthú. Is i mbatálach ar thaobh sléibhe mar a bhfuil bean óg agus bean aosta ina gcónaí atá an

dráma seo suite. Áit theibí agus cogadh anaithnid atá i gceist ag an scribhneoir Celia de Fréine. Díríonn sí, áfach, ar mhothúcháin dhaonna, ar ghéarchúis na mban a thugann slán iad ó shlad bruidiúil na bhfear. D'éirigh leis na haisteoirí Maire Hastings (Vera) agus Dorothy Cotter (Aimée) na mothúcháin seo a chur in iúl don chuid is mó. Ní raibh an tocht céanna, ámh, le brath i gcás an tsaighdiúra (Barry Barnes), a bhí i ngéibheann ag na mná. In ainneoin an úsáid shamhlaíoch a baineadh as ábhar scannánaíochta ag túis an dráma le hatmasféar scanrúil foréigneach a léiriú, ní raibh dearadh na seite féin ró-shásúil. Bhí staire nár usáideadh i rith an léirithe le feiceáil ar chúl an stáitse, mar shampla. Sa dara leath den dráma, nuair a theastaigh ó Guy, cara na mban, cleas draíochta a thaispeáint dóibh, tháinig a chip agus a mheanaí ó thaobh an stáitse gan aon mhíniú tugtha ar an dóigh a raibh a leithéid in aice láimhe san iargúltacht. Gí go raibh an ghealladh faoin scéal agus faoin léiriú ag an túis, bhí réitigh na bplotaí éagsúla pas beag ró-shimplí ó thaobh léirithe agus ó thaobh scripte de — oíche amháin i ndiaidh cúpla buidéal fiona thosaigh na carachtair ag insint a scéalta pearsanta, d'éirigh siad go léir ólta, thit an tseanbhean ina cnap os comhair an phriosúnaigh, ghoid sé na heochracha uaithe agus d'éalaigh sé. Is minic gur mar fobartaigh a léiritear mná agus cursaf cogáiochta á gcardáil ag scribhneoirí agus ag drámadóiri. Gí go dtugann de Fréine dúshláin na léirithe seo ag túis an dráma, ní leanann sí den bhréagnú. Beireann an saighdiúr na cosa leis ar deireadh toisc go dtéann a dhaonnacht i bhfeidhm ar na mná. Ar an dóigh seo seachnaítear téama casta na bruidiúlachta baininne.

Tá rogha na fiona fágtha agam go críoch na Féile. Ní chuirfinn na léirithe eile do dhaoine fásta ar aon iomaire leis na drámaí *Pádraic Ó Conaire* le Diarmuid de Faoite agus *Lig Sinn i gCathú*, círithe don stáitse ag Darach Mac an Iomaire, agus léirithe ag Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe.

Is stáitsiú ar úrscéal caitiúil Bheandáin Uí Eithir a rinne Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe. Is mór an t-athrú atá tagtha ar dhrámaí na Taibhdheirce le blianta beaga anuas. Tá stíl áirithe drámaíochta saothraithe ag an chomrántas faoi stiúir Dharaigh Mhic Con Iomaire. Is ionann léiriú ón chomrántas seo agus ardcaighdeán aisteoireachta, dearadh seite profisiúnta agus léiriú den scoth. Bhí formhór na gcáilíochtaí sin ag an léiriú seo. D'éirigh le Darach Ó Dubháin, Eoin Mac Diarmada agus go speisialta Brídín Nic Dhonnta iliomad carachtar a léiriú go cruinn pointeáilte. Bhí páirt dhúshláinach ag Marc Mac Lochlainn mar a raibh air teacht in innme Mháirtín Uí Mhéaloid a léiriú, rud a rinne sé go críochnúil. Mar léiriú ar úrscéal Uí Eithir ní raibh fuíoll molta ar an taispeántas. Mar dhráma, áfach, bhí drámatacht in easnamh. Ceann de na lochtanna a fhaightear ar an úrscéal féin ná nach

gcuireann muid aithne ar na carachtair ach amháin trí mheán reacaire an scéil. In éagmás an reacaire, ba dheacair don té nach raibh an t-úrscéal léite aige na carachtair eagsúla ar státse a aithint agus an bhaint a bhí acu leis an sceal a thuisceint.

Is do Dhiarmuid de Faoite a thabharfainn an chraobh an iarráidh seo. Éirinn le de Faoite saol Phádraic Uí Chonaire a ríomh i gcomhthéacs stair pholaitiúil agus shóisialta a linne. Faightear léargas festa ar shaothar litríochta Uí Chonaire, na cúinsí a spreag é agus an glacadh a bhí leis. Cé go mbaineann de Faoite fiche gáirf as an lucht féachana de réir mar a athraíonn sé carachtar ó Ó Conaire go Mícheál Ó Coileáin go Dubhghlas de híde go Liam Ó Flaithearta agus leár mór eile nach iad, éirinn leis truamhéala chás Uí Chonaire a chur ina lui orainn. Sna heachtrai is greannmhaire sa dráma is mó a bhfuil an brón agus an tragóid le sonrú. Cuirtear in iúl dúinn freisin nach bhfuil sa léiriú os ár gcomhair ach insint amháin ar an scéal. Meallann de Faoite an lucht féachana isteach i ndomhain Uí Chonaire agus díreach nuair a átítear orainn go bhfuil an fear féin ag labhairt linn, caitheann de Faoite cóta agus hata Uí Chonaire ar mhaide agus cuireann sé inár láthair é mar Ó Conaire féin. Críochnaíonn an dráma leis an rún díchonstruála seo nuair a sheasann de Faoite siar ón charachtar agus íslítear an solas ar dhealbh chinn Uí Chonaire. Mar is dual don amhránaí sean-nós agus don scéalaí, tugann de Faoite aitheantas dá réamhtheachtaí.

Is cúis mhisiúchán an borradh atá le sonrú ar chúrsáil drámaíochta na Gaeilge i láthair na huaire. Is ábhar dóchais gur tugadh aitheantas d'fheabhas na haisteoireachta agus na léirithe Gaeilge ag an Fringe Festival. Is cinnte mar sin nach easpa caighdeáin a thug ar an Amharclann Náisiúnta droim láimhe a thabhairt do léirithe Gaeilge agus céad bliain á gceiliúradh acu i mbliana. Le taobh a raibh le feiceáil le linn na fíle *Borradh Buán* ó thaobh léirithe samhlafocha agus aisteoirí cumasacha de, is údar mór díomá é gurbh é an t-aon dráma Gaeilge a léirigh Amharclann na Mainistreach i mbliana ná léiriú eile d'aistríúchán eile; *Riders to the Sea* aistríthe ag Tomás Ó Flaithearta faoin teideal *Chun na Farraige Síos*. Sin a bhfuil de léiriú ar phobal na Gaeilge ar státse na hAmharclainne Náisiúnta do lucht féachana comhaimseartha — an Gael mar neach andúchasach. Baineann an iomhá sheanchaite seo go dlúth le rún imeallaítear a gcothaitheoirí. Is í forróin an ghnímh smachtaithe seo, áfach, ná go dtugtar tuilleadh dlistineachta donimeall dá bharr — tuigtear gurb ann atá an fhírinne, an borradh buan, na sméara dubha, idir mhilis agus shearbh.



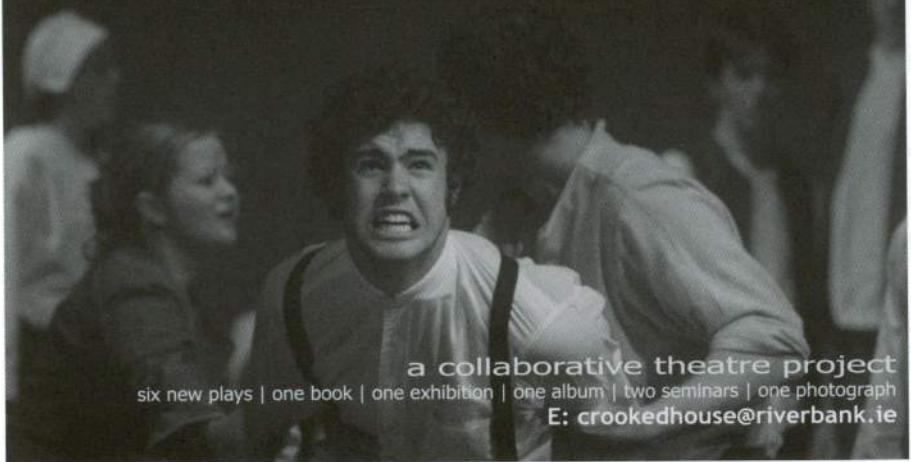
Is léachtóir le Gaeilge í an Dr Ríona Ní Fhrighil i gColáiste Phádraig, Droim Conrach.

Is cúis mhisiúchán
an borradh atá le
sonrú ar chúrsáil
drámaíochta na
Gaeilge i láthair
na huaire.
Is ábhar dóchais
gur tugadh
aitheantas
d'fheabhas na
haisteoireachta
agus na léirithe
Gaeilge ag an
Fringe Festival.

crooked house

resisting the occupation

twelve affidavits in support of the decolonisation of our imagination
2004 - 2007



a collaborative theatre project

six new plays | one book | one exhibition | one album | two seminars | one photograph

E: crookedhouse@riverbank.ie



VISIT THE ACTORS' NOTICE BOARD

This is a free online service for displaying:

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

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

WWW.CROOKEDHOUSE.IE



National University of Ireland, Galway
Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh

Postgraduate Programmes

MA in Drama and Theatre Studies

An innovative combination of internships and courses in creative scholarship and performance, with acting workshops and seminars in writing plays, reviews, articles, and theatre history, taught by English Department staff and theatre professionals. Galway theatres benefit the programme: the Druid, Town Hall, Black Box, and Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe.

Contact Dr Adrian Frazier, T: +353 91 493129. E: Adrian.Frazier@nuigalway.ie

MA in Writing

A workshop-based programme with courses not only in poetry and fiction, but in non-fiction, playwriting, reviewing, screenwriting, and publishing. This MA builds on existing strengths at NUI, Galway in the diverse arts of writing for page and stage, screen and daily papers.

Contact Dr Adrian Frazier, T: +353 91 493129. E: Adrian.Frazier@nuigalway.ie

Entry Requirements, Number of Places, Duration, and Deadline:

- Applicants must hold a B.A. degree or equivalent, with a minimum standard of Honours 2nd Class, Grade 2 or equivalent (USA: BA at GPA 3.00). Writing sample required.
- Each programme is limited to 15-20 students, and extends full-time for one year (1 September-August 30).
- Please contact the Admissions Office at t.maher@mis.nuigalway.ie in early January for details of application closing dates.
- Website address: <http://www.nuigalway.ie/enl/>

entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and goings in Irish theatre.



EMMA FOOTE, (pictured, left) formerly assistant to the deputy director of the Gate Theatre, has departed to become senior marketing executive of the University Concert Hall, Limerick. A new appointment at the Gate will soon be made... **JOAN MALLON** has departed her position as company manager of Storytellers and joined the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire... **CLIONA DUKES**, (pictured, right) previously administrator of the company, has been promoted to fill the position... Meridian's project co-ordinator, **SUE BAKER**, has departed the company to work for Real Event Solutions... **DARA REALI**, administrator with the company has taken on her former duties... **JENNIFER JENNINGS** has been appointed as administrator with The Corn Exchange. She is a recent graduate of UCD with an MA in Cultural Policy and Arts Management ... **LOUISE DUGGAN**, formerly of Film Base, has been appointed the new administrator of Druid Theatre company. She replaces **YVONNE CORSCADDEN**, currently travelling the world.



subscribe

irish theatre magazine is published quarterly and includes topical and timely articles about theatre in Ireland and Irish theatre around the world. Subscribe and have the magazine delivered to you before it hits the shops! Email at info@irishthemagazine.ie or ring us on 087 799 7989



www.irishthemagazine.ie



THE PRINCE OF DENMARK

By Electric Bridget Theatre Company

Town Hall Studio, Galway

as part of Galway Arts Festival

13-17 July, 2004; reviewed 13 July

AN EVENING WITH SAMUEL JOHNSON

By Rod Goodall

King's Head Pub Theatre

as part of Galway Arts Festival

14-21 July, 2004; reviewed 14 July

BY KENNETH NALLY

IN AN INTERESTING ASIDE TO THE increasingly international composition of the Galway Arts Festival, this year's programme included *Showcase Galway*, a self-contained fringe giving a platform to new English-language work from Galway, work that would gain prestige and presumably punters from such an association. It also gave festival-goers a chance to sample a flavour of what Galway theatre

is like when the Festival is not in town. Amongst productions of works by innovative local companies such as Catastrophe were two decidedly literary tea-time shows which self-consciously showcased their artifice: Rod Goodall's one-man show *An Evening with Samuel Johnson*, and Electric Bridget's *The Prince of Denmark*, a comedy loosely inspired by *Hamlet*.

An Evening with Samuel Johnson, Goodall's adaptation of Kay Eldridge's play *Your Obedient Servant*, begins with Goodall preparing for the role of Johnson. Addressing the audience as he dresses himself, he gradually comes into character while narrating all present into the eighteenth century. Donning a false nose and eyebrows he informs us that Johnson's era was a time when a man could be hanged for any of 143 offences. Here the grey stone backdrop of the King's Head Pub appropriately authenticates the harsh reality that the play pre-

COLIN HOGAN



supposes. With Goodall's make-up and costume in place we are then treated to an absorbing exploration of Johnson's life; his early financial struggles, his devotion to his wife, the

success of his *Dictionary of the English Language*, until we meet the deviation that is to justify the production: his friendship with his hero-worshipping biographer, Boswell. Now, it is intimated, we are going to learn the truth about the man, and by extension, about the age — the truths not found in Boswell's work.

In revealing the man behind the famous writer Goodall excels, vividly conveying the effects of all the drudgery, dreams and disappointments that underpin a writer's life. Script and direction move things along with a controlled momentum — no

THE GOOD DOCTOR (left)
Rod Goodall as Samuel
Johnson; **NOBLE QUAFFING**
Gregg, McCloskey, and
Stephens (above) in The
Prince of Denmark

small feat when one is conveying such a life in little more than an hour. Situational scenes are invested with insight and there are liberal sprinklings of Johnson's elegant witticisms, such as

the rueful "marriage has many pains but celibacy has no pleasures." Each utterance is placed within the context of Johnson's life, ensuring they gain a meaning beyond word-play.

In so doing, Goodall fosters the image of Johnson as a troubled but undaunted man, a humanist par excellence. This is an assured, captivating performance played at a relatively constant pitch of intensity throughout, and augmented by fine musical accompaniment from Nuala Ní Chanainn on violin. The hour-long performance proves an appropriate length, while the show overcomes occa-

sionally awkward spatial limitations to convince us of the truth of the claim that his is the name by which an age will be remembered.

A recurring concern in this production is Johnson's efforts to get his one-time student, David Garrick to perform one of his dramatic works. Garrick was largely responsible for the beginning of a revival of popular interest in Shakespearean drama, and having seen *The Prince of Denmark*, one almost wishes Garrick had not been quite so successful. From a functional stage, glib knowing references to Shakespeare's work punctuate a re-imagining of the Bard's work with the events being transposed to The Prince of Denmark Hotel, in the West of Ireland. Hamlet is now Teddy, limp with effeminate whimpering, not so much indecisive as inconsequential. Quotes from Shakespeare are shoehorned into the dialogue in an occasionally inventive manner. In the obligatory gender reversal, Helen Gregg gives an arch and knowing performance as Claudia while she, Carmel Stephens and Fred McCloskey play ten separate roles with much energy, launching themselves in deliberate over-playing in a number of burlesques.

The fundamental problem, however, is trying to discern who the intended audience may be. To play both to those intimately familiar with Shakespeare's work, and those who just desire an evening of comedy, is a delicate balancing act, and proves beyond the reach of this production. It dithers (ironically, considering the source material) and falls between both stools so that it is neither truly comic nor inventively parodic. That said, under the direction of Eileen Gibbons, who co-wrote the piece with Gregg, the timing is often impressive,

especially in light of the number of character and scene changes. This suggests a company which could work well with a script that finds its audience, and perhaps engages with its source material in a more innovative fashion.

The contrast with Goodall's illuminating production is, however, pronounced. Of course Goodall's work has been honed by repeated performances and revisions. And therein lies the problem with this showcase. One wonders how *An Evening...* may be deemed 'new work' given that it previously successfully toured Galway county venues and was performed at the Cúirt Festival 2003. And as much as *An Evening...* could not be deemed very new work, *The Prince of Denmark* is intentionally amongst the more lightweight, rather than significant, work from Galway in recent times. This showcase seemed, in the end, a rattlebag of uncontextualised local theatre works, a point of significance when it is presumably aimed at the Festival visitor determining which shows to book from programme descriptions. If the initiative is continued, then participating theatre companies and audiences alike would benefit from more defined categorisation of content.

Kenneth Nally lectures in English at NUI, Galway.

BEAUTY IN A BROKEN PLACE

By Colm Tóibín

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

16 August-11 September 2004; reviewed 25

August

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

SUMMER 2004. TWO NATIONAL THEATRES premiere plays by prominent writers.

Both are based on real events, and feature characters well known to audiences. Both draw dialogue from statements already on the record, presenting familiar events in disorientating contexts. And both threaten to be rendered irrelevant by news stories that change daily. One play is *Stuff Happens*, David Hare's trenchant critique of the recent invasion of Iraq. Premiering at London's Royal National Theatre, it dominates the arts and news pages of the British media. The other is *Beauty in a Broken Place*, Colm Tóibín's treatment of the *Plough and the Stars* riots. It receives a muted critical response, and is overshadowed by news of redundancies at the Abbey.

This contrast is revealing. It shows that the Abbey is engaging constructively

with current trends in international theatre, producing the first Irish play that blends elements of 'docudrama' with imaginative work. But it also exposes some of that theatre's current difficulties. The Abbey is staging a debate about what a national theatre ought to achieve; meanwhile, the RNT does the job of simply *being* a national theatre, producing work of wide relevance, national appeal, and international class.

This contrast between doing something, and endlessly talking about it, is both the context and the theme of this play. Tóibín suggests that the key moment in the Abbey's post-independence history was not the *Plough and the Stars* controversy in 1926, but the award of a state subsidy the previous year. The debate about



University College Dublin

An Coláiste Ollscoile Baile Átha Cliath

Drama Studies Centre

MA in Drama and Performance Studies

UCD Drama Studies Centre offers a full-time, one-year MA programme. Students explore theoretical and performance aspects of theatre, and develop critical reflection and research on modern theatre practice in an Irish and European context. The programme includes theory and praxis relating to the body in performance, seminars, lectures, theatre visits and critical appraisals, and supervised research.

The Drama Studies Centre will offer a new specialist strand in **Directing for Theatre: Theory and Practice** in 2005/06. An option in **Scriptwriting** will also be available (in partnership with the University of South Wales at Glamorgan).

We welcome applicants who may not fulfil the usual academic requirements, but who have relevant professional expertise and experience.

For further information see our website at www.ucd.ie/dramastd or contact:

Dr Joseph Long, Director, UCD Drama Studies Centre,

Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin

Telephone: (01) 716 8049 a.m. only. Fax: (01) 716 8048.

e-mail: drama.studies@ucd.ie



O'Casey's play was, Tóibín suggests, really a fight for control of the Abbey's remit: would it remain a national theatre, challenging and reinvigorating the Irish imagination, or would it instead become a state theatre, run as an agent of government policy?

This dispute is presented from the perspective of a befuddled and defensive Sean O'Casey, who sees it as a clash between two women: Lady Gregory, who champions *The Plough*, and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, who views that play as an insult to those who died in 1916, including her husband, who was shot when trying to prevent looting. Tóibín presents the two women not as adversaries, but as alter-egos: both have lost the most important men in their lives, and each is slowly realising that

PERPLEXED *Campion, O'Kelly, Karl Shiels and Catriona Ní Mhurchú in Beauty.*

her ideals will be betrayed by the emerging Irish state. Tóibín uses this common ground to propose that

the sign of a first-rate national theatre might be an ability to present conflicting voices without privileging any of them. Director Niall Henry intriguingly emphasises this common ground by having one actor — Derbhle Crotty — play Gregory and Sheehy-Skeffington.

Tóibín draws directly from literary and historical sources here, but must also invent many scenes. This gives rise to a clash between the historical and creative elements of the play. Its historical impulse is to be definitive, to say how things *really* were, an objective the production often achieves. For example, the entire Peacock interior has been designed by Jamie Vartan to resemble

PAT FREDMOND

the original Abbey — and Crotty (in both roles), Sean Campion as Yeats and Donal O'Kelly as O'Casey provide convincing representations of familiar figures.

But Tóibín's creative impulse works against this attempt at historical accuracy. His theme requires subtle characterisation, and emphasises the importance of change; he wants us to see Gregory and O'Casey not as historical figures, but as real people, who are complicated, flawed, and inconsistent. So he is not trying to *recreate* past events, but to reinterpret a history with which, he assumes, we're already familiar. For those audience members who do know about the Abbey's past, that's fine. But for everyone else, it's likely to be confusing.

Niall Henry's solution seems to be to assume that the audience lacks specialised knowledge. Instead he embraces the play's lack of detail to turn many characters into stylised stereotypes. In

the process, however, Tóibín's complex argument about artistic responsibility becomes a clash between rational, dignified Abbey directors, and a more inherently comical band of reactionaries. The imbalance in Tóibín's script means that it's difficult to see how else Henry could have made the production work for all audiences. But, although his style of direction makes the play more accessible, it also obscures Tóibín's apparent objectives.

The sophistication of those objectives suggests that original drama from Tóibín could be very interesting indeed. And Henry's direction suggests he should be given more opportunities to stage naturalistic work (one wonders what he'd make of *The Plough and the Stars*, for example). Tóibín presents us with a vision of a national theatre founded in idealism, dynamism, inclusiveness, and intelligence. But this pro-

DIT Faculty of Applied Arts Conservatory of Music and Drama
announce their new:
B.A. in DRAMA (Performance)

- three-year, full-time degree
- focus on actor training and the study of drama in performance and facilitation contexts
- courses include Stanislavski, contemporary Irish drama, Shakespeare in performance, theatre in education, radio acting and acting to camera
- graduating production and showcase for agents and industry

For more information contact: Peter McDermott
T: (01) 4023515 E: peter.mcdermott@dit.ie

D.I.T DUBLIN INSTITUTE
of TECHNOLOGY
Institutum Trionteliae et Bkale Abha Clabha

www.dit.ie

reviews

duction has so many conflicting objectives and styles that that vision often disappears.

Patrick Lonergan is itm's books editor, and teaches at NUI Galway.

BOSTON MARRIAGE

By David Mamet

B*Spoke Theatre Company

Project Upstairs, Dublin

26 August-18 September, 2004;

reviewed 7 September

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

ANNA (INGRID CRAIGIE) IS A NINETEENTH century single lady who of necessity has recently acquired a (married) male 'protector'. He has provided her with accommodations, a monthly stipend and a valuable family heirloom in the form of a jewelled necklace. Anna is happy, not because she has these things, but because this situation affords her the opportunity to enjoy domestic pleasure with her true love, Claire (Jane Brennan). However, when Claire drops the bombshell that she has fallen in love with someone else, Anna is both crest-fallen and thrown into crisis. The crisis deepens when it is revealed that Claire's new passion is the daughter of Anna's 'protector', and that the girl has recognised her mother's necklace. This formulaic twist threatens to bring the bailiffs upon Anna and Claire unless they can scheme their way out ...

Meanwhile (of course) the real dilemma for these women is not the quasi-comic details of plots and schemes, but a more personal one: the tangled relationship between Anna and Claire and the *Boston Marriage* of the title, derived from a term used to describe the intensely

close (and sometimes, but not necessarily always, sexual) relationships between economically independent, co-habiting women in nineteenth century American society. As Emma Donoghue points out in the programme, the play debuted in the US in 1999 amid the rising voices in the campaign for same-sex marriage and, as she puts it, Mamet's title may suggest that Anna and Claire's voracious, warring, and ultimately romantic "unity-of-two" is the archetypal marriage, same-sex or no.

Though David Mamet's period farce is a departure from his usual milieu, it sparkles with characteristic wit and linguistic precision. He clearly holds great affection for his characters, and still enjoys pitting his creations against one another in barbed rapid-fire exchanges. Given the playwright's usually — almost definitively — masculine point of view, the fact that they are all female is interesting. So too is the fact that the characters speak in what Anna refers to as "the comfort of such sacred and archaic language", as expected in the nineteenth-century drawing-room farce, instead of his idiomatic twentieth-century machine-gun slang.

And yet it becomes clear that these 'differences' are really little more than performative masks. The plot may introduce inconsequential twists and feints typical of late nineteenth century theatre, but the playwright also frequently interrupts the period-style asinine contrivance and arch pedantry with surrealistic asides, mostly provided by the character of Catherine, the Maid (Laura Donnelly). And in what amounts to an reflexive theatrical parlour game, the characters seem aware of the overly elaborate manner of speech, as if conversing this way is part of the masquerade nec-



essary to protect themselves from society and perhaps even from each other. These are self-conscious devices, then, through which Mamet invites the audience to deconstruct the incongruities they represent; in the process, our attitudes towards the subject of same-sex marriage are thrown into relief.

As B*spoke Theatre Company's third production, *Boston Marriage* has the merits of being an unusual work by a major playwright, and of having efficient direction by Loveday Ingram. Joe Vanek's chintz-decorated set properly conveys the just-short-of-camp self-awareness which marks the text itself. Craigie and Brennan handle the Wildean-hued Mametspeak very well, and effectively convey the texture of a relationship laced with anxiety, need, and love. The climax in particular requires some delicate act-

FEISTY FEMALES

Brennan, Donnelly and Craigie in Boston Marriage.

ing, and this is provided by both performers. Donnelly is given a slightly more slippery piece of characterisation as the housemaid, veering from seemingly caricatured naivety to sly intelligence. She handles the transitions successfully, and there are some priceless double-takes as Craigie and Brennan react to the non-sequitors this character introduces.

But overall, and in spite of good production values, *Boston Marriage* doesn't quite hold up simply as a play. Though the one-liners keep coming, along with bawdy *double entendres* about muffs and oven parts (don't ask), the sparkle is not quite enough to disguise the thinness of the plot, however intentional or self-referential the thinness is. The characters have made themselves heard long before Mamet stops speaking, and though he continually adds narrative complication,

reviews

there is no real urgency to the story. The result is a slightly flabby second act that requires strong directorial and thespian intervention. B*spoke have certainly done their best with it, but one senses that however meaningful it may become as textual discourse in the context of a discussion of same sex marriage, this play will never deliver the *frissons* of a *Glengarry Glen Ross* or *Oleanna*.

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

CHAMBER MADE — ROOM 409

Created by David Bolger and Katie Read

CoisCéim Dance Theatre

Kilkenny Ormonde Hotel

7-11 August, 2004; reviewed 7 August

BY SUSAN CONLEY

WHEN IT COMES TO THE KILKENNY Arts Festival, the challenge for practitioners is the lack of ample performance space. CoisCéim Dance Theatre overcame this limitation handily and creatively by staging their latest work in that most transient and compelling of spaces, the hotel room.

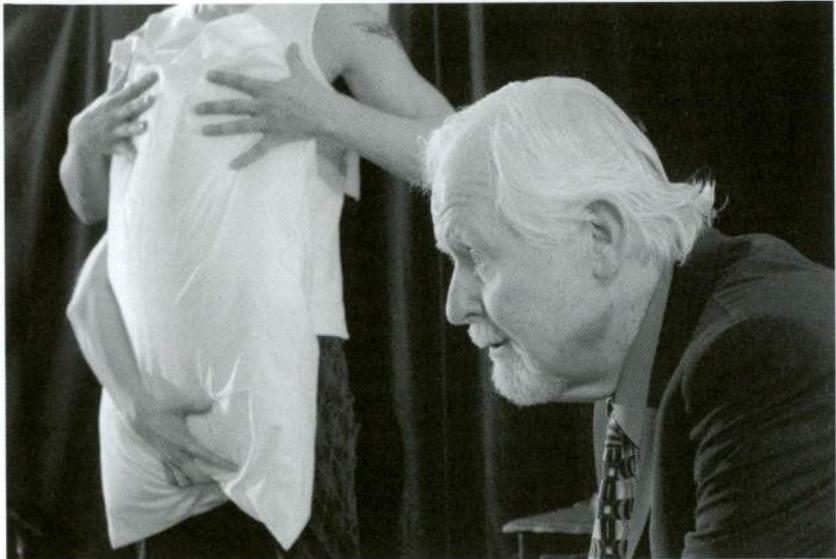
The site of many visible and invisible dramas, a hotel is the perfect place to set a non-conventionally staged piece. This is not only because the notion of what goes on behind the closed door of a room is so fertile; it's also because a hotel is a naturally occurring theatrical space. On the afternoon of the premiere, families were lounging about the lobby having Saturday lunch, children were climbing willy-nilly about the furniture, large groups of tourists were routinely congregating and disintegrating. The crowd standing around the huge floral arrangement in the centre of the foyer could

have been there for any reason, who knew? And if that group of fifteen were to disappear into one room, en masse, well ... that was their business.

The journey up in the lift was accompanied by a hectic cleaner, and as the audience made its way towards Room 409, people found themselves within the life of the play, as a couple raced by, laughing, and an older fella wandered down the hall in his pyjamas, clutching a battered suitcase. Unwitting residents of the next room, back from town with their shopping, smiled absently at the crowd clustered near to their door, and, in automatic respect for the anonymity of the hotel hallway, closed their door behind them with nary a query.

Artistic director David Bolger and co-creator Katie Read have fashioned a delightful gem in which the hotel room, a site for endlessly recycling human drama, cycles through several such dramas simultaneously. No detail was overlooked, the cleaner rather moodily deciding to eat the chocolate hearts she'd just placed carefully on the pillows; no potential theatrical space went unused, as another dancer popped up from the far side of a bed where she'd been concealed since the audience entered the room. Bodies flew in from the balcony, drifted out of the bathroom, and finally, all the stories overlapped as the company joined together to help that older fellow revisit the romance of his lifetime.

Miguel Angel, Muirne Bloomer, Eoin Lynch, Des Nealon, Ester O'Briain and Emma O'Kane are not only asked to perform dance, however; as this is a dance theatre company, they had also to perform character, and it is here that the piece realised its special nature. It's one thing to bounce around exuberantly on the big bed,



another entirely to achieve the expression of exultant courtship, and then of romance gone sour; another still to ask a dancer to perform 'preparing to ask the woman you love to marry you', and to convincingly express the reality of being stood up under the most heartbreaking of circumstances. The company achieved all of this, with acting and dancing of an equally high calibre.

Helping to bring the various narrative threads to life were Rory Pierce (original music), Sinead Cuthbert (costume) and Ciaran Eaton (sound), who pitched their contributions to fit the space perfectly. That perfect pitch was the outstanding element of the production, each aspect of the design subtly fleshing out the space without taking away from its essence as a hotel room. The audience always knew that it was in a non-conventional space,

ALL MADE UP
*Nealon in
Chamber Made*

but never felt that production values were lacking.

That the programme failed to attribute the dancers to their characters means name-checking becomes more of a problem than it ought to be. Audience members, much less critics, do like to put a name to a face, and it's a shame that, in particular, they may have wandered away without knowing that Lynch was the lad who got stood up with a diamond in his pocket, and that Nealon was the fellow they'd seen in his pyjamas. This quibble aside, *Chamber Made* was a creatively staged and often simply magical experience, presenting us with an intimate and innovative piece that delivered, and bringing new meaning to the notion of room service.

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

THE COUNTRY by Martin Crimp

ARClight Theatre Company

The Cube, Project Arts Centre, Dublin

25 August-11 September, 2004;

reviewed 28 August

BY SUSAN CONLEY

OH, TO HEAR A THEATRICAL VOICE and know it for its excellence, almost immediately; it makes taking a chance on a new theatre company, and an unfamiliar writer, so very worthwhile. Martin Crimp was introduced to us via a rather stilted and contrived version of *The Misanthrope*, in the Gate in 2002. How different is his voice without reference to anyone else's work, and despite a feeling of immediate identification with Pinter, Crimp makes use of a minimal dialogue and underlying menace all his own.

Corinne (Fiona Bell) sits at a long, beautiful table, cutting. Her husband Richard (Declan Conlon), asks her heartily what she is doing. Cutting, she replies. Cutting? he asks. She is cutting up photographs from a magazine to place around the children's cots. They talk about cutting as if it is the most important thing in the world, and for Richard and Fiona, it is, because if they don't talk about cutting, they will have to talk about the young woman (Rebecca, played by Fiona O'Shaughnessy) that Richard brought home last night. The unconscious girl he said he found, the stranger he came upon all unexpected, the young woman he said had no handbag.

With the skill of one interrogating someone who habitually lies to her, Corinne knows how to ask questions sideways. Reaching out while withholding information herself, she eventually quite calmly (but with vibrations of underlying rage and fear) produces the

supposedly non-existent handbag, and dumping it out, reveals the very elements of the life that Richard has promised he has left behind.

We know there is something else going on from the get-go, thanks to Crimp's divinely constructed narrative. Explication — which on most run-of-the-mill theatrical outings is handed out at the door when you hand in your ticket — is parsimoniously delivered, as if torn from the weave of lies that forms the fragile framework that is Fiona and Richard's marriage. Their move to the country from the city proves less to do with pastoral needs than grim reality: Doctor Richard is a junkie having an affair with Rebecca, who shares his need for the needle; this move to the country has been to facilitate Richard's proximity to Rebecca, and Fiona has been played for a fool. Fiona takes the children and leaves, only to return, and she and Richard play at reconciliation, engaging in another round of leading questions and seemingly inconsequential events that are, in fact, as loaded as atom bombs. The play ends as they play out another round of their relational trope, ad infinitum, 'til death do they part.

These leading questions about seemingly inconsequential events are the sum of what separates Crimp's work from a great deal of contemporary writing that wants to turn such confrontations into screaming matches and opportunities for histrionics. It is painful to listen to these people talk around each other and through each other, to listen to one trying to hold onto lies in the face of another trying to worm out the truth. Crimp uses repetition, on Fiona's side, against utter conviction, on Richard's; as Fiona wears Richard down, she becomes increasingly strident and he increasingly demoralized.



This creates a tone that is spare and constantly shifting, leaving the audience on tenterhooks throughout, watching and hearing the players as they start in a place of apparent lightness and descend into darkness.

Annabelle Comyn directs with the confidence of someone who knows that she's already won the battle through intelligent choice of material; and through assemblage of a stellar cast, she knows she will win the war. Her talents with pacing and staging come shining through, although, set in a wide traverse in Project's studio

THE GOOD LIFE?
Bell in The Country

space, there were moments in which it was difficult for the audience to literally take in the bigger picture. Paul O'Mahony's setting was eerily spare, and Kevin Smith's lighting design helped make up for the traverse staging difficulties by focusing our vision with his subtle cues.

All three performances were riveting in their own right, with Bell almost impossible to look away from as she desperately tries to control a situation over which she is entirely powerless. Conversely, watching Conlon passively deflate under her

reviews

edgy interrogation, his eyes veiling with his own brand of hopelessness, demanded that we take his feelings on board as well. O'Shaughnessy played the role of interloper without believing for a moment that she is interloping, bringing a stinging tension to her scenes with Bell.

This production, with its choice of material and its strong direction and performances, was undoubtedly one of the highpoints of the theatrical year by a company which, one hopes, will continue to present us with mature and challenging works in the future.

DR. LEDBETTER'S EXPERIMENT

By Tom Swift

The Performance Corporation
and Kilkenny Arts Festival

The streets of Kilkenny, as part of
Kilkenny Arts Festival

7-15 August; reviewed 8 August

BY SUSAN CONLEY

YOU'VE SEEN THEM EVERYWHERE: groups of people — *tourists* — shuffling around in public, in earnest groups, wearing headphones, clutching little walkman-like receivers, heads swivelling like closed circuit television cameras. More at home in a museum than on the streets, perhaps, they are nevertheless ubiquitous, especially in places like Ireland that have a surfeit of that thing called — *history*.

In *Dr Ledbetter's Experiment*, The Performance Corporation asked us to don such headphones, and shuffle around Kilkenny, and solely on behalf of this young, continually exciting company would many of us stoop to participate in this kind of 'group effort.' But after all, what is theatre-going but a group effort? It's simply that it's usual-

ly indoors, in the protective dark. Here, we the punters were as exposed as the actors, perhaps more so as we literally followed the tale of the life of Ledbetter, a fictional early nineteenth century scientist who got Darwin's theory of evolution terribly wrong.

The audience wandered, as directed, into the courtyard of Rothe House on Parliament Street, radio headsets duly tuned in to requisite frequency. Immediately we were immersed not only in Paul Brennan's excellent sound design, and Rob Canning's original score, but also in historic surroundings: the details of the architecture, the leaded glass windows of the surrounding buildings, the cobblestoned expanse at the audience's feet. Helpfully given umbrellas by the Arts Festival's crack staff, and with many clutching plastic bags (presumably full of rain gear), it was the audience who immediately became incongruous, so well had director Jo Mangan and company aurally and visually evoked the period.

The rhythm of the show fell into place with a figuratively and literally audible 'click' when Reverend Spenser (Fergal McElherron) welcomed us into his church service, hymn books and all, and we become not only witnesses but true participants. Ledbetter (Rory Nolan), as a community leader, was also given the opportunity to preach, and his oration eventually veered into the theories of Charles Darwin — *persona non grata* under the Reverend's roof. We were part of the scenery as players and punters watched the good doctor begin a descent into madness, physically following Ledbetter into a space given over to his laboratory.

There, having utterly misread Darwin through skewed logic and basic lunacy, Ledbetter decides that if man has



descended from the ape, then there is nothing stopping a highly evolved man from experimenting on his lessers. The goal is, as ever with these things, immortality. Though the scientist's journey is initially complicated by his morals, these subsequently prove quite disposable in the face of possible everlasting life, the man of God emerging to have no chance when up against the man of Science.

Mangan has assembled a cast of Performance Corporation veterans — McElherron, Damien Devaney and Aoife Moloney — alongside first-timers Nolan and Niamh Daly. All perform to the usual high standard, fully embodying their characters and completely committing to Tom Swift's perfectly pitched text. It would be far too easy to misfire when

WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Nolan in Dr Ledbetter's Experiment

writing in the flowery language of the time period, far too easy for the exchanges to come across as bad *Star Trek* dialogue,

but Swift's hand is sure, capturing tone and texture and time flawlessly. One can hear the emphasis on Ideas of Great Consequence through the cast's conscious (but never self-conscious) vocal expertise: what could have easily become fussy, fancy-pants semantics is made crystal clear through the performers' ability to speak Swift's dialogue skillfully, thereby linking thoughts coherently, and rendering the piece accessible.

Like Ledbetter, the audience ultimately descends into, if not madness, then a creepy discomfort, which is truly one of the most resourceful, intelligent, and germane ways a show like this could end.

reviews

Escorted into the disused gaol beneath Kilkenny's courthouse, eerie little figures made of burlap hung from the ceiling on lengths of hemp, and the mouldy smell and lack of clear sight began to take its toll on some of the more skittish audience members (present company included). We were led down a dead end, and then rather worryingly directed into a small cell that we passed before, that we *thought* was empty. The door, clangingly shut behind us, was brutally bolted, and the ensuing total darkness, unlike that usual protective darkness that we sink into in the theatre, was as full of threat as any childhood cupboard. It was the perfect ending to a complex and perfectly executed production; left — but not for too long — in the darkness of Swift's imagination, we were offered the ultimate release back onto the streets of Kilkenny, back into the light.

ELIZABETH:

ALMOST BY CHANCE A WOMAN

By Dario Fo

Kabosh Theatre Company

Touring; reviewed 24 September 2004 at
Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

BY PAUL DEVLIN

KABOSH'S PROCLAIMED COMMITMENT to stage provocative theatre, and the company's strongly physical and visual performance style, complements the satiric grotesquery explicit in the text of Dario Fo's *Elizabeth: Almost by Chance a Woman*. Fo's schizophrenic Elizabeth I is a paranoid mix of whimsy, egotism, rampant insecurities and ambiguous femininity; full of lust, she is also childlike, and simultaneously politically astute.

Surrounded by conspirators, and the ever-present threat of a Catholic Restora-

tion, Elizabeth sees treason everywhere: *Hamlet*, she fumes, is a parody of her reign and Shakespeare is out to dethrone her. But her beloved Robert, Duke of Essex, who ranks amongst the chief conspirators against her, is she says simply trying to get her attention. Fo's play lifts the petticoats of the Virgin Queen to reveal an isolated, troubled monarch struggling to retain some sense of her femininity in a role that seems to demand she abandon it.

Directed by Rachel O'Riordan, this production achieves, in the main, Fo's desired form of defamiliarised acting through universally well-realised physical performances from the cast. The sense of exaggerated physicality she establishes creates an effective distance between the actors and their characters, and she expertly choreographs and paces the play's first half, accentuating the anarchic farce of Fo's text by playing it with the kind of manic satirical energy of a *Blackadder II* episode. Her most notable production decision is, however, to use an all-male cast. This not only appropriately echoes the conventions of Elizabethan drama, but also acts as a constant reminder of the theatrical constructs at work in the play. The decision to cast a man as Elizabeth, in particular, succeeds in emphasising the questions Fo asks of the difficulties a woman faces maintaining the more nurturing characteristics of a "feminine" sensibility in such a position.

Fo establishes the private world of Elizabeth in the play's first half, dismantling the mythic image of the Queen, but also subtly allowing the demands of her public life to increasingly penetrate this space. In the second half of the play this is reversed: Elizabeth's assumed public persona proves equally permeable to pri-

vate insecurities, resulting in bouts of mania and doubt.

O'Riordan's direction of the first half complements Fo's intention. As plots thicken around her, Elizabeth, who begins the play in only her nightgown, gradually dresses to become the white-faced and red-haired icon of received history. However, both Fo's text and O'Riordan's direction in the second part are less controlled. Partly, Fo struggles to maintain the hectic pitch of the farce in the first half; partly O'Riordan never fully manages to unite that lagging farce with Elizabeth's soliloquies, so the overall effect is that this second section feels somewhat disjointed.

However, Patrick Moy's performance as Elizabeth holds the production together, the strength of his delivery carrying

the production past those few moments where it threatens to disentangle. The role of Elizabeth, on stage and centre-stage virtually throughout the play, demands a huge physical and emotional commitment which Moy produces with force. He is brilliantly effete, childishly moody and malicious, and totally convincing as the paranoid Elizabeth. John Paul Harley, as the Queen's loyal maid-servant, suggests a quiet dignity in his character, a sense of necessarily subdued intelligence, and a genuine motherly affection for Elizabeth. His is a particularly generous performance, allowing Moy the space and range to flesh out his role. Paul Hamilton as Dame Grosslady is physically superb, hunched and snarling throughout the play, and delivering his character's grotesque *patois* with a great



Subscribe to

The Journal of Music in Ireland (JMI)

JMI is published six times a year and includes articles, essays and reviews on traditional and contemporary music in Ireland.

'Ireland's music scene needs and deserves a meaningful forum where crucial issues can be aired properly, and JMI is it.' – Donal Lunny

Visit our web-site for more information: www.thejmi.com

feel for the comic potential of this dialogue. Garry McCann's set design for this touring production is necessarily sparse, but effectively hints at courtly grandeur through use of reds and gold.

While the primary focus of *Elizabeth* may rest in gender politics, however, and while O'Riordan's directorial strategy brilliantly draws out these issues in the play, Fo's text also seems to suggest that no individual, whatever their gender, should ever be permitted to exercise the supreme power and authority Elizabeth possesses. Nor could any individual ever hope to morally survive such a role. O'Riordan wisely chooses to allow contemporary comparisons with Elizabeth's position — most obviously Margaret Thatcher — to rest implicitly in the performance. However, her all-male production does seem to marginalize the possible allegorical connections with some of the more urgent exigencies of the present political climate. Arguably, Fo's play, insisting not only that a woman will be destroyed by absolute power but also that any society headed by an individual leader will inevitably end in corruption, conspiracy, and exploitation, also has room to accommodate these pressing concerns.

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

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

By Tennessee Williams

Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork

27 July-14 Aug 2004; reviewed 27 July

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' 1948 CLASSIC, *The Glass Menagerie* is a play about memory, often taken to be loosely based on

Williams' own experience. Tom Wingfield, who is both narrator and participant, looks back some time after the Second World War to the economic depression of the 1930s. Then working in a warehouse in St. Louis, and supporting his mother Amanda and sister Laura, he sought refuge from the banality of his everyday life in the movies and drinking. Abandoned by her husband sixteen years ago, Amanda has struggled to raise her two children with some of the gentility of her own early years. Her memories of 'gentleman callers', now an antiquated concept, indicates the breadth of the generation gap between Amanda and her children.

Laura has inherited her mother's vulnerability, but none of the steel, and a childhood disease that left her with one leg shorter than the other has made her painfully shy. Her only refuge is in her collection of tiny glass animals, too fragile to move from the shelf. When a 'gentleman caller' — a friend of Tom's from the warehouse — accepts a casual invitation to supper, he never suspects the false hopes it will arouse in Amanda and Laura.

The Glass Menagerie is a fragile piece of writing, just like the collection of glass animals that forms its central metaphor. As Williams wrote in his production notes: "Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part." Equally important is the casting of the role of Amanda, the southern belle come down in the world. This production rose ably to these challenges.

Amanda Wingfield was played by Barbara Babcock, who has had a distin-

guished career in the US on both stage and in television. She set a high standard of performance, her playing of Amanda being perfectly judged, using both voice and gesture to achieve the complex character of Williams' description: "There is as much to admire in Amanda and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at." Her achievement was matched by the younger members of the cast. Myles Horgan is a lively and attractive Tom, getting as much fun as he can out of the part while also conveying his impossible dilemma: does he sacrifice his life to look after the women his father abandoned, or does he follow his dreams? Julie Sharkey as Laura is a mass of pent-up emotion, her vulnerability increasing as the play progresses until, as Tennessee Williams specified, she indeed appears

"like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf." Raymond Scannell as Jim O'Connor hits exactly the right, bluff note, bringing a whiff of the normal world into the Wingfields' hell. The assured delivery of credible and consistent American accents throughout helped to sustain the intensity of the experience.

The Glass Menagerie is a poetic play in the broadest sense of the word — not just in the way it uses language ("gentleman caller", "blue roses") but also in the way that it plays on the audience's emotions. Williams' piece works through its combination of intensely lyrical language with apparently realistic situations, and can only succeed if every single detail of the production works together with the language rather

FRAGILE FEASTING

Hogan, Sharkey, Babcock
and Scannell in *The
Glass Menagerie*



KEVIN MCLOUGHLIN

reviews

than distracting from it. Hence, the way the play looks and sounds matters every bit as much as the way the lines are delivered. Director Patrick Talbot succeeded brilliantly in eliciting fine performances from the actors, and making all elements of the production work together. The music, a haunting composition by Irene Buckley, Patrick Murray's cleverly understated set, Dany Everett's period costumes and Paul Denby's highly dramatic lighting each made a major contribution to the success of the whole.

The result was that scenes like that in which the three Wingfields are on their fire escape, listening to distant dance-hall music on the night air, and wishing on the moon, offered rare moments of pure theatre. Such moments were proof of the great strength of this production; actors, set, lighting, and music combining together in a magical alchemy to make the audience believe whole-heartedly in the illusion.

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

HARD TO BELIEVE by Conall Morrison

Storytellers Theatre Company

Touring; reviewed 10 August, 2004 at
Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh

PEACEFIRE by Macdara Vallely

Peacefire Productions

Touring; reviewed 15 August, 2004 at
Gilded Balloon Caves, Edinburgh

BY MARK FISHER

THE THEME OF RECONCILIATION was everywhere at this year's Edin-

burgh Festival and Fringe. There was a sense of a generation stumbling their way towards an uncertain future, all the while weighed down by the legacy of its past. Wherever you looked, theatre-makers were torn between the desire to move forward and the need to come to terms with what has gone before.

Nowhere was this more true than in two prominent Irish plays. That's not surprising: the trouble with the Troubles is they haven't gone away. You can have all the peace plans, decommissioning and cross-border agreements you like, but it will apparently take generations to pick apart the threads of social fabric that make conflict possible in the first place. Research published in September said that children in Ulster begin to show signs of cultural and political preferences as young as three. When the legacy of the past is so deep-rooted, the future can seem a long time coming.

In Conall Morrison's *Hard to Believe* and Macdara Vallely's *Peacefire* we see two snapshots of just how tightly interwoven the social fabric is. From the outside, the idea of reconciliation might look like basic common sense, but from the inside it can be a different matter. The plays suggest that it's never simply a question of settling grudges and grievances but about somehow untangling the complex web of relationships and expectations that society sustains.

Vallely, an Irish actor and writer who now lives in New York, has written his *Peacefire* monologue about a Catholic teenager growing up in Northern Ireland. Falling in with a bad crowd, the lad gets drawn into joyriding. When the security forces pick him up, they offer him a deal. They won't pros-

ecute him if he promises to inform them about IRA activities. Suddenly a petty criminal becomes a political pawn.

By using a character who has no interest in politics, Vallely demonstrates connections between social poverty and paramilitary activity. The character is a waster, not a creature of political or religious conviction. If he hadn't been living in such dead-end circumstances, he'd never have had got caught in the political crossfire. In this way, Vallely portrays the tensions in

Northern Ireland as a matter not simply about Protestant versus Catholic or army versus terrorist, but a whole network of power relationships on either side of the law. Even if you could take away the rhetoric in a new era of peace, you would still be left with social structures that depend on old animosities.

This is not the first time an Irish dramatist has gone into such territory, and it would be wrong to call it a major work. Vallely performs his own

SCEPTIC SOUL
Kearns in Hard
to Believe



ROS KAVANAGH

reviews

one-man play with a tremendous gift for storytelling, however, that means you don't miss a beat. His socio-political vision is not heavy handed, but an integral and unobtrusive part of the narrative, seamlessly revealing how the actions of an individual can be dwarfed by the force of the society he or she lives in. Performed in a dank and claustrophobic cellar in central Edinburgh, *Peacefire* has a simple theatrical form, enhanced by the occasional hip-hop intrusions of Brendan Dolan's soundtrack. With a convincingly youthful performance by the playwright, it is gripping, lucid and relevant.

Morrison's *Hard to Believe*, meanwhile, has been revived for the first time since its debut ten years ago with the original actor, Sean Kearns, again starring. Although more ambitious in scope than *Peacefire*, it is less successful in execution.

Kearns plays John Foster, a character created by Morrison as a symbol of contemporary Ireland. The first clue to this lies in Foster's mixed Catholic and Protestant parentage. The country's external religious schism is made internal in him, not least because of his chosen profession. Despite the strength of his Catholic side, he has made his career spreading black propaganda as part of the security forces' dirty tricks campaign. In this, you can see him as both oppressed and oppressor.

We encounter him just after the death of his mother, a man suddenly alone in the world. His loneliness compounds the crippling cynicism he has developed as a result of a job as a state-sponsored liar. Morrison sees a parallel to this cynicism in society at large, where belief of any description — even simple religious



**HIP HOP
CHUTZPAH**
*Valley in
Peacefire*

faith — has become impossible. The title of the play has two meanings: it is hard to believe the lengths the security forces would go to and, in these jaded times, it is hard to believe in any moral absolute, be it offered by church or state.

Morrison was commissioned to write this play by Bickerstaffe and Cultures of Island, and apparently chose to write it as a monologue because he felt Foster's isolation was central to his vision. A man detached and disenfranchised — a living embodiment of Margaret Thatcher's credo that there is "no

such thing as society" — was best represented by a solitary actor, he argued.

His reasoning was sound, but it strikes me that isolation is not the most interesting aspect of *Hard to Believe*. It is also a play about the legacy of a nation — be that in its long-term religious history or short-term political history — and that's a lot for one character to shoulder.

The absurdity of some of the dirty tricks could have fuelled a black farce in the Dario Fo mould. There's the story of the stray dog with supposed loyalist sympathies; the myth about friction in your knickers setting off explosives; and the true story of the mobile laundry service designed to sniff out terrorists from their dirty clothes. But Foster is too morose a character to get any laughs out of these tall tales and their comic novelty is muted. The result is an earnest performance weighed down by the play's own ambition. You can admire the richness of Morrison's ideas and the gruff presence of Kearns's acting, but it doesn't draw you in as such incendiary material should.

Mark Fisher is a freelance writer based in Edinburgh.

THE HOSTAGE by Brendan Behan

The New Theatre, Dublin

Touring; reviewed 27 July

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

IN A HOUSE IN 1950S DUBLIN "THAT HAS seen better days", caretaker Pat (Joe Cassidy) presides over a congregation of denizens including prostitutes, homosexuals, and the insane old owner (Terence Orr), who thinks he is still fighting the war of independence. Pat, an old

Republican, is forced to question his values when a kidnapped British soldier (Anthony Fox) is given over to his keeping while the I.R.A. awaits the fate of a volunteer facing execution. Housemaid and country girl Teresa (Orna Joyce) finds herself fascinated by the frightened young man, while various other inhabitants of the house, in search of stout, physical comfort or the odd ballad, drift in and out of the room according to their curiosity and the state of Pat's temper. It all ends in chaos and tragedy when, as Behan tells us through song "the bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling."

The fusion between the collaborative improvisation at the Theatre Workshop and Behan's laid-back writing style was the core of Joan Littlewood's sensational 1950s productions of *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*. *The Hostage* in particular invited an informal attitude reflective of the personality of the playwright and a then radical approach to dramaturgy. In Behan's work, incendiary politics and bursts of violent energy could emerge from a relaxed, almost lethargic setting. Characters spending time patiently drinking stout or singing a ballad could suddenly deliver pointed, ironic dialogue, playing complex games with language or summing up the paradoxes of Irish history with knowing references to the world of the present. A comfortable scene of an Irish jig could give way to a parade of wasted souls and broken revolutionaries. It was a dark, knowing, funny view of the world spoken with a clear, original voice, and the shock of it was given all the more force by the manner of its presentation.

Behan's legend is now long established, however, and *The Hostage* is

reviews

never far from the stage. Its moment of impact has passed, and it takes vision or immense technical skill to make the play relevant today. There is no longer anything surprising about Behan's scepticism for Irish romantic nationalism, nor about the presence of such dishevelled characters in an Irish setting. Though Behan's heartfelt humanity still shines through the trappings of grotesquery, there is a subtle, delicate balance to the polemical energies at the centre of the play that needs to be managed particularly well.

This, then, was the challenge facing director Ronan Wilmot: to bring some kind of perspective to this production while also delivering the conventional pleasures of the text. His initial approach seemed interesting. The play begins with the customary dance scene, but now features Teresa alone dancing to the radio. She is interrupted by the arrival of the rest of the cast, parading from the dark recesses of the gloomy *de facto* bordello like a parade of the damned. They stand frozen in tableau, facing down the audience with all the decadent excess in appearance that they can muster, before silently yielding to the initial dialogue between Pat and his 'consort' Meg (Laoisa Sexton). This frozen moment of confrontation



LOCK UP Lenny Hayden
and Fox in *The Hostage*

represents a challenge to the comfortable fourth wall space of the theatre, and gives perhaps a glimpse of a radical revisioning of the text that just might break through the weight of tradition which now bears down upon it.

Unfortunately the approach is not sustained. This momentary *frisson* gives way to garden-variety thespian and directorial stiffness which seems more the result of nerves and uncertainty than a deliberate aesthetic. The cast do not so much "drift in and out of the room" as hesitantly enter and exit on occasion, as if unsure of

how to move or where to sit. Much of the dialogue is lost as this awkwardness persists, distracting the audience from what the principals are saying. When a large number of characters are on stage, it looks not so much a nonchalant gathering of lost souls as a confused muddle.

The individual performances are a mixed bag. Cassidy has plenty of presence, Fox is fairly sympathetic, and Orr clearly enjoys his noisy cameo appearances, but much of the cast seems too nervous to settle into actual characterisation. Joyce particularly fails to convey the subtle shifting of emotion that elucidates her character's relationship with the hostage, and this brings the human heart of the play down. She also becomes the unwitting victim of a disastrous decision to replace Behan's chilling "bells of hell" ballad with a solemn aria sung by Joyce herself. This sounds the final painfully false note of a production ultimately unable to illuminate the text.

IMPROBABLE FREQUENCY

By Arthur Riordan (book and lyrics)

and Bell Helicopter (music)

Rough Magic Theatre Company

O'Reilly Theatre, Dublin

27 September–9 October, 2004;

reviewed 9 October

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

THE HISTORIES OF MANY IRISH THEATRE companies reveal that producing international plays can subsequently stimulate the development of new Irish writing. Since 1984, this link has been most obvious in the growth of Rough Magic. Founded from a perception that Irish theatre was too insular, the company moved quickly from presenting Irish

premieres by dramatists like Caryl Churchill and Wallace Shawn, to commissioning drama by new Irish writers, many of whom started their careers as actors. Twenty years on, the Rough Magic style is firmly established: we can generally rely on the company to present work with an internationalised, urban, contemporary feel, regardless of the playwright's nationality.

Improbable Frequency is thus a great way for Rough Magic to celebrate its twentieth anniversary. It blends many features of Irish drama: the comic absurdism of Beckett, Behan's politicised vaudeville, Boucicault's melodrama, and the gallows-humour cynicism of Ireland's younger writers. And it integrates many elements of the international into an Irish setting, from Brecht and Weil to Broadway. But, most importantly, the play takes as its theme the question that has dominated the development of Rough Magic: why does Ireland present itself as being isolated from the rest of the world, when it's obvious that a more internationalised perspective is not just beneficial, but necessary?

This theme is developed by setting the play in Dublin during the Second World War. English crossword-enthusiast turned code-breaker Tristram Faraday (Peter Hanly) has been sent to neutral Ireland to investigate a radio station that appears to be sending useful signals about the weather to Germany. Along the way, he encounters the obligatory *femme fatale*, Agent Green (Cathy White), before falling for innocent colleen Philomena O'Shea (played by a show-stealing Lisa Lambe).

Interestingly, the most improbable characters here are the ones based on fact. Faraday finds that his British Secret



Service contact in Dublin is the poet John Betjeman (Rory Nolan), who actually was a spy in Ireland during the early 1940s. Much of the action takes place in the Red Bank restaurant on D'Olier Street, which was a gathering place for Irish Nazi sympathisers. The key to the play is the German physicist Erwin Schrödinger (Declan Conlon), whose life was even more extraordinary than is presented here. And, finally, we meet Flann O'Brien, presented as Myles Na gCopaleen (Daragh Kelly), the pseudonym he used for his journalism and perhaps a reference to another important Irish musical play, Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*.

The strength of writer Arthur Riordan's treatment of neutrality is that he manages to be critical of Ireland's past without being smug about our distance from that time. There is an obvious

SPOOKSONG *Lambe, Kelly, Hanly, White, Conlon and Rory Nolan in Improbable Frequency*

attempt here to draw parallels between Ireland during the 'Emergency' and contemporary events. This play takes a satirical look at

an Ireland that turns a blind eye to an international conflict, feigning neutrality while war wages — at a time when debate rages about the number of American soldiers that pass each week through Shannon Airport, en route to Iraq. We get pointed references during the piece to the movement of military personnel through Ireland and, most importantly, the musical hinges on the discovery of a secret Irish 'weapon of mass destruction', the existence of which encourages representatives of foreign governments to completely ignore Irish sovereignty. Riordan makes clear that the gulf between Ireland's past and present is not as wide as we might like to believe.

ROS KAVANAGH

This serious intent doesn't stop the play from being extremely enjoyable, however. Alan Farquharson's set allows the action to switch easily between musical and cabaret. Music, composed by Bell Helicopter and performed by a live band, keeps the audience's feet tapping, while the lyrics are often bitingly funny. And the cast, directed by Lynne Parker, moves through multiple roles with a slick, savvy professionalism — which is particularly admirable, given that most of them are unused to musical theatre.

The only problem is that the action peaks about twenty minutes from the finale, when the stage is transformed to reveal the 'weapon of mass destruction.' Thereafter, the work runs out of steam, perhaps becoming a little uncomfortable with its own improbability. Cutting one or two numbers and running without an interval might avoid this problem but, in any case, the work could do with a stronger ending.

Nevertheless, *Improbable Frequency* is another fine production from Rough Magic. Not only does it have strong contemporary relevance, and point Irish theatre in interesting new directions, but it also encapsulates the company's best qualities. Not a bad way to celebrate an anniversary, that.

JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN

By Stephen Adly Guirgis

Focus Theatre, Dublin

30 August–18 September 2004;

reviewed 8 September

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

OPENING WITH A SCENE IN WHICH a kneeling prisoner tries vainly to pray, Stephen Adly Guirgis' play quickly establishes its central concerns of human

despair, forgiveness and power relations. The storyline of the 'super star' prisoner who wrestles both with his conscience and with the concept of Christian redemption has featured before, markedly in such films as *Dead Man Walking*. Though similar in theme, however, *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* avoids any sense of dull repetition through layered characterisation, an engaging use of language, and humane, anti-sensationalist handling of contentious subject matter.

The play focuses on the dynamics between characters who meet in a New York prison. Angel, a new prisoner who has recently been charged with stabbing a cult leader, meets hardened defence lawyer Mary Jane with whom he initiates a bickering relationship; this eventually turns into mutual sympathy. Meanwhile serial murderer and born-again Christian Lucius initially commands the admiration of a kind-hearted prison guard, D'Amico, but arouses sadistic contempt in the latter's successor Valdez.

Rhetorical encounters comprise the play's central thrust, with reflective monologues sketching in the characters' motivations. The influence of Tarantino can be heard in Guirgis' dialogue, which includes riffs on popular culture; the playwright's experience as a television writer on shows such as *The Sopranos* is palpable in the tautness of the script. We watch the characters attempt to persuade or coerce each other through well-crafted speeches, the play subtly examining how individual lives are affected by chance meetings and past events.

Joe Devlin's direction of these encounters is excellent, while with carefully timed, nearly imperceptible, use of dim-



ming, Kevin Smith's lighting catches the cadences of the characters' more intense exchanges. The actors' athletic movement in the prison cells is reminiscent of zoo animals pacing through habit, boredom, and resistance to unnatural incarceration: Angel climbs the sides of his cell to underline his sense of desperation, while Lucius' manic exercising and proselytising have a similar effect. Indeed the set, designed by Martin Cahill, plays a crucial role in the success of this production: an imposing metal cage comprising two cells sits squarely in this cramped theatre space, filling more than half the stage, with the audience in uncomfortably close

COOPED UP CONS *Mills and Brown in Jesus Hopped...*

proximity. Menace is palpable on both sides of the penal barrier, as Valdez also paces out-

side, threatening to enter and beat Lucius, in barely contained rage at the prisoner's apparent lack of guilt. The actors frequently snap the sides of the wire cage, producing an ominous jangling sound. The high-pitched operatic music which accompanies a number of scene changes seems affected when compared with this inspired use of the cage as sound effect.

The actors' performances are superlative. Hope Brown draws out all the nuances of the role of Lucius: crazy, compassionate, trustworthy, manipulative,

ROS KAVANAGH

irate and humorous. The commanding physicality of his performance conveys menace and gentleness by turns. Equally compelling is Declan Mills as the Puerto Rican inmate Angel; he opens the play with an intensity which he then sustains, playing a man who is frustrated, angry, helpless, and pathetic. Mills' wholly convincing Latino appearance and accent, and his awkward body movement, ring true and testify to the versatility of this actor. Aisling McLaughlin (Mary Jane) and Art Kearns (D'Amico) bring a quiet sympathy to their roles, respectively depicting a lawyer and a guard who each break a set of rules by aiding one of the prisoners, end up sacrificing their careers, and emerge more contented in their own lives. In the play's first act Paul Roe's rendition of the brutal prison guard Valdez borders on stereotype (thumb tucked into his waistband, stiffly pacing), but as the play progresses he successfully develops this to present a man of bitterness and bloodlust.

The result is no black and white treatment of the topic of guilt. Guirgis instead points to the sense of righteousness in acts of terror, most notably here a murderer's belief that his crime is justified. This very thoughtful kaleidoscope of themes of moral justification, and of what constitutes being human, is provocative; as expertly produced by Focus, it leaves us to ponder a number of questions. Do we, for example, require a Christian framework in order to measure our conception of right and wrong? And is killing for a reason more justifiable than killing for no reason? Though of longstanding relevance, such questions patently carry a sense of urgency in today's world, and to be confronted by them in a production on an Irish stage is more than welcome.

JOHN BULL'S OTHER ISLAND

By George Bernard Shaw

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

17 September–16 October 2004;

reviewed 16 October

BY PAUL DEVLIN

ORIGINALLY COMMISSIONED BY WB YEATS for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1904, and then rejected by him ostensibly on the grounds that it was too long and too technical, the Lyric Theatre's ambitious centenary production of George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* proved a judicious reminder of Shaw's prophetic insight into the vagaries of multi-national investment in the modern Irish state.

Shaw's epic political comedy follows the fortunes of Tom Broadbent, an English entrepreneur, and his attempts to acquire land in Ireland on which to build a golf course and hotel. Larry Doyle, Broadbent's dour Irish business partner who left Ireland years earlier and hasn't returned since, accompanies him on his trip, which turns out to be to Doyle's old townland, Roscullen. Broadbent's vim and vigour, coupled with his fecklessly romantic conceptions of Ireland and "the Irish", make him both a charming and disarming land developer. The locals take him for a fool and plan to borrow as much money as possible from him on the strength of their land. This suits Broadbent's purposes, and also allows him to garner local support for his campaign to become Roscullen's Member of Parliament — a position which, should he attain it, he intends to use solely in the service of his own business interests.

Counterpointing Broadbent's Blairite sincerity and somewhat affected idealism is Doyle's cool business manner.

Having rejected both the Protestant aristocracy's former control of Irish land and the emergent transfer of power to the 'Catholic rabble' in the wake of the Land Reform Act, Doyle rejects misty-eyed Irish romanticism in favour of the 'certainties' of progress, science, and capitalism. Only Keegan, a lapsed, vegetarian priest and something of a Fabian mouthpiece in the play, can see through Broadbent and Doyle's seemingly ameliorating plans for Roscullen.

In this, his Irish debut, respected English director Jonathan Munby has a formidable meeting of minds with designer Mike Britton, which powerfully foregrounds Shaw's focus on the belated first stirrings of modernity in Ireland. In a play at pains to warn of the ability of Ireland's climate to "thicken the wits" of its inhabitants, Britton creates a lurid, idealised backdrop of a neon green and blue panoramic representing the hills and sky of Roscullen. This is an apt dreamscape, the filmic hint of early modernity mirroring Shaw's central conceit.

Meanwhile Munby's smooth direction is effectively crystallised in the transition from Broadbent and Doyle's cramped office in the first act to the expansive possibilities of Roscullen in the second. Here



SASSY SUITS Cox and Higgins in John Bull's Other Island

he holds the figure of Keegan in a temporary, Sam Shepard-like, silhouette. This image not only visually establishes Keegan's steadfast individualism

and innate integrity, but also offers a vivid contrast to the earlier neon flickering projected image. Complimenting this, Conleth White's colourful lighting design heightens the sense of the rural idyll Munby's direction so clearly establishes.

Alex Cox is excellent as the bump-

FERGUS GRANT

tious Gladstonian Broadbent, managing to win the audience's tacit approval for his character with a persuasive combination of comedic skill and wonderfully overstated 'English' sincerity. Munby encourages Cox to play every line for all its comic value, which has the effect of energising the stage for his entire performance. Vincent Higgins as Larry Doyle quickly establishes the cold rationality of his character, and thoughtfully negotiates Doyle's lengthy speeches. Maria Connolly's performance as Nora Reilly, Doyle's long-suffering sweetheart and a potentially useful Irish wife for Broadbent, is both funny and charming, and together she and Cox are an accomplished comedy duo. Lalor Roddy's ominous realisation of his role as Keegan aptly counterbalances the play's lighter moments; Roddy carries Shaw's weighty moral premonitions with confidence and a suitably measured degree of reticence.

Shaw's play seeks to problematise the construction of self-identity based on the supposed indicators of 'national characteristics.' As an internationalist and socialist, he was clearly uneasy with the stereotypes such conceptions produce. Stereotypes, his play suggests, can create an arena for limited understanding, and the space for shallow negotiations to occur, but also necessarily open the door to misunderstanding and duplicity. Though now rightly complicated by the equally pressing problems of class, gender, and sexual identity, these issues remain, as this anniversary production attests, common currency in an Ireland where we seem engaged in an endless round of re-negotiating the national self/selves.

MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION

By George Bernard Shaw

Cork Opera House in association with

Yew Tree Theatre

Touring; reviewed 10 August, 2004

at Cork Opera House

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

THE BIG SURPRISE WAS FINDING THAT *Mrs Warren's Profession*, written in 1893 by George Bernard Shaw, is a punchy, well-made play in which he uses a drawing room comedy to explore the injustices and hypocrisies on which polite society is based. The disappointment was director John Breen's decision to set the play, co-produced by Yew Tree Theatre Company and Cork Opera House, in the 1950s.

The play centres on a visit by Mrs Warren, together with friends Praed and Crofts, from London to her daughter Vivie, who is holidaying in a cottage in Haslemere in Surrey, having recently graduated brilliantly from Cambridge in mathematics. Vivie hardly knows her mother, who lives abroad; in twenty years they have only spent a few months together. She challenges her mother's assumption that, having finished college, she will live at home until she marries; Vivie wants to work as an actuary.

When she demands to know more about her mother's life, Mrs Warren reveals that she escaped a life of poverty by becoming a prostitute (though the word is never actually used), and setting up a chain of brothels abroad with charming business partner, Sir George Crofts. Vivie initially admires her mother's courage and work ethic, but on discovering that the brothel business continues, is horrified. Rejecting Crofts' argument that it is morally preferable to



profit from well-organised prostitution than from exploiting factory labourers in appalling conditions. Vivie leaves for London, refusing further financial support.

When *Mrs Warren's Profession* was finally performed on the London stage in 1902, the St. James Gazette condemned it as "one of the boldest and most specious defences of an immoral life for women ever penned." Shaw was pleased enough with this comment to quote it in the *Apology* that prefaces the printed version. The issue of prostitution still resonates — a hundred years later neither English nor Irish society has come any closer to dealing with its legal status.

The issue of working women has changed drastically, however, as have

SOCIAL STRETCH?

*McCarthy, Bradley,
McDonagh and
O'Mahoney in Mrs
Warren's Profession*

those of child labour and health and safety at work. A programme note by Eamonn Jordan notes that Vivie's disillusion is matched by that of "1950s post-war, reactionary Britain", a period in which

he argues that women lost the freedoms that had been earned during the war years. But the post-war situation, while undoubtedly tough, was arguably not as extreme for women as that of the 1890s. While certainly there was tremendous pressure on women to return to the home in 1950s Britain, there were also the stirrings of change. Women *had* worked more widely; the civil service marriage bar in Britain had been abolished in 1946; while in the 1950s British women teachers and civil servants had won equal pay. The changed setting therefore loses a good

PAUL McCARTHY

deal of the impact of Vivie's decision: much of the play's force derives from its specific historical context. Vivie is an exact contemporary of Gwendoline and Cicely (*The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed in 1895), and her resolve to make her own living has a greater radicalism in its 1890s context.

Having chosen the 1950s setting, too, there was some uncertainty in this production about how to express it. The set, by Sinead O'Hanlon, was certainly pretty in a generically nostalgic way, with a wicket gate and rambling roses over windows and doors. The Opera House's balcony was tented off, giving the impression that the play was being performed in a marquee, which worked well on a summer's night, helped by Paul Denby's sunny lighting, and muted bird song. The ballet music during scene changes was a nice touch.

But as the play opens, Vivie (Gillian McCarthy) is reclining outside her country cottage on the diving board of a small swimming pool — surely an unlikely luxury in post-war Britain? Charlotte Bradley as Mrs Warren was brilliantly costumed in a figure-hugging sheath dress by Léonore McDonagh, but her hairstyle seemed from a more modern era. Her accent, when it slipped to reveal her origins, veered between cockney and north of England. Mrs Warren's friend Praed (Malcolm Adams) had similar confusions of accent. Only with the entry of Robert O'Mahoney as Crofts did one feel the presence of an actor who delivered his Shavian lines with appropriate ease and relish.

Nonetheless the cast, which included lively performances from Sean McDonagh as Frank, and Mal Whyte at the Reverend, worked very hard, often to sat-

isfy effect, as in Mrs Warren's enraged "Put yourself above me!" speech. But the dialogue, which should have sparked, became increasingly hesitant, most notably in the final exchange between Frank and Praed. Lacking clear direction, the actors failed to relate fruitfully to each other, a problem symptomatic of the production overall. While enjoyable in parts, it failed to achieve cohesion and impact, being simply unable to recover from that 1950s period setting.

OPEN SOURCE

Galway Arts Festival/Ghent

Festival/Helena Jonsdottir

Black Box Theatre, as part of

Galway Arts Festival

12-15 July 2004; reviewed 13 July

BY MARY COLL

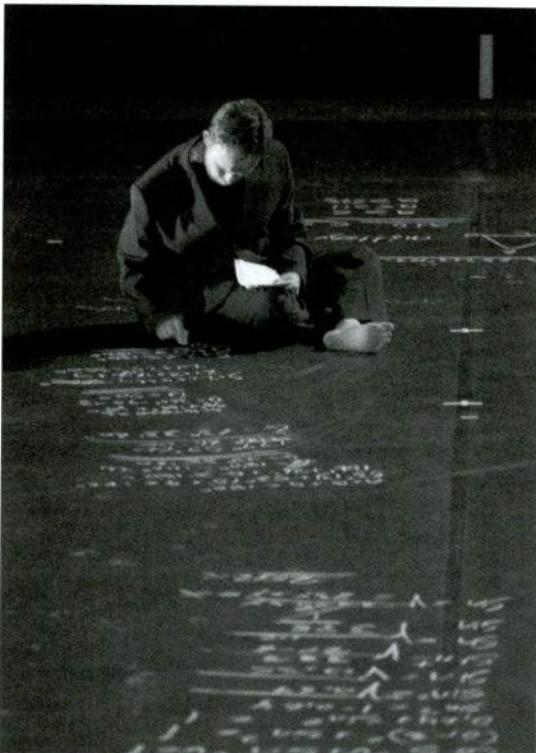
COMMENCING AS THE AUDIENCE takes their seats, *Open Source* has a cast of five performers, who begin by moving across the stage one by one to shed their drab everyday suits and pile them up in rows at the opposite side. They then exit, and then repeat this action. They are not all actors and they are not all dancers, but then this work is determined to defy tight definitions. It is not dance, it is not theatre, it is not performance art, it is all of these and more — and none of these whatsoever.

Through *Open Source* Icelandic director Helena Jonsdottir is trying to discover what it means to be Irish, to live an ordinary life in this country, and to give meaning and value to that far from simple concept of the ordinary. Throughout this ninety-minute work the same question is repeatedly asked by the various performers: "Can we use everything?" Unfortunately, Jonsdottir's answer is a

resounding "Yes", and the result is a deluge. Working with a core text comprised of snatches of everyday conversation, loose narrative threads, and clips from the soundtrack of *Buntús Cainte*, the 1970's audio-visual Irish language series, and played against a looming backdrop of focus video projections, there is a definite air of the surreal to *Open Source*.

Trying to be everything while refusing to be anything leads to a sense of dislocation and confusion, however; a failure to commit which weakens this show's overall impact. It's the seemingly vacant spaces between more highly charged set pieces of dance or dialogue that are the problem, artistic pauses when the energy seems to drain away from the core and it becomes tedious. Interminably listing the precise content and weight of innumerable jars of coins is not experimental or cutting edge, for example — it's lethargic, and it tests the goodwill of its audience to explore the contemporary artistic process.

This piece desperately needed to connect to its audience: its entire premise was that of exploring one culture through the eyes of another, Iceland looking into Ireland, stimulating Ireland to look into itself, and to carry this process beyond the



DRAWING CONNECTIONS:

Kilroy in Open Source

limits of the theatre space into the wider world outside. But such a journey requires a sense of trust between audience and performer, otherwise resistance builds. Here, though Paul Keogan's lighting swept over the stage in impressive waves of clarity and illumination, the subject matter beneath remained lost to our senses. Consequently, with *Open Source* you could feel the audience holding back, and a sense of loss rising like a damp chill inside the Black Box Theatre.

However, periodically a central focus

was found, and when movement and language came together coherently there was a wistful grace and a delicate charm to *Open Source* that offered a brief glimpse of what might have been. Solo narratives are given a chance to breathe, little gestures find a place to make their mark, Cameron Corbett is liberated to move, and in so doing lifts the entire mood of the work to another dimension. Now and again beautifully crafted set pieces emerge and almost save the day. The image of Rachel Wynne soaring upwards on a full skirt unfurling from the pile of cast off clothing, and ethereally glowing like a Paul Henry painting, silently speaks volumes about the genuine intentions and aspirations of this work.

Furthermore the device of using both dancers and actors together was successful. Each complemented the other, with clear and true voices matched to fluid movement, and there was no doubting the sincerity of the collective performance by Corbett, Wynne, Mike Winter, Lynn Cahill and Enda Kilroy.

On paper the international team involved in this production is quite impressive. In Iceland and Ireland they have won individual awards and accolades for their work as choreographers, writers, editors, musicians, designers and performers. Together they represent a real wealth of talent, experience and creative energy, which should have produced the kind of innovative and imaginative production that can define a festival. That *Open Source* failed to do so is indeed a matter of regret and disappointment, but arts festivals run the risk of losing credibility as anything more than a tourist attraction unless they are prepared to programme events which challenge an audience and push

artistic limits. Hence, despite the confused outcome on this occasion, Galway Arts Festival is nonetheless to be commended for developing *Open Source* and for bravely placing it at the opening of this year's Festival.

Mary Coll is a Limerick based writer and broadcaster.

SWANSONG by Conor McDermottroe

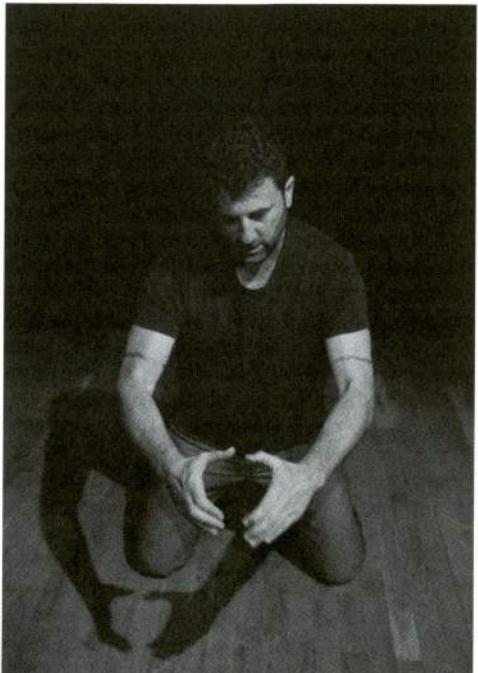
Benrae Productions Ltd.
Touring; reviewed 20 July 2004 at
Town Hall Studio as part of Galway Arts
Festival.

PARALLEL PARKING by Josh Tobiessen

Catastrophe Theatre
Hynes Car Park, Galway, as part of
Galway Arts Festival.
13-24 July, 2004; reviewed 22 July
BY LISA FITZPATRICK

THE SWAN, FRANK MCGUINNESS'S programme note reminds us, sings its heart out in its last moments of life. In *Swansong*, the slow-witted character Occi reveals his heart, recounting his life-story from early childhood, through his one romance, to the death of his mother. In the process he also narrates his own personal history of violence, including his murder of his best friend, ultimately explaining that he has been reconciled with his past and has found some peace of mind.

Occi enters the bare stage through the back curtain, whistling and calling to "Agnes", and tossing breadcrumbs, the only prop, to the side of the playing area. With this simple action, he establishes the scene: a public park, where swans are nesting. He threatens the other swans as they jostle for Agnes'



crumbs — we quickly realize that Occi's relationships are singular and intense — and begins a direct address to the audience. Through the ironic little story that follows, telling of the death of Agnes's mate, and reminding us that swans mate for life, we are prepared for the tragi-comedy of Occi's biography.

McDermottroe performs the part with sensitivity, and the intimacy of the Town Hall Studio works well with the piece. The simplicity of the staging allows for an unimpeded focus on McDermottroe's text and performance, and the style, in which the actor allows us access to Occi

SOMBRE SOLOIST

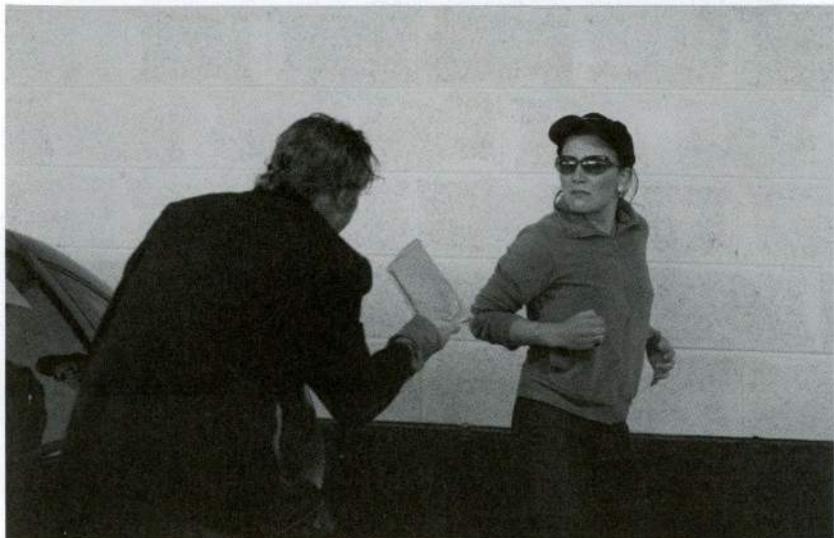
McDermottroe in
Swansong

but does not attempt to portray the other characters, relegates them firmly to their existence in Occi's consciousness. By structuring the monologue associatively, McDermottroe also creates a lyrical narrative that offers an insight into the working of Occi's mind. The audience therefore is entirely focused on his struggle with his limited ability to understand the world around him and the consequences of his actions.

McDermottroe also expresses Occi's emotional landscape physically. The character's rare moments of tenderness, in his relationship with his mother, for example, leave him bewildered and vulnerable; he is more comfortable meeting the world with his fists clenched. In moments when either of the women is threatened, he becomes immediately and uncontrollably angry, his body tensed, his movements abrupt and jerky. But when moved to tenderness and love, his body expresses his confusion in its slackness and immobility. These moments serve to humanise the character, giving him depth while still portraying his emotional illiteracy and intellectual limitations.

Yet despite the strength of both text and performance, there is something in this work that disappoints. Ultimately, this is a story that has been played before, most memorably in *The Butcher Boy*: the boy from the brutal background whose adult life is a violent odyssey, punctuated by occasional sentimental

COLIN HOGAN



attachments to women. The opening scene, with the rich symbolism of the story of the swan and the vivid creation of a setting in just a few small physical movements, promised much more, and hints at McDermott-troe's capabilities; it would be interesting to see how his work could develop.

Catastrophe Theatre has established a reputation for innovative and interesting work, and *Parallel Parking* is its first attempt at a site-specific piece. Set in the top floors of a multi-storey car park, the story tells of a Temp with high hopes of working his way to the top now he has "a foot in the door." However, it quickly becomes evident to all but him that he is a fall guy, hired only to be sent to deliver a package to a loan-shark's goon, Carl. On his way, he meets a variety of eccentric characters, including the Channel 10 Weather Girl, Jack the photographer and

HI RISE MOVER
Bonar and Bennett
in *Parallel Parking*

Helen, his over-committed girlfriend.

In its favour, the play has some amusing elements — Helen's ability to form intense and meaningful relationships in seconds, or the Temp's stubborn insistence that Carl should break his arms, for example — and the final twist to the story proves nicely understated and speculative. Unimaginative use is made of the found space, however. The action certainly moves through the three areas and two floors of the car-park, so that the audience's physical journey mirrors the mounting dramatic tension; indeed, the Temp's belief that he can "work his way to the top" is ironically realized as he squirms and struggles in Carl's grip on the top floor of the park.

But this oddly literal setting diminishes the production, particularly since the action is always fixed in tiny areas of

the potential space, so that the opportunity to play with scale and perspective is lost. There is no compelling artistic reason why this could not play equally well in a theatre. In fact, mainly comprised as it is of two-person dialogues, and with humour relying on verbal exchanges, a more intimate space might have enhanced the work by creating a tighter focus on these interpersonal moments.

But the great weakness of the show is the lack of a single consistent style. Paul Bonar's grotesquely obsequious Temp, though clever in itself, does not play well beside Seamus Ferierick's naturalism as the cool menacing Carl. Claire-Louise Bennett's performance as the Weather Girl is reminiscent of Edina from *Absolutely Fabulous*, while Meabh McNairney, who plays Helen, is awkwardly self-conscious. Against the hyper-real setting of the car park this disarray of acting styles is even more apparent; for Catastrophe to grow as a company, a coherent company style needs to be developed.

Overall, Conor McDermottroe's *Swansong* and Catastrophe Theatre's *Parallel Parking* raise the same question, though for different reasons: what aesthetic reasoning informed their dominant playing choice, be it genre or performance space? *Parallel Parking* might have been better served as other than a site-specific play, while *Swansong*, a monologue skilfully written, directed and performed by Conor McDermottroe, proved most interesting when moving away from a more conventional monologue form. Ultimately, then, despite their respective strengths, it could be argued that neither production fully explored the riches their

respective choices opened up before them.

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

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

by Andrew Bovell

Civic Theatre in association with

Quare Hawks Theatre Company

Civic Theatre, Tallaght

1-18 September 2004; reviewed 4 September

BY BRIAN LAVERY

RARELY HAS THE GRIMACE-INDUCING sportscaster's cliché been more true: this is, quite literally, a play of two halves. As leading Australian writer Andrew Bovell explained in the programme notes to an earlier revival, its two acts were originally two separate plays, cobbled together in 1996 to make *Speaking in Tongues*. That provenance goes a long way towards clarifying the disjointed nature of this work, but doesn't wipe away the grimace.

Bovell himself has noted the influence on this play of the segmented, character-swapping narrative structure in films like *Happiness* and *Magnolia*, and this piece similarly starts by tackling marital infidelity and modern insecurities with two couples, linked by an unlikely act of inadvertent wife-swapping. Later on, straightforward questions of loyalty and honesty fade from view as the play shifts over to characters who are spiritually adrift, or maybe just naïve, trying to find their place in the world by grasping at ideal relationships instead of reality.

In act one, Leon (Seamus Moran) cheats on Sonya (Una Kavanagh)



with Jane (Noelle Brown), who is cheating on her husband Pete (Karl O'Neill). Then Leon

and Pete — who are strangers at first — accidentally get chatting. Each man has gone for a pint on his own, to gather his thoughts about being the perpetrator and victim of betrayal, and Leon eventually realises that he is talking to the man he cuckolded. The scene is subsequently repeated, nearly exactly, with Sonya and Jane.

Moran is the strongest actor in the

FALSE CONSOLATION:
O'Neill and Kavanagh in
Speaking in Tongues

production, and provides an anchor during encounters with less assured and more high-strung performances like O'Neill's. Brown's 'plain Jane' seems appropriately unsure of how to carry herself in a bar, but also slyly proud of her indiscretion. Before confronting the adulteress across from her, Kavanagh's Sonya dances on her own to deal with it — an exercise in writhing that taints her otherwise fine performance, and belies director Liam Halligan's willingness to overindulge the script's quirks.

The acting, like the plot itself, becomes more fragmented in the second act, when the actors take on new roles in new settings. A therapist goes missing; a housewife suspects her neighbour; a long-lost love stays unrequited. The straightforward structure of part one is abandoned in favour of short glimpses of characters whose lives overlap, but are only tangentially related. The lack of a compelling story makes the production's missteps more difficult to watch, like the repeated occasions when the actors speak lines or even just one word in unison, while Halligan has them all stare off dreamily into the distance left of the stage. Bovell's flat writing does little to engage the ear, especially when delivered in a recording of the answering machine message, recited by Brown in a wooden monotone, and repeated

reviews

again and again over the PA.

Bovell tries to be clean and neat by leaving no detail hanging. But once the trend is established, the reappearance and resolution of every throwaway line quickly becomes predictable. A chance encounter with a paranoid woman in act one becomes the basis for a main character in act two, in one of several desperate grasps for plot devices. Moments like that, when hidden threads are discovered to be running through the plot, should give the audience brief "a-ha!" thrills of discovery. When all the action relies on those weak strands, they instead expose the fact that the plots are as threadbare as an overextended metaphor.

Marcus Costello's sparse and slick set works well by allowing both sides of the stage to be used simultaneously when necessary. But its ambient lighting and modern furniture has a generic feel, as if the characters lived in a world made by Ikea. That's also true of the play overall. When it first toured abroad in 2001, Bovell worried that it was too Australian, and was surprised that it managed to travel to England and the U.S. He was more confident by the time of this 2004 production, writing in the Dublin programme that nothing about the story means it has to be set 'down under', and taking pride in the universality of his themes.

But this production lacked the sharp edge to make his well-worn concepts of infidelity and modern rootlessness gleam. With this play, Bovell is right about universality: *Speaking in Tongues* is bland enough to fit in anywhere.

Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for The New York Times.

SPERANZA by Christopher Fitz-Simon

Little Elf in association with Smock Alley

Andrews Lane Studio, Dublin

11-28 August 2004; reviewed 26 August

BY CATRIONA MITCHELL

OSCAR WILDE'S MOTHER WAS BORN Jane Francesca Elgee, but was better known by her *nom de plume* Speranza, meaning 'hope' in Italian. Written by Christopher Fitz-Simon, directed by Derek Chapman and performed by Liz Lloyd, *Speranza* is an eighty-minute monologue both narrated by and about this spirited woman, herself a figure in Ireland's literary history.

All the major details of Speranza's life are covered: her early years in Wexford; the poetry and patriotic writings she published in *The Nation*, which embodied "the spirit of revolution" and were described as "lofty and passionate as one of Napoleon's bulletins"; the salons to which the artists and intellectuals of the day were invited for a bit of *conversazione* and Darjeeling tea from Findlaters in Wicklow Street; her two court cases, and the scandals she endured as the result of her husband William's lasciviousness; and finally her latter years, which she spent confined in her flat in London, entertaining visitors and keeping the blinds lowered to hide her age.

Fitz-Simon's use of language is literary, authentically Victorian, and flamboyant: Speranza claims Thomas Davis' funeral was "emblazoned on the emblature of my brain", and her anecdotes are peppered with words like "scurrilous" and "crepuscular." The script is wordy, but rarely dry. The pretensions and unreliability of the narrator are quickly established — she tells

us, for example, that she was born in 1826, but that her father died in 1822: "I only wished to emphasize the melancholy nature of his passing." Her maiden name "is certainly not one of those piffling Saxon names, Black or Brown or Hand or Foot. I am of the tribe of the Florentine." She claims direct descent from Dante: "People of intelligence do not fail to note the connection — when I explain it."

These lines are delivered with an engaging interplay between naivety and irony. Lloyd also reads Speranza's poetry and prose with feeling, each time meriting applause. This is a witty, animated performance; Lloyd's crisp diction is a pleasure to listen to, and she imbues her subject with affection and charm so that we can't help liking Speranza despite her idiosyncrasies. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this production, however, is the design by Eoghan O'Reilly and Rebecca O'Sullivan. Throughout, Lloyd sits behind a bouffant satin skirt so large it takes up almost all the stage. Like Beckett's Winnie, she is only visible from the waist up, and her props — a teapot and cup, a wooden writing bureau, a book, spectacles and embroidery — sit in front of her as if on a table-top. The skirt operates as a clever sub-textual device: it is highly theatrical, as is Speranza herself, and its restriction of her movement emphasizes the many limitations imposed upon women of her time. This is a brave choice in a play that is already largely cerebral, but with Chapman's lively direction, and Lloyd's arm and facial movements and substantial vocal energy, it works.

Behind her on the back wall is a gold picture frame. This is another visual motif used effectively: it emphasizes the

sense of artifice surrounding the narrator's story. At times we hear Lloyd in voice-over, while she sits apparently framed and spot lit, cast into light and shadow like in an old-fashioned portrait. The lighting by Conleth White is beautiful at these moments of static pose.

Of course, any play about Speranza would be incomplete without mention of her son, whom she exposed to arts and ideas from an early age. He told his colleagues at Trinity that the two of them were setting up "a Society for the Suppression of Virtue"; her influence was, however, not always a positive one. "I advised him to stand firm and face his accusers," she said when Oscar was summoned to court. "You will always be my son; it will make no difference to my affections. But if you go to France I'll never speak to you again." He stayed.

Yet while this link with Oscar has surely helped secure Speranza's place in Ireland's literary history, it would be unfair to belittle her own achievements and writing. This play's presentation of her as a strong-minded and vivacious, if flawed, character, rightfully reclaims herself and her work as of more than sufficient interest in their own right.

Catriona Mitchell has just completed an M.Phil in creative writing at Trinity College, Dublin.

TRAD by Mark Doherty

Galway Arts Festival

Druid Theatre, Galway

14-25 July, 2004; reviewed 25 July

BY SHAUN RICHARDS

A PRODUCTION WHICH OPENS ON A bare stage occupied by two isolated figures cannot help but evoke Beckett's

reviews

Godot, but this is less the Beckett of existential angst than the one who declared that he could not give a fart in his cordonnays for ideas of old Ireland. For, as the title of the piece suggests, *Trad*, a first play by actor/comedian Mark Doherty, is concerned with whittling away at whatever remains of Irish 'tradition' in a series of comic demolitions.

The play centres on the efforts of a hundred-year-old 'Son' to trace his boy, born of a brief liaison, who might bring a future into the benighted present of himself and his aged 'Da'. As played by Frankie McCafferty (full of gaunt-faced spleen as the Da), and Peter Gowen (a powerful evocation of lost possibilities as the Son), the pair's infirmities suggest an incompleteness which only the lost son can remedy. Determined to track down this future, the one-armed Son straps a prosthetic leg on Da and they set off on a journey to find their future.

As the above résumé suggests, this is a highly self-conscious piece, fully aware of the multiple 'traditions' both within and against which it is working. And while the targets within the dialogue might be Irish, the performance style, as orchestrated by director Mikel Murfi, suggests an admiration for the stage imagery and performance physicality of European theatre, where realism is merely a possible point of reference rather than a stylistic determinant. Music from the fiddle and guitar of on-stage black-clad musicians punctuates the performance; the couple's costumes are of a heightened realism where the high-waisted trousers and broad belts acknowledge, rather than imitate, the farm. And the urge to work beyond the restraining boundaries of conventional realism extends into the space of the

auditorium — literally, as turf runs forward from the playing area and stretches under the feet of the audience.

Overall, however, *Trad* suggests, rather than fully realises, a full poetry of the theatre. With the exception of a brief moment when Da waltzes before a back-projected image of his wedding photograph, the play is largely dialogue-dependent — admittedly dialogue delivered by actors at the height of their form. But while McCafferty seethes with rage at his losses, and Gowen smoulders at what he has never had, their frequently poignant — if properly stylised — performances clash with that of David Pearse as both Peig and Priest who is working in a different register. Virtuoso as these are, they are essentially 'turns' which, in the case of Peig, would not have disgraced *The League of Gentleman*.

Indeed, and particularly when the three are on stage together, laughter dominates, and while comedy can cut to the national quick as rapidly as rapiere, it requires a cutting edge to penetrate. In *Trad* the laughs are achieved by exploding values which are now best known for being reprised in comedy rather than significant in society. Despite an intermittent flirtation with issues of import — the maimed Son and Da setting out to find their future — this is a plot vehicle with picaresque possibilities rather than a substantial theme. Ultimately it is the world of Corkadoragh, pushed beyond even Flann O'Brien in the Priest's tale of the peasant heroism of one so physically eroded that he dragged himself across the fields by his eye-lids, a tiny plough attached to his tongue.

The humour is, however, ultimately



dependent on the same set of now-tired tropes. Allusions to the Olive Famine indicate a self-conscious determination not to succumb to shibboleths, but while these, and other moments, amuse, they do not carry the shock of revelation; the laughter is easy, familiar, unthreatened. A creative iconoclasm depends on icons whose power is of the present, not the past.

In the play's final moments the couple row towards the island where the sought son might be found. However, Da rolls from the row-boat and drowns himself, leaving his one-armed Son to row alone. But the question of what shore could ever be reached by a one-armed rower is not one the audience is ever invited to consid-

TRAD TREKKERS *McCafferty, Gowen and Pearse in Trad*

er. Questions as to the relation between tradition and modernity, and the achievability of a future suspected but unknown, are left for

other plays and other productions. While the thematic development of the play might be limited, this is theatre as exuberant performance, distinguished by the delighted response of audiences to whom it spoke more directly than would any consistently developed 'thesis'. And though other plays may carry the thematic weight hinted at by *Trad* with more coherence, they will probably do so with less entertaining drive, dynamism and sheer panache.

Shaun Richards is Professor of Irish Studies at Staffordshire University.

VOYAGE OF NO RETURN

by Brian Campbell

Dubbeljoint Theatre Company

Amharclann Na Carraige as part of Féile an Phobail

30 July–7 August, 2004; reviewed 6 August

BY EUGENE Mc NAMEE

TWO PARALLEL NARRATIVES, TOLD IN alternating past and present scenes, compose *Voyage of No Return*. A junior Northern Irish Tourist Board employee on a junket to Montserrat — the ‘Emerald Isle of the Caribbean’ — plays on historical links between their countries to charm his way into the affections of a local “fine black woman.” So many Irish were deported to her island that they might be distant cousins, and, like her, he understands what it’s like to be part of a subjugated and now risen people: he’s a “taig with attitude.” Her scepticism thaws and a holiday romance blossoms. A few months later, when a volcanic eruption destroys most of her island, she comes to live in London, and their relationship develops. They marry and settle in Belfast, planning to return to Montserrat as tourist entrepreneurs. But Belfast isn’t the Caribbean, real life isn’t a holiday, and things start to unravel.

Some three centuries earlier in the late 1600s, an Irish plantation and slave owner, himself deported from Ireland but now risen to the ruling class, rants to his black housekeeper, ‘Bridget’. The English are lazy, incompetent, and prejudiced against him. The blacks are work-shy, untrustworthy. Bridget is the exception; she’s his eyes and ears, he thinks. He treats her like a dog, alternating affection and brutality. Behind his back she plots rebellion with the other slaves.

Dubbeljoint is an explicitly political theatre company, and these parallel stories are played out to suggest both the refinement of techniques of exploitation in economic, racial and sexual politics, and the persistence of basic structures. Sugar plantation slavery gives way to mass tourist industrialisation, and force gives way to manipulation, but inequality and presumed superiority remain. The uncomfortable historical issue of the Irish as abusers rather than victims is confronted, and brought up-to-date in relation to current racism and exploitation. Through both stories run the subtext that the brutalised will be drawn into cycles of brutalisation, and that exploitative power corrupts and makes prisoners of those who wield it as much as it tortures those who endure it.

These grand themes are very deftly conjured within the driving plot lines, and accentuated by the split-scene structuring. But the real beauty of the play is in the flesh on these political bones. The characterisation, despite the limitations imposed by a structure of alternating and dialogue-heavy two-hander scenes, is remarkably intricate, and develops with the play. The dialogue in the modern scenes is dazzling in its balance between the everyday and the utterly revealing, and in the historical scenes is genuinely shocking in its brutality.

Beyond this Pam Brighton’s direction, measured on the pacing and overall quality of performances, is impressive. The uniformly excellent cast of Ide Chiahemen, Peter Ballance, Andy Moore and Shereen Patrice develop a confident handling of sub-textual dynamics to provide challenging and theatrically compelling characterisation.



Technically, too, the play is excellent. The overall design is credit-ed to Féile artists, with the staging in the round and the set, in clever complement to the play's themes, a bare oval low-walled ochre compound suggesting at once a sandy island and a kind of prison. The large wall hangings of dancing warriors, incorporating African images and Celtic tracery give a pungent sense of the tragi-comedy of terrible beauty. The punctuating African-Irish fusion music by Kila, heavy on the drums, drives the sense of cultures clashing and merging.

The structuring of the play, however, directly alternating scenes of past and present, eventually becomes mechanical and produces an unavoidable practical clumsiness, at least in this large theatre space, as one set of actors leave to make

NO COMEBACK? *Chiahemen and Balance in Voyage...*

way for the other. It also serves to point up the fact that ultimately, the historical parallels

between the principal characters are not made sufficiently convincing for historical or emotional resonances to sing out. There's a sense of being too aware of the craftedness of the connections and the necessary scene-by-scene balance. The continuity of experience down the centuries — both national and personal — is assumed rather than invoked, leaving a sense of stories somewhat forced upon each other. The conclusion arrives with a sense of political purpose rather than an internally generated dynamic. In this piece, some things work brilliantly, and some creak at the seams.

Eugene Mc Namee is reviews editor of the Vacuum newspaper in Belfast.

reviews

THE TINKER'S WEDDING & THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

BY J.M. SYNGE

Druid Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 9 October, 2004 at

Tivoli Theatre, Dublin

BY PETER CRAWLEY

WELL, ISN'T IT A QUEER THING FOR yourself, Garry Hynes, that it's not destroyed you are with the canonical works of J.M. Synge; and he filling his dramas with the great stories and circuitous syntax of the Irish peasantry, the way they'd be talking out with the overblown lyricism of the devil beyond, maybe, that would charm the ears of an anthropologist of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy itself, I'm thinking, and awaken the stylist in him. And wouldn't an astonishing director, the like of Hynes, not have a right to be taking the same journey as the writer, maybe; starting out with Irish realism, threading it through European expressionism and launching it, finally, into deliberate parody.

Staging *Playboy* as the first offering of Druid's Synge cycle was a timely, if expected, launch for an ambitious project. But what next? Continuing to interrogate and invigorate Synge's sometimes fond, often scabrous, depictions of early twentieth century Christian Irish peasants, Hynes now sets her sights on a location, twinning two plays set in Wicklow, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Well of the Saints*. We know it's Wicklow, because in typically ornate but carefully detailed dialogue, the inhabitants mention surrounding place names so frequently and elaborately (the road to Rathvanna, the horses of Arklow, the Beauty of Ballinacree) that you start to feel the county is populated

by show-off cartographers. But, with the march of time and theatrical piety, such scrupulous fidelity tends to become erroneously associated with Synge, easily the most inflammatory playwright of his generation. Synge doesn't want us to respect these characters. He wants us to laugh at them.

"I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice", Synge wrote in the preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*, perhaps the least loved play of his career. It is unlikely that they would have. It is less likely that they existed. This is not only because it is recorded that Synge never dared to speak to tinkers in all of his travels, but because, for all the documentarian drive of his prose, Synge's drama never tethered itself too tightly to fact, nor did his dialogue latch itself to recorded speech. It's often observed that Martin McDonagh (whose own cycle was so successfully oiled by Druid) sends up Synge in his drama. But Synge has already sent himself up. Both of these plays may switch their tones in dramatic structure and performance, but both are satires, comedies and distortions. Synge put Ireland through a megaphone. Hynes puts the megaphone through an amplifier.

Even as the light breaks over the bare boards of Francis O'Connor's sparse set, there is an immediate element of unreality about *The Tinker's Wedding*. Haggard sheets and shirts, with patches of material raggedly cut from some and colourfully quilted to others, hang on a line like the two-dimensional backdrop of a cartoon. Before them, Norma Sheehan's Sarah Casey embodies a beautified tinker, lured by the moon



into desires to be married, strutting purposefully in a tight-waisted man's jacket and a Benetton-bright patchwork dress. That this squares with Marie Mullen's alarmingly convincing weather-beaten and booze-ravaged face (a feat of Val Sherlock's ultra-real make-up) is a result of the intriguing balance maintained by Hynes's production. On the set there are theatrical boards and real earth, neatly reinforcing what has been described of Synge's drama as a strange mixture of lyric and dirt. In Hynes' production her characters notably have a footing in both.

Just as striking is Synge's acid attack on Christian values, where Diarmuid de Faoite's cartoonishly full-bellied and craven priest will not celebrate a marriage for the sinkingly believable reason that he has not received sufficient pay-

MIGHTY CUTE

Mullen and Gary Lydon in The Tinker's Wedding

ment; where the only evident higher power is alcohol; where God is conspicuous by His absence. While de Faoite's exclamation-mark poses of shock, or

Sheehan's physically striking (both figuratively and literally) Sarah tend to over-amp the play for the sake of unmalicious laughter, in a sense with these stage Irish depictions Hynes is being cruel to be kind. When the souse Mary Byrne awakens from a drunken bout, upside down, literally hanging by her feet from a pram, you realise how Synge's people could never seem real to us today. If this means that the final, potentially shocking assault of the priest seems like only another comic routine, so be it. There may be the lulling realism of a turf fire, but there are also playfully artificial sound cues where dogs bark and bats squeak to order.



More substantial, then, is *The Well of the Saints*, the fable of a blind itinerant couple, misled by the (now slightly more vague) cartographers of Wicklow into believing themselves the finest man and woman "of the seven counties of the east." But a holy shocking saint is coming, and he with the power to restore their sight and thus cripple their illusions. In the emotive coupling of Mick Lally and Marie Mullen as Martin and Mary Doul, this production is centred with an emotional core, but the caricature is never far away. From the moment the first crowd scene seeps onto a boxed-in set, with each member bar one of a perfectly equal height, it is hard to allay the suspicion that Hynes has cast the show with a tape measure. Speaking as one, clopping obliviously behind each other, 'the people' have

FINE SIGHT Kirby,
Lally and Mullen in
The Well of the Saints

never seemed so strange and unfamiliar, so resolutely unsympathetic.

But far more extraordinary is the appearance of the Saint. Now, there is no reason why you could not have cast, say, Stephen Brennan in the role, all sonorous, sincere and silver haired. But instead, a gangly and brittle boy inches onto the stage and with his arrival the play, much like Irish culture, has been turned on its head. The authority of the Church, of religion itself, is presented as weak and vulnerable, and again we are encouraged to laugh. Added to this dramaturgical subversion, *The Well of the Saints* is shrouded in a disarming and impressive aesthetic. Under Davy Cunningham's bright studio-light illumination Simone Kirby's mean and vapid Molly Byrne attains a hardened beauty. As coldly attractive is the

KEITH PATTERSON

stone wall that raises smoothly into the rafters of the set when no longer needed, or the long green rushes that will rise through the floor boards, to be cut with a switch, then rise again later.

When the smoke of the blacksmith's forge envelops the stage, or shafts of light slice through from huge opening doors, it is hard not to think of Appia and Craig, not only European contemporaries of Synge's stylistic work, but forerunners of Hynes' towering and dramatic imagination. Eventually reconciled amid the lyric and dirt of Synge's parodic imaginings, the couple choose blindness over sight and take refuge from the dull reality of the Ireland around them. With three plays to go in DruidSynge, such a refuge has been opened to us too, pushing the edges of apparent realism into willing satire. Who could choose not to see it?

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

WHERE HE LIES

By John Barrett

Island Theatre Company

Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

July 2004; reviewed July 14

BY MARY COLL

DURING THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE a local member of the British Forces was captured and shot in a reprisal killing in North Tipperary, and his body buried in an unmarked grave. Years later in a Cork hospital a dying person gave information on its whereabouts, but the details were not accurate, and there was local resistance to the idea of the body being recovered.

A writer's note in the *Where He Lies*

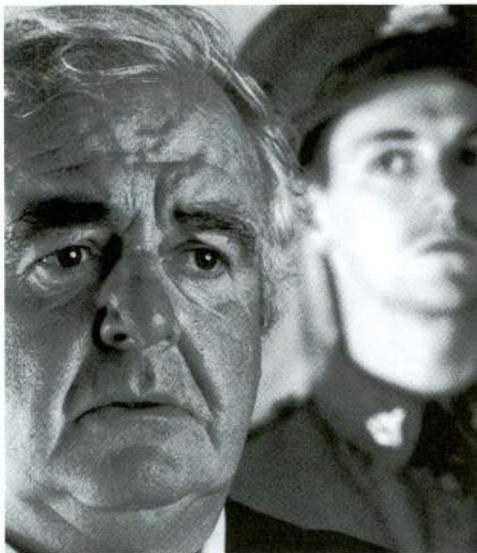
programme tells us this story, and that it is an account of an actual incident, which helped inspire the play. But the work itself, we are told, is fictional and does not make any claim to be an historical account of an event in Irish history. Instead, it seeks to provoke an analysis of personal as well as public history in the minds of the audience. How do we deal with the past, our nation's dirty laundry, and how does that affect the way we view the present? Who are the freedom fighters, and who are the terrorists? When — if ever — is it right to kill and how do we cope with our collective guilt?

Set in a contemporary small Irish town, the play begins with a visit to the offices of local solicitor Barry Heagerty (Alan Devlin) by Carol Fallon (Gene Rooney). An elderly American woman, she is seeking to fulfil a promise made to her dying husband: to find a young soldier's body buried years ago in the nearby hills. Soon we discover the solicitor has his own demons: his teenage son's body is also missing following an accident four years earlier, which may or may not have been suicide. This draws him to Fallon's quest, despite warnings both from his wife Susan (Joan Sheehy) and his erstwhile friend and local politician Pat Linnane (Donnacha Crowley) about disturbing the locale by asking too many questions about the past. As events begin to unfold in the town below, the gentle spectre of the gauche young soldier Malachy Hogan (Emmet Kirwan) emerges from the hills to narrate the story of his death and the days leading up to it.

This storyline certainly has all the stock elements of a typical rural Irish pot-boiler: earnest priests, old IRA men, neurotic wives, eager young teachers and spineless bishops. Set mainly in a family draw-

reviews

ing room, it could easily have languished in the realms of the tired and mundane. However Barrett's writing has a real edge, and when combined with a story that is genuinely compelling, and has



serious contemporary resonances, the effect is quite powerful.

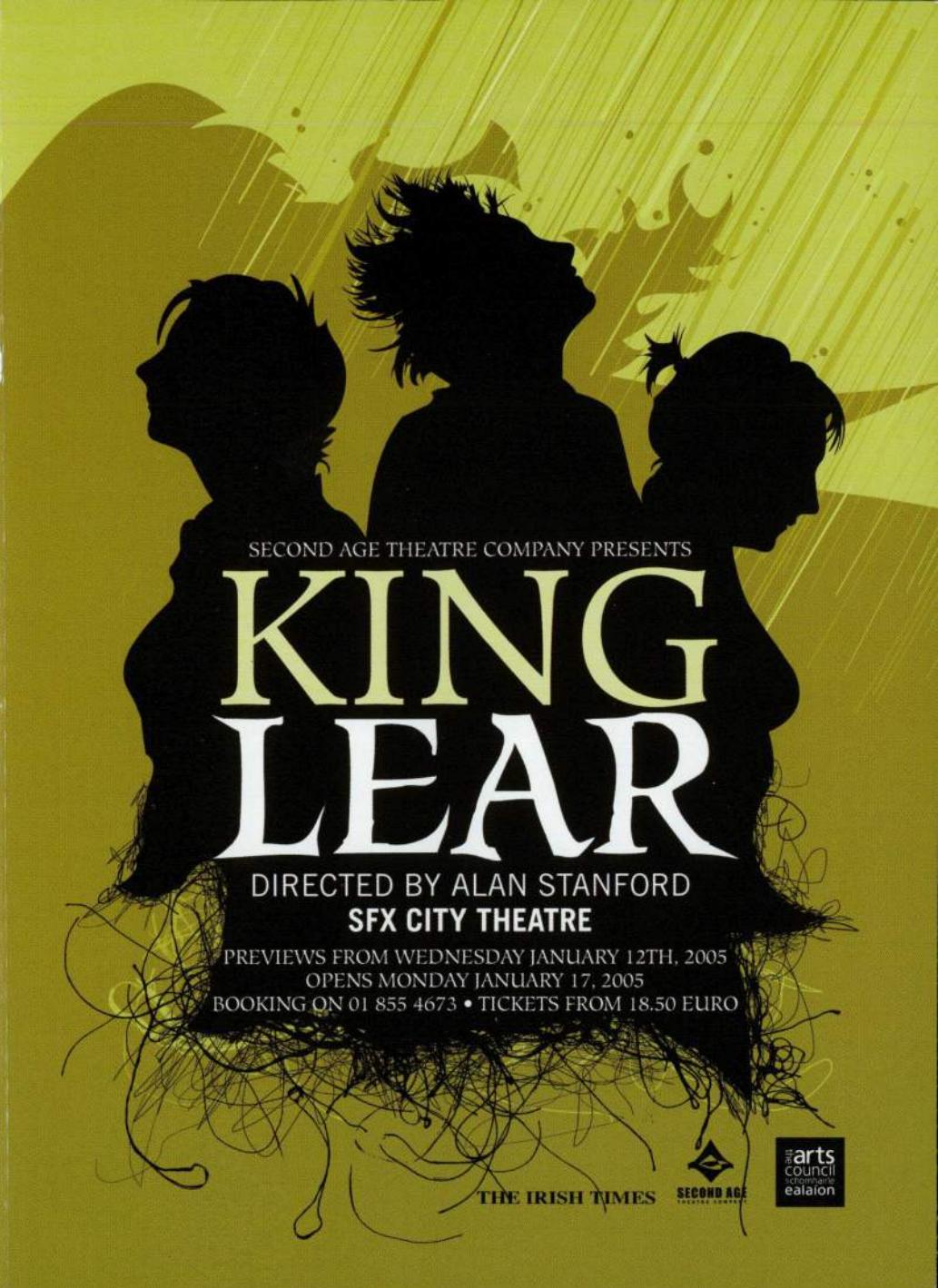
Throughout there are moments of extraordinary tenderness and poignancy; the soldier Hogan in particular speaks with such disarming innocence that we are chilled and appalled by the reality of the cruelty inflicted upon him, and in his loneliness we come to realise the full meaning of an unmarked grave. Ireland is a long way yet from dealing with the darker aspects of its history; a few years into the current peace process, many of the bodies of those who 'disappeared' in

the Troubles have yet to be returned to their families. As such, *Where He Lies* rings loud and clear, and Barrett brings the past disconcertingly close enough for us all to almost touch and smell.

His writing is notably well served by the performers, with the trio of Sheehy, Devlin and Crowley being truly superb, offering ensemble playing at its best. Devlin's Heagerty is a lovable old rogue physically bending under the weight of sadness at his failure to be the hero his wife desires; you can almost hear his heart breaking. Waiting in the wings for his fall from grace is Crowley's Linneane, his every movement and syllable oozes the unctuous cynicism of the small town politico, ready to be all things to all men once it's good for business, and ready for Susan if he got his chance. Caught between them, Joan Sheehy's Susan is brittle with despair and frustration, sparks flying as she tries to hold back her anger at the death of her son and her disappointment with life and the men she loves. However Emmet Kirwan's Hogan stays with you longest, and has the greatest capacity to unsettle and disturb. He is a young actor whose work has become a pleasure to watch.

Imaginatively designed by Sonia Haccius, beautifully lit by Gerard Meagher, and directed with a cool assurance by Terry Devlin, this made for a solid and satisfying evening of theatre, and is the kind of work at which Island genuinely excels. ■

**HOSTLY
PRESENCE**
*Kirwan and
Devlin in
Where He Lies*



SECOND AGE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

KING LEAR

DIRECTED BY ALAN STANFORD
SFX CITY THEATRE

PREVIEWS FROM WEDNESDAY JANUARY 12TH, 2005
OPENS MONDAY JANUARY 17, 2005
BOOKING ON 01 855 4673 • TICKETS FROM 18.50 EURO

THE IRISH TIMES





Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd

in partnership with UCD and the Mid-Ulster Women's Network are now inviting applications for a new accredited training programme:

Diploma in Community Drama Facilitation Skills

This course accredited through University College Dublin provides training and a recognized qualification for **professional artists** who wish to work as drama facilitators in a community context. The course aims to develop the use of drama and theatre to address conflict resolution, peace building and reconciliation.

The training takes place over 10 residential weekends in the Northern and Southern border counties and will run from
January to December 2005.

The course is developed and delivered by Smashing Times Theatre Company and is funded by the Cross-Border Consortium under the EU Peace 11 Programme and part-financed by the UK and Irish Governments.

(The training is open to participants from Northern Ireland and from the Southern border counties)

**For further information and application forms, please contact
Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd, Coleraine House, Coleraine Street, Dublin 7. Tel: 01-8656613.**

www.smashingtimes.ie



Project supported by the
EU Programme
for Peace and Reconciliation



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

ISSN 13937855



9 771393 785027