

irishtheatre

VOLUME FIVE, NUMBER

2005 €6

MAGAZINE

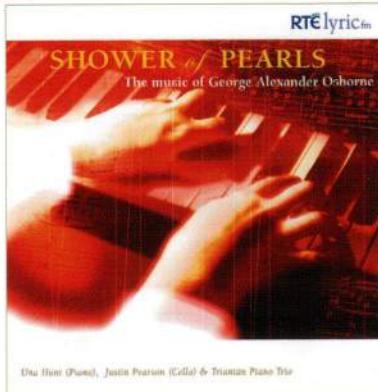


Ideal Gifts



Your lunchtime, your choice...
performed by the RTE Concert Orchestra, conducted by Robert Houlahan

LUNCHTIME CHOICE 2 - Long-awaited successor
to best selling Lunchtime Choice No.1 RRP €17.99



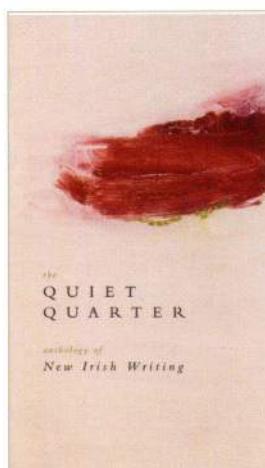
Una Hunt (Piano), Justin Pearson (Cello) & Triantafis Piano Trio

OSBOURNE - Never before recorded, easy listening
from Ireland's lost composer RRP €17.99



RTE Concert Orchestra conducted by Robert Houlahan
Selina Dwyer (Guitar), Pauline Ó Siadhail, Jennifer Lawlor, Siobhan Ó Catháin, Elizabeth Moakley and Brigid Moloney with Padraic Ó Conaill (piano)

JOYCE SONGS - Eight weeks at No.1 RRP €17.99



QUIET QUARTER - 100 Irish writers -
the ideal bed-time reading RRP €14.99

Available in all good book and record
shops nationwide or on-line at
www.rte.ie/shop

RTE lyric fm

What's New?

ALOT, ACTUALLY. *itm*'S FIRST ISSUE OF 2005 finds us welcoming a new dawn at the Abbey; a new schedule for Dublin's Festivals season; a new Arts Pl... whoops, sorry — Approach to Supporting the Arts; and several new editorial features in our own pages.

After the fiasco that was its 2004 centenary year, the Abbey Theatre may have turned the corner with the appointment of much-respected producer Fiach MacConghail as its new director. But this is just the tip of the iceberg of radical changes being instigated at the beleaguered national theatre. What are the nature of these changes, and what it is at stake? *itm* editor in chief Karen Fricker's investigation runs from page 16.

Over on East Essex Street, the Dublin Fringe has recently announced that it is "going solo" from the Dublin Theatre Festival; that is, running for the three weeks previous to the DTF, with only a weekend's overlap. As critics contemplating five straight weeks of full-on theatregoing in the autumn, we at *itm* are exhausted already... but do the upsides compensate for the potential fatigue factor? On page 26, news editor Peter Crawley contemplates the repercussions of the switcheroo, and gets a chance to chat to the new directors of both festivals, Wolfgang Hoffmann and Don Shipley.

As critics contemplating five straight weeks of full-on theatregoing in the autumn, we at *itm* are exhausted already...

Speaking of tired, it is hard not to feel an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* as Arts Council director Mary Cloake and chairperson Olive Braiden roll out yet another consultation period in advance of yet another strategy document for the arts in Ireland that is Definitely Not A Plan. Consultation is, yes, of course, the best and only way forward, and the scope of the proposed present set of discussions is impressively broad and democratic; but one hopes that the Council will be savvy enough to acknowledge that arts professionals and organisations have offered their time and insight many times over in previous consultation processes. A regime change in Merrion Square hopefully does not mean an amnesiac approach to the valuable input that

has been offered in the past. More information about the consultation and strategy process is at www.artscouncil.ie.

New *chez nous* are several front-of-book editorial features: *Off Shore* notes the work that Irish theatre and dance professionals and companies are doing off the island; and *Opening Nights* is our newly streamlined approach to listing upcoming productions. But we can't tell our readers what you're up to if you don't tell us yourselves! Please send listings and information to us at info@irishthemagazine.ie. 



Et Tu, Keano?

EVERYBODY KNOWS KARL MARX'S FAMOUS OBSERVATION on how historic events repeat themselves — the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The producers of *I, Keano*, however, may have discovered a third way. Arthur Mathews, Michael Nugent, and Paul Woodfull's musical-comedy version of the calamitous falling-out between Roy Keane and Mick McCarthy in Saipan before the 2002 World Cup arrived

THE BEST WAY TO GET
irishtheatre
MAGAZINE



IS TO SUBSCRIBE



LOG ON TO
www.irishtheatremagazine.ie
OR RING (087) 799-7989

irishtheatre
MAGAZINE

VOLUME FIVE,
ISSUE TWENTY TWO
SPRING 2005

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

KAREN FRICKER

PUBLISHER

NIK QUAIFE

ART DIRECTOR

SUSAN CONLEY

NEWS EDITOR

PETER CRAWLEY

WEBSITE EDITOR

AOIFE FLYNN

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR

PATRICK LONERGAN

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

LAYLA O'MARA

DISTRIBUTION

NEW ISLAND BOOKS

SPECIAL THANKS

Thomas Conway, Tom Creed, Oonagh Kearney, Berni Sweeney, 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
Dublin Theatre Festival
Theatre Shop
Tyrone Productions

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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

**4 WHAT'S NEWS and OPENING NIGHTS**

10 OFF SHORE What Irish theatre artists are up to overseas.

12 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Comings and goings behind the scenes.

15 SOUNDING BOARD Joe Devlin argues that there are lessons for 21st century Irish theatre in Russia.

16 UNFINISHED BUSINESS The Abbey Theatre is facing the biggest organisational shakeup in its 101-year history. Karen Fricker investigates.

26 TIME FOR A CHANGE Peter Crawley considers the ramifications of the new schedule for this year's Dublin Fringe.

32 FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS What does live art have to do with Irish theatre? Plenty, argues Fintan Walsh.

42 DOWN AND DIRTY Johnny Hanrahan offers an excerpt from his new music theatre piece, *Madam T.*

46 BOOK REVIEWS Helen Meany reviews three new scripts by England-based writers, and Patrick Lonergan thumbs through some new releases.

52 REVIEWS Our critics review 23 productions.

ON THE COVER: *Louis Lovett in Dublin by Lamplight.* Photo: Paul McCarthy

TOP: SEAN MCGORMACK; MIDDLE: TOM LAWLER



ADDRESS: 44 East Essex St., Temple Bar, Dublin 2 Phone: (087) 799-7989

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

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



Dublin City Council

Constituted Cathaoirleach Áras an Chathair

in early February on a tide of media interest and quickly became a critical and commercial hit. Following a sell-out run at the Olympia Theatre, Lane Productions and promoters MCD announced an extension for "a short season" to begin in late April. And then their star players quit.

Mario Rosenstock (Keano), Risteárd Cooper (Quinnus), and Tara Byrne, who plays Quinnus' wife Surfia, signalled their intention to leave the production at the end of its original run, leaving the rest of the team to play without them. A case of life imitating art imitating life, the departure moved headline writers to declare a "Saipan 2" episode. Eventually emerging from behind a press release, producer Pat Moylan told *The Guardian* that in negotiations some performers had asked for "a lot more money" to appear in the second run. "And I had to say: we can't pay that amount. It's too much. So when they talk about 'artistic differences,' I have to say these were not mentioned."

Risteárd Cooper has been most vocal about creative differences, speaking of his qualms to newspapers and radio.

"There were rehearsal difficulties, there were creative difficulties, and they haven't really gone away," Cooper told the 2FM show *Newsbeat*. Nor did he feel "that the offer they've put in place acknowledges what we've contributed to the show thus far."

The financial incentive wouldn't matter so much, Cooper stressed, if the show was more accomplished. Among his misgivings were "lowest common denominator" comedy and a production that had not achieved the potential of either the writers or the cast.

Moylan, hurt at the suggestion, gave little credence to the argument: "At the end of the day," she said, "had these actors got their money, I don't think you'd have heard them talking about



I. KEANO

artistic differences."

Were it not for the smouldering bridges between producers and performers, one might have suspected that this was all a publicity stunt. But for Lane Productions it is anything but, and their situation may be more difficult than they are willing to admit. Trading heavily on the familiarity (not to mention audiences) of *Après Match* and *Gift Grub*, it's hard to imagine how the production will replace

what's news

its stars without losing audience appeal — recognisable impersonators are, by definition, hard to find. The Olympia box office may yet learn that a farce can still turn tragic.

LET THE RIVER RUN

AFTER WHAT SEEMED like eons of speculation, the only surprise about the future life of the Abbey's production of *The Shaughraun* is its location. So much interest had swirled around the production's mooted journey to America that plans for a London run snuck by quietly. But when the production directed by John McColgan opens in the Albery Theatre on the West End this May, it will finally look less like a National Theatre production than an independent commercial enterprise.

The legend, "River Productions presents the Abbey Theatre's production of *The Shaughraun* by Dion Boucicault," will soon be up in lights — should they find enough bulbs. The elongated title hints at a contract reached between the National Theatre and River Productions, one arm of John McColgan and Moya Doherty's production company, Abhann. Although both parties are not willing to divulge details of the contract, the Abbey's managing director Brian Jackson explains that one precondition of the theatre's Arts Council funding "is



THE SHAUGHRAUN

that you don't expend it on ventures outside of the state." Nor would the Abbey be inclined to expose itself to commercial risk outside the country. "Frankly, it would be a rather poor policy," said Jackson. "For example, if we were doing a foreign tour, it would basically be on guarantee." According to Jackson, not only were the Abbey's three recent international tours (of *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Gigli Concert*, and *The Plough and the Stars*) ring-fenced from loss, they actually proved profitable.

KIP CARROLL

The stakes are raised at the high rollers' table, however, and liberated from the Abbey, the costly production of *The Shaughraun* can either lose or win big on the West End or — as is ultimately hoped — on Broadway.

As originating producer of the show, the Abbey has arranged to receive a favourable percentage of the production's profits. "We have negotiated a deal which our advisors are extremely pleased with," is all that Jackson will allow, reluctant to "queer the pitch" while negotiations continue with other parties before the tour begins. The Abbey's advisors are Clintons, one of Europe's leading entertainment law firms.

This is not the first time that one of McColgan's enterprises has benefited from — and then rewarded — the investment of a national institution. RTÉ invested €253,000 into *Riverdance — The Show* and has since earned over €8 million, more than 30 times its original investment.

When it was reported last August that *The Shaughraun* would undertake a tour of American theatres, McColgan, then a board member of the Abbey as well as a director of Abhann, which was at that time mooted as the tour's producer,

Measuring the Bottom Line

THE ARTS COUNCIL is undertaking an unprecedented study of the living and working conditions of theatre practitioners in Ireland, which will be available to inform initiatives towards better working conditions in the future. Hibernian Consulting will conduct the research, which will be presented to the Council in June of this year. For more information, visit www.hibernianconsulting.ie or contact Emma Kelly at the Arts Council: 01-618 0271.

explained that as a government-subsidised institution, the Abbey Theatre is not mandated to incur financial risk from mounting a tour. Nor, as the year drew to a close, did the woeful state of the Abbey's finances suggest it was in a position to undertake any such endeavour. However, McColgan understood that *The Shaughraun* abroad would still benefit from association with the historic theatre. "From my point of view," he told *itm* last year, "it's an Abbey production. The Abbey are very excited and we're very excited and we're all singing from the same hymn sheet."

Asked then if he was compromised by competing roles as board member, show director, and international producer, McColgan promised his various duties would soon demonstrate "an absolutely very clear relationship, which will

be clearly defined, clearly articulated." McColgan has since stepped down as a board member of the theatre with the end of the Abbey's centenary year — distancing himself from its ongoing financial and organisational problems, and positioning himself perfectly to orchestrate the future life of *The Shaughraun*.

what's news

IN MEMORY OF EILIS

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of Youth Drama has created two new awards to encourage the development of new and established directors of youth drama in Ireland. The awards honour the memory of Eilis Mullan, NAYD's founder, who passed away last year. More information is available from Karen O'Shea at N.A.Y.D., 34 Upper Gardiner St., Dublin 1, karen@nayd.ie. Deadlines for the first round of awards is 1 Apr.

LOVE YOUR SPONSOR

NOMINATIONS CLOSE ON 24 March for the 2005 Allianz Business2Arts Awards. Among the categories is a €4,000 prize, sponsored by the Dublin Airport Authority, to an arts organisation for an innovative collaboration with a business. Contact info@business2arts.com or the Awards Administrator, Business2Arts, 44 East Essex Street, Dublin 2 for more information.

LEAN ON ME

WRITER MICHELLE READ and arts consultant Valerie Bistany have set up the Mentoring Development Project, which has been commissioned by the Arts Council to research the process of mentoring in the arts. They are seeking potential mentors and "mentees" for a pilot scheme — artists interested either in sharing their skills and knowledge or in learning from a more experienced practitioner. Letters of interest and CV/bios



Bonjour Paris!

THE CENTRE CULTUREL IRLANDAIS IS OFFERING 2-3 month-long artists' residencies to Irish and other writers. The awards include accommodation and studio space in the beautiful College des Irlandais (pictured) in the heart of Paris' Left Bank. Applications are being considered for Sep-Dec 2005 and Jan-Mar, Apr-Jul 2006. More information available from the Director, Centre Culturel Irlandais, 5 rue des Irlandais, 75005 Paris or hcarey@centreculturelirlandais.com. Deadline for applications is 31 March. Bonne chance!

should be sent by 30 March to mentoringdevelopmentproject@eircom.net or The Mentoring Development Project, c/o READCO, 30-31 Wicklow Street, Dublin 2. Read and Bistany also welcome contact from anyone who might have had past experience of a mentoring relationship in the arts.

ROS KAVANAGH

opening nights

NEW IRISH PRODUCTIONS coming up
in the next three months – mark your diaries!

Bruiser's production of **THE THREEPENNY OPERA** plays at the Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda on **16 MARCH** as part of an all-island tour.

Donal O'Kelly's new play **THE CAMBRIA**, opens **17 MARCH** at Dublin's Liberty Hall, as part of the St. Patrick's Festival, before a national tour.

After finishing a run at the Gaiety, Dublin, **BLOOD BROTHERS** starring Rebecca Storm opens **21 MARCH** at Cork Opera House.

Red Kettle's touring production of Ira Levin's **DEATHTRAP** lands at Andrews Lane, Dublin from **21 MARCH**.

Blue Raincoat presents Ionesco's **THE BALD SOPRANO** at the Factory Performance Space, Sligo from **22 MARCH**.

Corn Exchange's **DUBLIN BY LAMPLIGHT** launches a national tour on **28 MARCH** at the Town Hall, Galway.

Inis Theatre tours **TICK MY BOX** around Ireland from **29 MARCH**.

Guna Nua presents **HAMLET**, directed by David Parnell, opening **30 MARCH** at Project Space Upstairs, Dublin.

Irish Modern Dance Theatre bring **FALL AND RECOVER** to Project Space Upstairs, **8 MARCH**.



Gare St Lazare's **ACCESS ALL BECKETT** (*Worstward Ho, Texts for Nothing, and Enough*) premieres in venues around Cork from **5 MARCH**.

POOR BEAST IN THE RAIN by Billy Roche, directed by Conor McPherson, opens **12 APRIL** at the Gate, Dublin.

THE SUGAR WIFE by Elizabeth Kuti and directed by Lynne Parker in a Rough Magic production, opens in the Project Cube, **6 APRIL**.

Ballet Ireland's **ALICE** opens on **1 APRIL** at Draiocht, Blanchardstown, and tours nationally and in the UK.

Fishamble bring a new play by Gary Duggan, **MONGED**, to the Space Upstairs, **14 APRIL**.

Articulate Anatomy Theatre bring **MOUTH** by John Dawson and Andy Crook to the Project Cube, **26 APRIL**.

I, KEANO (*Dessie Gallagher, pictured*) returns to the Olympia, Dublin, for a short run on **27 APRIL**.

The Abbey Theatre production of **THE RACE OF THE ARK TATTOO**, by David Hancock, tours from **1 MAY**.

The Second **DUBLIN GAY THEATRE FESTIVAL** runs in various venues from **3-15 MAY**.

offshore

What **IRISH THEATRE ARTISTS** are up to overseas.

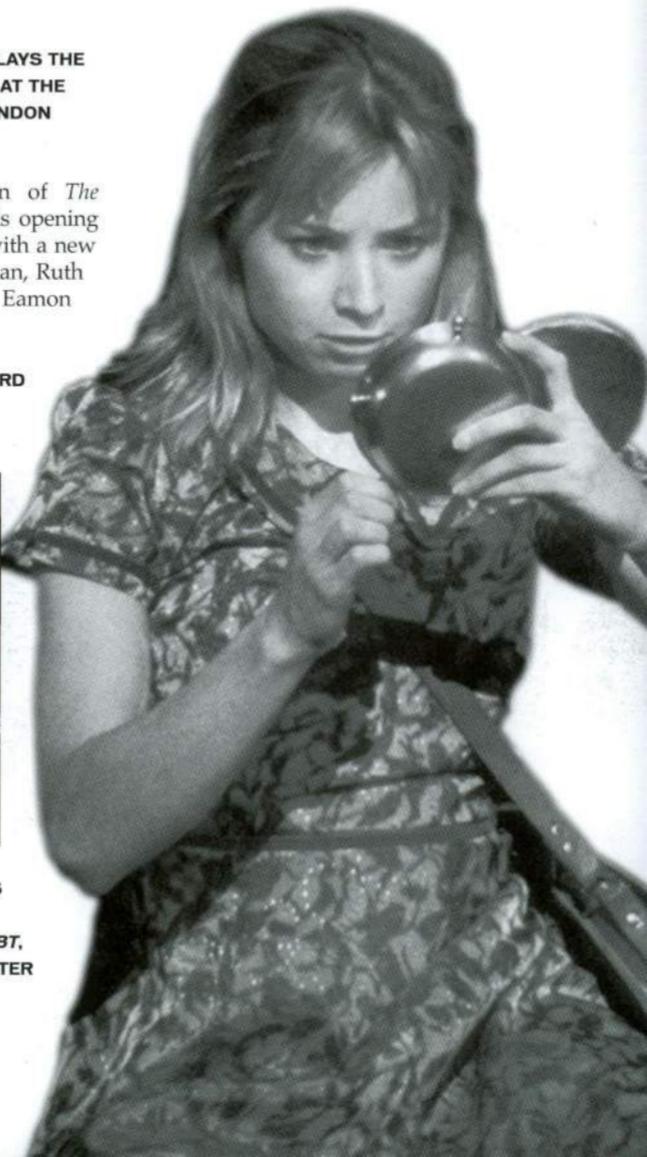
ELAINE SYMONS (PICTURED) PLAYS THE LEAD IN *HIS DARK MATERIALS* AT THE ROYAL NATIONAL THEATRE, LONDON THROUGH APRIL.

The **DRUIDSYNGE** production of *The Playboy of the Western World* is opening the Perth Festival in March, with a new cast including Aaron Monaghan, Ruth Negga, Marie Mullen, and Eamon Morrissey.

HAVING WON A 2004 TONY AWARD FOR BEST FEATURED ACTOR IN BRYONY LAVERY'S *FROZEN*,



BRIÁN F. O'BYRNE (PICTURED) IS BROADWAY-BOUND AGAIN IN JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY'S *DOUBT*, WHICH TRANSFERS TO THE WALTER KERR THEATRE ON 31 MARCH AFTER A SUCCESSFUL RUN AT MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB.



PAUL KEOGAN lit Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange* in a new production directed by Kathy Burke at the Crucible, Sheffield in February; the production is touring the UK through March.

CONLETH HILL won the 2004 Olivier Award for best featured actor in a musical for his portrayal of Roger de Bris in the London production of *The Producers*. Also at the Oliviers, **ANDREW SCOTT** won the award for outstanding achievement or performance in an affiliate theatre for his performance in Rob Evans' *A Girl in a Car with a Man* at the Royal Court.

DAVID BOLGER has been invited to create a new dance work for Tanztheater Freiburg/Heidelberg. *Aus der Gefahrenzone (Out of Harm's Way)* opens at the Kleines Haus, Freiburg from 26 March,

Two **CROOKED HOUSE** productions, premiering in Kildare in March, will tour internationally: *Chatroom*, a new one-act play for young actors by **ENDA WALSH**, visits the Prague Fringe Festival in June; and *Citizenship*, a new play by **MARK RAVENHILL**, visits the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh in the same month.

KABOSH IS REVIVING ITS PRODUCTION OF IONESCO'S RHINOCEROS (PICTURED, FAR RIGHT) AT LONDON'S LYRIC HAMMERSMITH IN MARCH BEFORE PLAYING AT THE LAGAN WEIR IN BELFAST IN APRIL.

OWEN McCAFFERTY's adaptation of *The Days of Wine and Roses* is playing at the Donmar Warehouse in London, starring Anne Marie Duff and Peter McDonald.

JOHN BREEN's *Alone It Stands* is playing in



with sets and costumes by **MONICA FRAWLEY**.

AT THE CENTRE FOR PERFORMANCE RESEARCH IN ABERYSTWYTH IN APRIL, IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE PERFORMS IT'S BETTER TO... (PICTURED).

O'BRYNE: JOAN MARCUS

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in April.

SCORE, a one-man play about Leonard Bernstein created by actor Tom Nelis, director Anne Bogart, and dramaturg **JOCELYN CLARKE**, plays at New York Theatre Workshop from 26 April.

entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

NICK REED has resigned from his position as director of the Helix. Reed will continue in the position until April, while **UNA CARMODY** (pictured), who most recently worked for the RSC and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, has returned from London to become the chief executive officer of UAC Management Ltd, in which position she will assume the duties of the Helix's director.

THOMAS CONWAY, freelance director, a director of the Everyman Palace Studio, and producer of NT Shell Connections has been appointed as New Writing manager with Druid. This is a new, part-time position... **CIARÁN McCALLION** has departed his position as HR manager with the Abbey Theatre. Meanwhile, the Abbey has appointed **ANDY KEOGH** as a full time production manager. Keogh, who has worked as a freelance production manager with many companies, replaces **TOMMY NOLAN** who had been with the Abbey for four years.

JESSICA HILLIARD, associate artist with Randolph SD and formerly office manager with Little Bird Productions, has been appointed administrative assistant at the Dublin Theatre Festival. This is a new position... Following **EMMA FOOTE**'s departure last year, **JACKIE HENDERSON** has assumed the role of assistant to



the deputy director of the Gate Theatre. Henderson previously worked as account executive for Weber Shandwick FCC.

Following recent project management work for the Ark, Dublin Theatre Festival, International Dance Festival Ireland, and this magazine, **ROSS Ó CORRAÍN** has been appointed the new audience development manager of Opera Theatre Company. The company has also appointed **MATTHEW BROOM**, formerly music department administrator at Glyndebourne, as its new artistic administrator.

DEBORAH DIGNAM will be working with **MAURA O'KEEFFE** on her producing projects this year, which include Gare St. Lazare's *Access All Beckett*, Meridian's *Madam T*, and Des Keogh's *The Love Hungry Farmer*. Deborah has just finished managing the box office for Second Age's *King Lear*.

SITUATIONS VACANT:

Kabosh Theatre plans to appoint a new creative producer in early May... Temple Bar Properties have interviewed candidates for the positions of property manager and cultural development executive, and for an information adviser for the Temple Bar Information Centre. Appointments are pending for all.

draiocht

looking for a great time?

log on now

www.whatsoninblanch.com

or tel 885 2622



a night in november ... tick my box ... between you & me
... family day ... monged ... catalpa ... stuck in the mud ...
feis maitiu ... liam clancy ... and much much more ...

the party Limo

Groove on the Move



 creative
events

01 4753313

info@creativeevents.ie

www.creativeevents.ie

JOE DEVLIN, artistic director of Focus Theatre, has just returned from researching actor training in Moscow, and feels that there are lessons there for Irish theatre.

EASTERN EUROPEANS HAVE A LONG tradition of rigorous training of all aspects of the actor's instrument: body, emotion, and imagination. My visit to Russia reveals a vital theatre culture for both the practitioner and audience, rooted in a philosophy to reach people at a molecular level. At the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts, the training is an encompassing 3-year course in which students work, for the first 6 months, solely on developing body strength, flexibility, and choreographic imagination before they start any actor training. They also study the history of the multiple genres and styles of theatre. The work is underpinned by a commitment to testing, stretching, and evolving the actor's instrument to access a depth of feeling. In metaphysical terms, the training releases the soul of the performer. In some academies in Eastern Europe, directors, designers, and critics all train with the actors. A common vocabulary is created and understood.

A visit to a number of venues in Moscow during my trip revealed a thriving and real civic experience. A 600-seater to see Jarry's *Ubu Rex*, a 250-seater at the Moscow Art Theatre for a physical production of a Marivaux, and *The Three*

Sisters in another 100-seat venue were all sold out. It was a humbling, enriching, and deeply rewarding experience. By investing at this level in sustained training, the Russians have created a standard of performance that communicates with audiences both collectively and individually. Despite the collapse of the social and governing system there, theatre still has real meaning for people.

In Ireland now, "innovation" is the new buzzword. But is innovation itself of any worth if it is not rooted in human values? Theatre needs to explore and reflect the deeper and eternal human needs and training needs to be founded on an understanding that

this is so. Just imagine for a moment a new Irish acting academy for Irish and international students and facilitators, or even a new company of actors trained to the level of Eastern Europeans with a physical, emotional, and imaginative robustness and depth never before seen in ensemble playing in this country. It would make a theatre that touches and changes people. It would make a truly civic medium that people would want to experience. It would make Irish theatrical art world-class in more than just playwriting. Now that would be innovative.



A black and white photograph of The Abbey Theatre building in Dublin, Ireland. The building features a large, illuminated sign with the words "THE ABBEY THEATRE" in a serif font. The letters are brightly lit against the dark sky. The building's facade is made of light-colored stone or concrete blocks. Large windows are visible on the upper floors, some with lights on inside. The overall atmosphere is architectural and dramatic.

THE ABBEY THEATRE



Unfinished Business

The news that Fiach MacConghail will be the next director of the Abbey Theatre is being greeted with excitement and relief in many corners of Irish life. But his appointment is only the first and most evident layer of the biggest organisational shakeup in the troubled organisation's 101-year history. Why is this change process necessary, who's in charge, and what is at stake?

KAREN FRICKER investigates.

W

HAT'S WRONG WITH THE ABBEY THEATRE?

"Don't get me started," I hear you groan. But, seriously: what's *really* wrong with the Abbey? It is widely considered to be the premier white elephant of the Irish arts world, with an arcane and barely functional corporate structure, untenable

cost base, lousy facility, and — at the moment — one hell of a deficit. It is, to be sure, an historical oddity, a private company that appropriated the adjective "National" a century ago, and continues to use the title by convention, not by any law or decree. But efforts over the years to adapt its company structures to correspond to contemporary practice have been more successful than is usually acknowledged; and reports of the uniqueness of its method of governance — a board of directors which appoints an executive and is advised by a shareholding council — are exaggerated. Certainly, the Abbey currently faces massive challenges in terms of inadequate premises, high overheads, low audience numbers, poor public perception, rock-bottom staff morale, and a lengthy upcoming management changeover. But it is too easy, when discussing the Abbey's situation, to wheel out received knowledge about its uniquely unmanageable systems, a line of argument that diverts attention from the fact that it is people, and not structures, who must be held accountable for the Abbey's failures, and honoured for its successes.

These points are particularly germane at present given changes underway at the theatre which will fundamentally alter its corporate governance as well as its management, operational, and communications systems. This change process is tied to a special €2 million grant being administered by the Abbey's current funding body, the Arts Council — and it's important to stress "current", because these changes could result in the Abbey coming into a more direct relationship with the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism, bringing it closer in line with other of Ireland's major cultural institutions. The Arts Council has laid down requirements for the first steps in this change process, but has also left many crucial points open. The ball is now in the court of the Abbey's board — the body which, it must be underlined, oversaw the theatre's descent into the appalling financial and organisational state in which it now finds itself. How it is that this body can still be entrusted with the theatre's future, not to mention its present? And how, for that matter, was the Abbey allowed to descend as far as it did before the current intervention was made?

If the Abbey's recent past has been characterised by a massive authority void, many hope that this gap has begun to be filled by the man Pauline McLynn dubbed, at this year's *Irish Times*/ESB Theatre Awards, "the two million dollar baby" — director-designate Fiach MacConghail, who in his present role as arts advisor to Arts, Sport, and Tourism Minister John O'Donoghue, would have been involved in the negotiation of the special grant to the Abbey, which came out of the Minister's 2004 reserves. McLynn's comment archly acknowledges that, having helped push the good ship Abbey away from the dock of debt, MacConghail has rather swiftly found himself at the helm. It all does look a bit in-house, but due process appears to have been followed in MacConghail's appointment, and it is widely agreed that he is perhaps the only person with the knowledge, savvy, and connections to lead the Abbey forward. Given that he doesn't start at the Abbey until May, it would be expected that he will be involved in the Ministerial side of the negotiations about corporate change at the Abbey; but there is also much that is presumably out of his control, given that what is being negotiated is the much-talked about, but never previously actualised, "tripartite relationship" between the Department, the Arts Council, and the Abbey.

So how did we get to this turn, what is at stake, and what are the potential scenarios for the Abbey's future? Appropriately for high drama, we'll start our tale with the arrival of a letter.

T IS HARDLY A SECRET THAT 2004 DID NOT GO EXACTLY as planned for the Abbey. What was meant to be a gala 12-month celebration of the theatre's centenary became mired in controversy and revelations of financial and organisational chaos, which dominated the news-round in the first fortnight of September. Things subsided when the board and executive stepped back from radical and premature plans to reduce the theatre's staff by a third, pending the outcome of reports from an internal Working Group and from an outside consultant appointed by the Arts Council, Anne Bonnar of Bonnar Keenlyside. Those reports having duly been submitted, on 23 December, Arts



MACCONGHAIL

Council director Mary Cloake confirmed via a five-page letter to Abbey chairperson Eithne Healy what had already been widely reported in the media: that the Council had received €2 million in extra funding for the Abbey from Minister O'Donoghue.

What was new information in the letter were the conditions attached not only to the extra €2 million but also "explicitly linked" to the Abbey's 2005 revenue grant of €5 million. The latter point renders puzzling theatre critic and Arts Councillor Emer O'Kelly's claim in a *Sunday Independent* article of 27 February that the Abbey board's acceptance of these conditions is proof of its dedication to "the future of the [Abbey] as a genuine national theatre." Such idealism ignores the fact that, by tying its conditions directly to the entirety of the theatre's state funding, the Council gave the Abbey board virtually no choice but to accept those conditions. If such a decisive move on the Council's part immediately raises concerns about the arm's length principle between government and the arts, it also must be acknowledged that strong outside action was, by this stage, all but imperative, given how deeply into crisis the theatre had descended.

REELIN' IN THE YEARS

The last decade of the Abbey's financial and management life

1995

OPERATING DEFICIT:
-€224,800

RUNNING DEFICIT:
-€559,077

Patrick Mason is artistic director, Martin Fahy general manager, and James Hickey chairperson

1996

OPERATING DEFICIT:
-€308,006

RUNNING DEFICIT:
-€867,083



1997

OPERATING SURPLUS:
+€643,191

RUNNING DEFICIT:
-€223,892

1998

OPERATING SURPLUS:
+€255,235

RUNNING SURPLUS:
+€31,343

1999

OPERATING DEFICIT:
-€572,909

RUNNING DEFICIT:
-€541,469

Redundancy and early retirement package offered to the acting company. Patrick Mason's contract ends

Cloake's letter makes clear that the €2 million is not an unconditional bailout but that a full half of the sum must be used to fund "a comprehensive restructuring programme, which the Council believes is essential." Job One in this restructuring is for the board of the Abbey to "[replace] the National Theatre Society, Ltd. with a new company, limited by guarantee with charitable status... to advocate this change with all of its stakeholders, and to enter into a process of negotiation with the Arts Council as to the detail of this new structure." This condition, at first quite surprising, is on reflection curiously vague, and perhaps even a bit misleading. The National Theatre Society Ltd., founded 101 years ago, is a fundamental part of Ireland's history; to call for its dissolution is a radical move. The priority given this condition extends perceptions that the corporate structure the Society dictates for the Abbey is hopelessly antiquated and the root of its problems; when in fact that structure has been

streamlined over the years by successive governments and managements to function in virtually the same manner as many large Irish arts organisations. The Arts Council stresses corporate change; but it does not mention the role of the current board and both members of the executive in the Abbey's current unfortunate turn.

The facts in this matter are clear. It is not impossible to run the contemporary Abbey at a small loss or even a profit: the management before Ben Barnes and Eithne Healy did exactly that (see timeline). But since 2001, the Abbey's running deficit has never been less than €780,000. The crucial year in which a marginal position turned disastrous was 2003, when the national arts budget was decreased by 8%, and the Abbey took a hit of 15% in its Arts Council grant. Losing approximately €800,000 in that year alone, the Abbey's running deficit by the end of 2003 (the most recent year for which its accounts are available at the Companies Office) was €1.5 million. A note in the Abbey's 2003 accounts attempts to contextualise these losses by explaining that the cut in funding "was announced at a point at which it was difficult to make substantial or meaningful adjustments to the artistic programme for the year", but this line of

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
OPERATING SURPLUS: +€188,975	OPERATING DEFICIT: -€449,096	OPERATING SURPLUS: +€158,193	OPERATING DEFICIT: -€801,944	ESTIMATED RUNNING DEFICIT: -€2,500,000
RUNNING DEFICIT: -€352,493	RUNNING DEFICIT: -€801,589	CAPITAL RESERVES: -€141,179	RUNNING DEFICIT: -€1,586,519	abbeyonehundred centenary year
Ben Barnes becomes artistic director	Eithne Healy becomes chair	RUNNING DEFICIT: -€784,575 Martin Fahy retires; Brian Jackson becomes managing director	Arts Council grant cut 15%	2005...
				

argument hardly holds water. All Arts Council-funded arts organisations, and indeed the Council itself, have unhappily coped for years with a situation wherein budgets cannot be finalised until grants are announced in December; the Abbey's professed inability to alter programming in response to diminished means indicates an alarming lack of practicality and flexibility. Even more alarming is the fact that the board and executive then put the theatre at exponentially greater risk by formulating and green-lighting the Abbeyonehundred centenary programme despite the fact that the extra funding necessary to deliver Abbeyonehundred was not secured at the time of the programme announcement (and indeed, it is understood, was never secured in full).

This leads us to ask how it is possible that the bodies who were steering the Abbey into such perilous territory were allowed to continue to do so. The answer, depressingly redolent with realpoli-

tik, is that intervention in the decline would have resulted in an embarrassing domino effect of exposure and blame. Censuring or removing the public face of the theatre (i.e. Barnes and/or managing director Brian Jackson) would have turned the spotlight on the board's overall responsibility for everything that happens at the Abbey. The theatre's advisory council could have recalled any or all of the four members it elects to the board, but it is evidently too

fractured and disempowered to assert that privilege. The Minister cannot remove his two board appointees (one of whom is the chair), but could have requested that they step down, an eventuality that is highly unusual and was not exercised here. This provides the most plausible context for the current intervention by the Arts Council, which can be seen, perhaps, as the strongest action that the layers of government above the Abbey has been willing to take.

Thus the situation has arisen wherein the extant board is still in charge of the Abbey. Whether it will continue to be so; what board structure might be created to supplant or evolve from it; and what bodies or individuals will be involved in formulating and empowering those structures are the key issues left unclear in the Arts Council's letter. It is possible that the Abbey is being steered closer in line with Ireland's official National Cultural Institutions; while each of these is unique, all are defined by either being directly run by government or by a board that is appointed by the Minister (see sidebar). The pros and cons of government-appointed boards is one of the most contentious issues in the upper echelons of the Irish arts: the potential downside is that appointments may be used as political favours and that the skill,

experience, and dedication of potential board members are not the top priority. Others counter-argue that successive governments are getting smarter at making good and skilled arts board appointments; and that, whatever the case, the political will is not present to remove the privilege of board appointments from the Arts Minister.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that she is a government appointee herself, current Abbey chair Healy told *itm* in a phone interview that a "skills-based" board made up exclusively of government appointees was not an inconceivable notion in the abstract, and

IRELAND'S NATIONAL CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Chester Beatty Library

Irish Museum of Modern Art

National Archives

National Concert Hall

National Gallery

National Library

National Museum

The Abbey Theatre is not, officially, a National Cultural Institution, because it is funded by the Arts Council. However, the artistic director of the Abbey has sat on the Council of National Cultural Institutions since it was founded in 1998; and the Abbey is mentioned in the National Cultural Institutions Act of 1997 in a list of Institutions made exempt from local rates. These grey areas have created ongoing confusion about the Abbey's status in this regard.

that while nothing was yet agreed on, a fully government-appointed board might be in the Abbey's future. Healy stressed, however, that the relationship would not come any closer than that: "The Department does not want to run the Abbey. The arm's length principle is very comfortable when the Abbey is hot, as it is now." The opinion of many arts insiders, however, is that the risks involved in a fully-government-appointed board are too high, and that the best possible scenario is a board made up of a mixture of government appointees, theatre experts, business heads, and staffers. Interestingly, the Abbey board has elected two new members since MacConghail's appointment, Siobhán Bourke and Paul Mercier, both of MacConghail's generation and one, Mercier, his close associate. This hints at a potential continuity between this board and whatever comes next. And so, the question returns: what's wrong with the Abbey?

According to Healy, the Abbey is currently considering all possible new corporate structures via a consultative council led by council member and veteran trade unionist Des Geraghty, who chaired the Working Group report, and Anne Bonnar. The top priority of the current board, says Healy, is to formulate new structures for the Abbey which "fulfill contemporary best practice," which ensure the Abbey's artistic freedom, and which are easily understood. "We need to inspire public confidence," she says. "We need to simplify how things work and how they are seen to work. It's as if the complications around the Abbey have become its identity, its history."

BEFORE ANY NEW CORPORATE STRUCTURE CAN BE SET IN place, the National Theatre Society Ltd. needs to be wound up. This is far from a *fait accompli*, however, and brings our discussion around to one of the Abbey's least-understood and most-maligned organisational features, the advisory council. It is commonly believed that the council is an odd remnant from the Abbey's distant past that keeps it from functioning like a proper contemporary institution; but in fact it dates from the mid-1960s and was created as part of one of the most important previous modernisations in the theatre's history. The Abbey is a private company limited by shares, meaning that it is owned by a group of individuals who have share capital in it. It was created as such because, in 1904, the theatre's founders wanted to distance themselves from the then-occupation government and because the corporate structure known as limited by guarantee — now the norm for Irish charitable and arts organisations — was not yet common. The nominal monetary value of Abbey shares has never been an issue in the way the company does business, and it is the nature of both kinds of limited companies that their directors and shareholders are kept from financial risk if

such companies go out of business while owing money.

Up until the mid-1960s, the Abbey's shareholders were its board of directors, a group of 3-4 members which controlled all aspects of the theatre's activities — very much including artistic programming. The potential problem of this was that it tightly centralised power and influence over the organisation, a potential acutely realised in former government finance minister Ernest Blythe's controversially conservative three-decade-long tenure as board member/managing director, which ended in 1967. In direct response to this, the government required that the Abbey separate the executive

responsibilities of running the theatre from the board's functions, via the creation of the new roles of artistic director and general manager. Also at this time, the number of board members was increased, and share capital was distributed amongst a new, large group of government appointees, who were intended to represent the general public and special interest groups in advising the Abbey.

This is, many insiders argue, where some problems began, because certain factions close to the theatre did not accept the creation of an executive and advocated a return to a stronger and artistically empowered board. While perhaps a good idea in principle, the shareholding body became politicised and factionalised, and because new shareholders were elected internally with no limit to the number of terms they could serve, certain figures became disruptively entrenched. Successive managements have attempted various means to tame the shareholding body; most radically and successfully in 2000, when it was renamed the advisory council, its number of members was reduced, and it was agreed that they would be nominated by various interested groups and organisations for a

maximum of two five-year terms. The council currently exists to advise, and elect some of its members to, the board; it cannot hire and fire staff members, but it can put pressure on the board by attracting public attention to particular issues, as with the call last September by council members Jimmy Murphy and Ulick O'Connor for a vote of no confidence in Barnes; an action that became central in turning a difficult situation at the Abbey into a national talking point.

Why the council is important at the present juncture is because

THE KEY PLAYERS

The Abbey Board

(meets monthly):

Siobhán Bourke, Eugene Downes, Loretta Brennan Glucksman, Eithne Healy (chair), Paul Mercier, Niall O'Brien, John O'Mahoney, Michael J. Somers, John Stapleton

The Advisory Council

(meets at least 2 times a year):

Kathleen Barrington, Conor Bowman, Brian Cowen (Minister for Finance), Frank Cuneen, Mairead Delaney, Paddy Duffy, Clare Duignan, John Fairleigh, Clive Geraghty, Des Geraghty, Peadar Lamb, John Lynch, Tomás Mac Anna, Patricia McBride, Muriel McCarthy, Jimmy Murphy, Donal Nevin, Edna O'Brien, Ulick O'Connor, John O'Donoghue (Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism), Pat O'Reilly, Peter Rose

the liquidation of a private company must be approved by a 75% margin of all its shareholders — that is, in the Abbey's case, 75% of all board and council members, each of whom owns 100 shares of the National Theatre Society Ltd. Were enough council members to kick up a fuss, the whole process could grind to a bureaucratic halt. This is doubtless the reason for the board's softly-softly approach in a preliminary meeting with the Council on 5 February, at which, according to one Council member, the board represented the Arts Council letter as the beginning of a "debate" about the theatre's future, and indicated that it was entirely possible that the new company would have an advisory council just as the current one does. Healy reiterated this position in her conversation with *itm*, saying that she didn't "think the council is as big an issue as it's made out to be," and that she would not "dismiss an advisory board [as a component of the new company] out of hand."

On one level, it is hard not to see the board's position as an attempt to coax out of the council what it needs to fulfill the Arts Council's requirements when the full group assemble for a general meeting in April — a positive vote to end the National Theatre Society, Ltd. But if we take the board's statement at face value, we return again to the initiating question: if the new company that the Abbey Theatre becomes will involve a board of directors and an advisory shareholding body, and if the best conceivable form for its board is a mixture of government appointees and independent nominees, than what will make that company so different from the present Abbey Theatre? And so, again — what's wrong with the Abbey?

The overriding point is that whatever new or recognisable form the Abbey takes, it will require the hard work of dedicated, talented, and passionate theatre artists and professionals. Nothing should be allowed to come in the way of the best possible team being assembled at board and staff level. There are, however, many conventions, allegiances, and political loyalties at play; it does not seem overly pessimistic to predict that things could go very wrong. The key player in the current phase of change could in fact be the council: its members have the power, after all, to make demands in exchange for the votes of dissolution that the board so need. There is nothing to stop them from asking for — say — an all-skills-based, independent board; or the guarantee of a certain number of new plays on the mainstage each year; or the promise of a new building by the end of 2005. If the council agrees to a call to fall on its collective sword, one can only hope that they will do so heroically.

There's a part for anyone who feels they have a stake in this to play as well. The council and board's names are listed in the sidebar. If you feel that what is happening at the Abbey right now is important, it might be an idea to let them know about it. At the moment, there is everything to play for.





Time for a Change

THE NEW DIRECTOR OF THE DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL has made a bold opening move. Bringing the Fringe forward by two weeks, Wolfgang Hoffmann has, in fact, boldly moved an opening, thus breaking a ten-year tradition of overlapping the three-week Fringe with the two-week Dublin Theatre Festival. Perhaps surprisingly, Hoffmann's decision has found wide approval from media figures, theatremakers, and his new counterpart in the Dublin Theatre Festival, director Don Shipley.

The Dublin Fringe, upstart offspring of the Dublin Theatre Festival, is leaving the fold. Under new director Wolfgang Hoffmann, the Fringe will run for the first time this year in the three weeks previous to the Festival, with only a weekend's overlap.

PETER CRAWLEY
considers the ramifications.

Since 1995, when the Dublin Fringe Festival was initiated by Bedrock Productions (and partly subsidised by the Dublin Theatre Festival), the Fringe has been envisioned as a concurrent event with the elder Festival, each drawing from a shared performance energy that envelops the city — if not, perhaps, from a shared audience.

The schism between the festivals may begin with a name. The word "Fringe" was first coined following the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947, when the playwright Robin Kemp noted the activity of uninvited theatre groups: "Round the fringe of official Festival drama, there seems to be more private enterprise than before," he wrote.

But, according to Jimmy Fay of Bedrock, in Dublin the contentiousness of the word "fringe" is not limited to a festival's borders. "Fringe was a dirty word in 1995," he told this writer last year. "It's used as a patronising kind of word, especially in terms of funding. It's deemed that the quality is low." At the time of the Dublin Fringe's beginning, Fay recalled that "everybody said, don't call it Fringe, because it won't sustain it — it won't happen." Today, Hoffmann's unmooring of the Fringe from the DTF serves as an opportunity to assert his festival's independent character, to

address the nebulous but persistent question about "quality", and to emphasise that the Fringe entails more than just theatre.

"It's basically an identity question," he says of the uncoupling, "[so] that we are not seen as a little brother of the Theatre Festival." Escaping the shadow of the DTF, Hoffmann's festival is then at liberty to re-establish the definition of Fringe: "I'd like the Fringe Festival to have a multi-art form theme and for it to be seen as a fringe of art forms." Hoffmann's two predecessors, Ali Curran and Vallejo Gantner, have banged the multi-arts drum before, yet the theatre perception sticks. Will it be a case of third time lucky?

But first there are immediate practical benefits from the move, which will afford breathing room to both Dublin festivals for their respective productions. Don Shipley, director of the Dublin Theatre Festival, calls the move a "win-win situation" which responds to space restrictions faced by each: "The upside is that we both have been challenged by the lack of venues for our respective festivals, and this certainly frees up some valuable venue space for them, because we're not arm-wrestling over space. It frees up the Project for the Theatre Festival — something that we've long sought." Other than Project, though, one of the coveted "venues with state of the art equipment", as Shipley puts it, it's hard to imagine which other of the Fringe's previous performance spaces the Festival might desire — The SS Michael and John? The International Bar? The St Stephen's Green public toilets?

Nor is it likely, given the modest scale of most Fringe productions, that Hoffmann dreams of spending more than a week in the Samuel Beckett Theatre, or of renting out the Tivoli for, say, a hybrid-form dance drama. Besides, Hoffmann now speaks of actually reducing the number of venues involved in the Fringe, ensuring that the spaces used will be concentrated within the city centre and that his programme will be easier to navigate, while he also remains committed to the Fringe ethos of "finding new spaces", ones unusual for performance. He will also bring back the highly successful Spiegeltent for a third year.

But the question that bedevils not only the Dublin Fringe but also the word "fringe" itself is still one of quality. This is the hardest to redress. Experimental performance runs a high risk of failure, and given the Fringe's warmth for start-up companies, it is hard to safeguard a particular level of accomplishment — there's no kite mark for theatre. Hoffmann thinks that such erratic standards on the Fringe have tipped the balance in favour of the Dublin Theatre Festival, which offers more reassuring alternatives.

"There is a certain amount of the audience that feel a show at the Theatre Festival is a safer bet than a show at the Fringe, and they are probably, to a certain extent, right," says Hoffmann. "At the Fringe we take more risks, but I want to develop a better sense of

Other than Project, it's hard to imagine which other of the Fringe's previous performance spaces the Theatre Festival might desire — the SS Michael and John? The International Bar? The St Stephen's Green public toilets?

quality, that there is a high standard even though we are doing off-centre work; it's not poor work, or people who are only starting."

Does this mean that the 2005 Fringe will feature fewer new companies? "Yes," he says. "We don't see ourselves as a platform for just *any* new work. Just because a company makes something new, or has a first show, doesn't mean that it has to be shown in the Fringe. We need to take this seriously, that our programme is quality — there's no other way to get audiences into the theatre, and I think the Fringe has suffered from a lack of audience."

The Fringe has actually reported audience growth in recent years, pointing to a doubling of audiences under Gantner — but Hoffmann is not the first to tackle the thorny issue of quality. Given that such companies as Corn Exchange, Semper Fi, and the recently-funded Performance Corporation and Inis Theatre first came to notice by winning acclaim on the Fringe, however, his solution may not come as heartening news for young artists who habitually find the doors of professional theatre experience closed.

Director of Fabrik Potsdam, a German contemporary dance company, and artistic director of the *Aurora Nova* programme, which highlights dance and visual theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Hoffmann feels well-placed to gauge the potential of an idea and to essentially forecast its quality. "I find it easy to communicate with other working artists about their ideas rather than just reading a proposal. I want to talk to the artist and find out more about how they are working and basically see if all the ingredients are right."

Concerns have been quietly voiced, however, over extending Dublin's festival season from its usual three weeks to five, with Hoffmann recognising that the Fringe will have to generate excitement in the city on its own, magnanimously leaving the Festival to "kick off on a high point." For his part, however, Shipley's only voiced concern is whether or not there will be "media fatigue" by the time the DTF rolls into action. This is surely a consideration; but it is also doubtless the case that neither festival will now have to fight as hard for media coverage. All of which raises the question, were the Festival and the Fringe ever good for each other?



NEW BOYS:

Wolfgang
Hoffmann (top)
and Don Shipley

"I think that in previous years we were trying to generate a critical mass of performances in town to get the excitement going and to get more people in general to come, but the underlying problem is that we did cannibalise each other's audience," says Hoffmann.

Shipley, for his part, is unsure. "I never saw it as being competitive at all. In fact I thought the greater synergy was a very positive thing — I don't think that we drew heavily from each other's audiences. If anything the buzz that was in the community only enhanced and brought focus to the fact that an extraordinary amount of invigorating theatre was going on." Hoffmann's decision, as Shipley understands it, makes sense because it places the Fringe "on the coattails of Edinburgh", allowing an easier transfer of international participants — this year there will be a gap of less than two weeks between the Edinburgh Fringe and Dublin's.

The Edinburgh Fringe provides an interesting comparison. Recent debates have raged over that festival's scant funding versus its enormous contribution to the Scottish economy, and whether or not a festival that has long eclipsed the International Festival should even retain the name Fringe. With the International Festival, Book Festival, Film Festival, Jazz Festival, and Military Tattoo running concurrently, however, Edinburgh is (as Hoffmann puts it) a "different animal", and none of the individual festivals would dare detach itself from such an established group. Conservative estimates suggest that Edinburgh quadruples in size during the month of August, healthily sustaining all festivals, whereas Dublin's modest scale could never generate such a mass.

Although the Dublin Fringe now gives every outward sign of going it alone, Hoffmann stresses the idea of collaboration: "We want to bring Irish and international companies together in creative partnerships," he says. "Where, on a formal level, there would be international companies that would see Irish work, maybe hold workshops, or just be in conversation. On the other hand, the Irish company would play the host to the international one, accommodate them, if they can, and co-promote them to their audience."

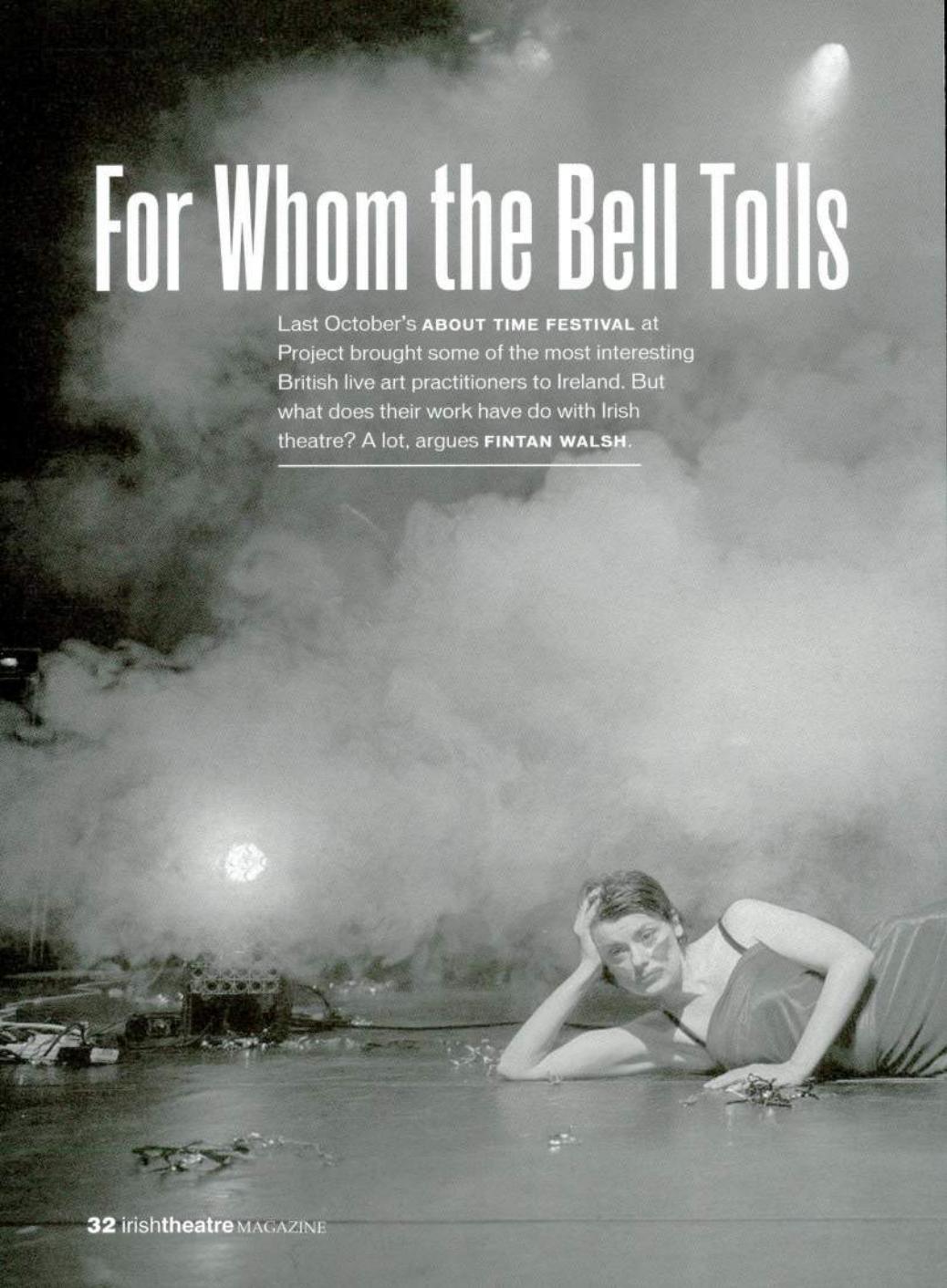
Despite the growing space between the two festivals, their directors have recently mooted a potential collaboration. "We're hoping to bridge the two festivals," says Shipley. "So that's a good sense, during early days, that we have a good rapport from the offset." This collaboration, though still at the theoretical stage, may result in an outdoor event, the co-presentation of an international company, or could even involve "building something from the ground up." It's the one sign of communion between two festivals that have aesthetically, ideologically, and now temporally been drifting further apart. 

A potential collaboration mooted by Hoffmann and Shipley is the one sign of communion between two festivals that have, aesthetically, ideologically, and now temporally, been drifting further apart.

Peter Crawley writes about theatre and music for publications including The Irish Times, and is news editor of this magazine.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Last October's **ABOUT TIME FESTIVAL** at Project brought some of the most interesting British live art practitioners to Ireland. But what does their work have do with Irish theatre? A lot, argues **FINTAN WALSH**.





FORCED ENTERTAINMENT'S BLOODY MESS

THE TITLE OF THE FESTIVAL ORGANIZED BY Project Arts Centre and the British Council late last year — *About Time* — set the prospective spectator up with an interpretative dilemma. The more literal might have assumed that the programme was concerned with issues of time; the more idiomatic, sensitive to the exclamatory tone, may well have been prepared for a theatrical epiphany while the more suspicious, conscious of the subtle condescension, most likely wondered to whom and at what we were playing second fiddle now? No doubt the more imaginative were primed for timely performances about time (and in some cases, they were right). Further, in refusing to classify itself within the familiar areas of theatre, cinema, music or art, preferring terms like "performance" and "live art," *About Time* also left the public to wonder exactly whose or what time was in question. Those brave enough to throw caution to the wind and attend the festival learned that the bell tolled across Irish artistic divides, announcing a weeklong presentation of contemporary British performance and heralding possible new models for Irish cultural practice.

If you happened to miss this festival, I can assure you that its chief lesson was semantic rather than artistic. This is not to discredit the initiative nor the performances themselves, but to reassure the public and theatre practitioners that we in Ireland are not so out of kilter with British trends as the title of the festival and some of the surrounding hype might suggest. The term "live art" — or "contemporary British performance," as it was digestibly coated — is relatively new, having emerged in Britain in the 1980s and '90s. A hybrid form, it developed as a merger of the then-relatively distinct areas of performance art and experimental theatre, and has since continued as a non-descriptive, non-prescriptive interdisciplinary practice. According to the London-based Live Art Development Agency, these practices are directed at "disrupting borders, breaking rules, defying traditions, resisting defi-



nitions, asking questions, activating audiences and exposing gaps." This is all well and good, but is the concept really so alien to this island? I'm sure I read something similar in this year's Fringe programme.

In fact, much of the language used to describe live art is already part of Irish theatre's critical vocabulary. Rather than speak of live art, however, we are more likely to describe contemporary work in terms of physical theatre, multi-media, and devised or collaborative performance. There are a number of reasons for these differences. First, Irish theatre undoubtedly remains influenced by its strong literary history, a tradition responsible for dressing our stages with socio-realist plays for over a hundred years, and for equipping us with specific ways of making and speaking about theatre. These differences also owe to the fact that performance was not embraced as readily by the Irish art world as by the British, thus stalling the pace of our theatre's inheritance of hybridised performance styles and vocabularies. These patterns were also influenced by Ireland's political climate which, as David Grant has argued, in being dominated by the "National Question," has typi-

cally lacked the same left/right wing divisions which have characterised British and American politics. Consequently, while British live art was experimenting with new forms to respond to a

range of identity politics including gender, sexuality, and race during the 1980s, even Ireland's rapidly growing independent theatre sector, including companies like Passion Machine and Rough Magic, maintained affinities with national and nationalist questions, and relatively naturalistic performance styles.

One of the values of the *About Time* festival was that it reminded us of the array of media and forms which many Irish practitioners already use. It also called into question the very notion of a theatre community, by resisting usage of the term "theatre" and by refusing to solely market the festival to a theatre audience. This point was bolstered by exploiting different performance sites and by employing a range of media drawn from the generally distinct areas of theatre, cinema, music and art. Perhaps most importantly, in a climate where even the National Theatre is struggling to fill seats, the festival illuminated potential ways of attracting a more diverse audience demographic, with terms like "contemporary performance" or "live art" sounding more alluring than plain old theatre. More specifically, the real value of *About Time* emerged when we forgot that we were watching exemplars of contemporary British performance and allowed individual pieces could speak for themselves, rather than for a movement — while at the same time not

LIVE AND IN CORK

IF ABOUT TIME LEFT YOU HUNGRY FOR MORE, prepare for the **BODILY FUNCTIONS** programme of live art at the Granary, Cork this year. Part of the European Capital of Culture celebrations, the programme will feature theatre, performance, dance, installation, and music, from Irish and international artists, and will culminate in a symposium (30 Sep-2 Oct) including **MARINA ABRAMOVIC** and **RON ATHEY**. While a detailed description of events is available at www.granary.ie, here are a few events to look out for:

Galway-based performance artist **AIDEEN BARRY** will be in residence in July, creating new work and perform two pieces from her "The Futility of Conveying Emotion" series – *Storm Reader* and *whatgoesaroundcomesaround*.

In September, the (in)famous Italian-born live artist, **FRANKO B.**, takes up residence. In exploring issues of violence, Franko's work is explicit, characterised by self-mutilation and blood-letting practices; in *Oh Lover Boy* (coming to Cork) the naked artist bleeds over a canvas.

Dublin-born performance artist **AMANDA COOGAN** will present *Headbangers* (30 Sept), a highlight of last year's Liverpool Biennial, an exploration of group hysteria in which 100 people headbang to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Other highlights include a commissioned work by **AINE PHILLIPS** (*Red Wedding*, 25-28 May); a durational piece by the Ulster-based **ALASTAIR MACLENNAN**, (*Bail the Veil*, 7-9 Jul) and a performance by the Belfast-born **ANDRE STITT** ("LOVE ETC...", 16-18 Dec). -FW

precluding the possibility of sparking some ideas for Irish practice.

Rising to this challenge, London based Curious' *On the Scent* explored the relationship between smell and memory. The inti-



FRANKO B

Though performers like Conor Lovett and Mannix Flynn have proved that Irish artists are extremely capable of invention in the solo medium, reminders of the full range of representational media remain nonetheless useful.

mate site-based performance, which is currently on a world tour, took place in an basement apartment on Synge Street, where three female performers relayed memories, evoked and defined by various smells. Surrounded by perfume bottles, the glamorous Lois Weaver recalled her mother and visiting Avon ladies. In the kitchen Leslie Hill made popcorn, fried meat, burned a tuft of her own hair and snorted chilli while relaying the history of her New Mexico homeland as an atomic bomb testing site. To the toast 'Here's to homesickness' all three of us sitting around the table downed a shot of tequila in sympathy. Finally, in a sick room, the memories of performer Helen Paris were ignited by smells of digestive biscuits, alcohol, and Roget & Gallet soap.

Marisa Carnesky's one-woman piece, *Jewess Tatooess*, exploited video imagery, photography, sound, objects and her own body, to juxtapose the Jewish taboo of tattooing against the Nazi practice of tattooing incarcerated Jews during the Holocaust. In the multi-media performance, Carnesky's body became the paper for rewriting history — in tattooing herself she attempted to resignify the Nazi practice on her forbears by acting of her own free will while simultaneously contesting those primary dictates which created the taboo. The piece also highlighted approaches to exploring identities violently forged in the smithy of history, without relying solely on verbal methods. A timely lesson, surely, for a country that has chiefly depended on literary forms to carry out a similar project.

Another one-man show, Robin Deacon's *Colin Powell*, began with the performer speaking with his back to the audience, while facing a large projection screen. As images were mounted, many of which depicted Powell, Deacon made comparisons between himself and the then U.S. Secretary of State: they both have they similar ethnic backgrounds, they both look alike, and like Deacon, Powell's daughter is an actor. Soon into the piece it became apparent that the comparisons were few, with Deacon proceeding to satirize a politician who, he believes, has white-faced himself to ensure his political assimilation. Though the content was interesting, the performance and presentation were especially engaging — the video footage, the music, the novel range of props. Like Carnesky, Deacon also showed how resourceful a single artist can be. Though performers like Conor Lovett and Mannix Flynn, in their respective performances of Beckett works and childhood under the Christian Brothers, have proved that Irish artists are extremely capable of invention in the solo medium, reminders of the full range of representational media remain nonetheless useful.

Amidst all this innovation, certain performances highlighted the dangers and limitations of working within such fluid parameters. In their short but energetic production, *To The Dogs*, the two mem-



FORCED ENTERTAINMENT

bers of Lone Twin attempted to entertain the audience with anecdotes of cycling around Dublin. Though the performers seemed to enjoy themselves, they did so at the expense of audience engagement, and the masturbatory piece left me craving a good old-fashioned denouement. Likewise, though not to the same extent, did *Bloody Mess*, Forced Entertainment's production. Delivering what both the company name and the show title promised, the piece centred on the efforts of ten performers to piece together a story of the world. With the "characters" including rock singers, clowns and a woman dressed as a gorilla, it soon became obvious that the creation of a consensual, cohesive narrative was an elusive goal. Regardless, we laughed at their failure, if only because we felt forced to. Get it? Writer and director Tim Etchells claimed that although the piece is about mess and disunity, it is presented with a "structured exuberance" and as such may be taken as a manifesto

"that theatre can be more than drag story or literary rhetoric that its heart lies in a play, in liveness and in the event." While *Bloody Mess* was certainly live and exuberant, it was rarely probing. The piece showed us some problems with contemporary life, without questioning their origins or suggesting ways to remedy them. But then again, perhaps manic creativity is the company's solution.

Civic Life: Moore Street explored how members of the Dublin-based African theatre group Arambe relate to the city as home. The film culminates with the statement "I want to belong, but on my own terms," a timely and defiant assertion.

On the other hand Etchells' films, shown as in Project Cube, were much more subtle than *Bloody Mess*, and more successful for that. Films like *Down Time*, *My Eyes Were Like Stars* and *So Small* were concerned with experiences of love, loss and dreaming, whispered as if secrets confessed by the on-screen performers to the viewer. The hilarious text-based film *Starfucker*, which described Hollywood stars in bizarre situations, revealed how evocative familiar media can be, given the right context. On a more serious note, desperate optimists, a group hailing from Ireland but based in the U.K. since 1987, screened their film *Civic Life: Moore Street*. More explicitly related to Irish life than other performances, the film explored how members of the Dublin-based African theatre group Arambe relate to the city as home. Shot at night-time on Moore Street, the film culminated with the statement "I want to belong, but on my own terms", a timely and defiant assertion that ethnic and racial integration is not about assimilation or compliance, but about living side by side.

Though the term "live art" may not be part of the Irish cultural vocabulary, for some of the reasons identified above, and although at this stage we may never embrace it, many of its features are already evident in our contemporary theatre practice. Increasingly we are witnessing the dissolution of artistic borders with theatre makers collaborating with dance, music and visual artists. Evidence of this interdisciplinary practice can be found in the past year, from Rough Magic's wartime musical *Improbable Frequency* to CoisCéim's collaboration with Opera Ireland on a production of *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The hybrid style was perhaps most memorably exemplified last year in Operating Theatre's *Passades*, which took place in a cavernous warehouse space in Dublin's inner-city Digital Hub. Devoid of dialogue, and combining movement, digital image and electronic sound, the piece was effectively live art, though not labelled as such. It is also worth noting that About Time corresponded with *Fix '04 Biennial of Performance Art* in Belfast, and preceded other live art activities due to take place in Cork this year (see sidebar, p. 36). Those who remain unconvinced by my arguments here will have ample opportunities to sample the work of some of the biggest names in international live art and make comparisons with Irish work for themselves.



Fintan Walsh is a research student at the School of Drama, TCD.



For as little as €32 per year you'll get full coverage of everything that's new on the Irish theatre scene, as well as debate, criticism and analysis of trends that are shaping Irish theatre today.

Get your own subscription to Ireland's number one theatre magazine

Subscribe online at
info@irishthemagazine.ie
Or call 087 799 7989

Down and Dirty

JOHNNY HANRAHAN offers an excerpt from his new music theatre piece, **MADAM T**, which plays in a Meridian/Cork 2005 co-production at the Everyman Palace, Cork from 21-30 April.



JOHNNY HANRAHAN WRITES: This show is based on the short story "Madame Tellier's House" by Guy de Maupassant. It tells the story of a dockside brothel owner and her role in the life of various seedy burghers of Fecamp who visit her *maison* nightly for tea, sex, and sympathy. This scene opens the play. It gives some basic information about Madame Tellier, her "House", and its place in the world of these small-town reprobates. Its real life is musical, though; musical in the sense that some of it is sung but also in the fact that the slightly ornate vocabulary and spiky rhythms are designed to create a kind of syncopated mouth-music which combines street attitude with retro terminology. In this way it tries to encompass in its language the overall style I'm trying to build for the production.

Act 1, Scene 1

(As lights come up and actors enter)

CHORUS:

And so the evening comes
And as the evening comes
Across the bay great fleets of dreaming cloud
Go floating high and silent through the golden air
They pass away

They pass away
Like dreams

(Men speaking, women dressing. Moderately snappy music — urban feel.)

PHILLIPE: There's nothing special about the House of Madam T. Not at first glance. If houses were people hers would be just one more face in the crowd. Right on the corner of two small streets. And neither of

them is going anywhere fast. (*Bell rings*) St. Etienne just up behind here, appealing to the heavens and down below here the docks and the breathing sea.

(*Long hooter blast – pause.*)

DUPUIS: It's the kind of place where you go up the narrow lino stairs and find an old-fashioned tailor who looks like he's been stitching one long seam for a lifetime or a mouldering lawyer or a door that's always locked with a yellow sign that says "Russian Lessons —apply within." Or a woman in a shady room who might supply the answers to a lot of awkward questions a girl might want to ask.

PIMPESSE: A house from long ago with a sweet shop in the parlour or a storybook cobbler with a stoop and two thousand shoes inside the open door. Where you can step inside and have your sticky fancy. Where you can get yourself completely soled and heeled and time sits down and waits.

TOUNEVEAU: And that's how it still stands. For all anybody cares our hostess could be flogging fruit or ...

PHILLIPE: Liquorice sticks ...

TOURNEVEAU: Or even ...

DUPUIS: Miniature pastries.

TOURNEVEAU: Upstairs. She could be a funeral florist in a small way or the finest haberdasher this town has ever seen.

DUPUIS: For all anybody cares.

TOURNEVEAU: For all anybody really cares.

(*Bell – long hooter.*)

ALL: There goes the sun!!

(*Chorus, big visuals – sunset – night. Girls start to hum as lights go down. Something spiky, spunky, a bit of "cha cha cha" about it without moving – lights grow on girls as they fade on men.*)

Scene 2

PIMPESSE: Madam T's no haberdasher.

DUPUIS: Not that she ...

PIMPESSE: Alas ...

TOURNEVEAU: Alas, no ...

PHILLIPE: Not that she ...

PIMPESSE: If only ...

TOURNEVEAU: If only ...

DUPUIS: That arse.

PIMPESSE: I've often thought ...

PHILLIPE: Those tits.

TOURNEVEAU: What I wouldn't give...!

PHILIPPE: What I wouldn't give ...!

DUPUIS: Oh yes! (*laughs*) Oh yes, dear Madam T!!

TOURNEVEAU: Cheap at the price.

PHILIPPE: Cheap at any price.

PIMPESSE: Not that she...

TOURNEVEAU: (*sadly*) No... No....

PIMPESSE: If only ...

TOURNEVEAU: ...What I wouldn't give.

GIRLS: (*cheeky song*)

My name is Rosa.

It's not hard to make

A habit out of me.

The boys all like

play excerpt

the way I make 'em shake.
I get the very best, they've got to give
My motto, no results, no fee.
So they give and I take
And they take and I give
And that is how we feel its gotta be
'cos I know how to hit 'em where they live
and they know that they got the very best
of me.
My name is Rosa
It's not hard to make
A habit out of me.

(All the girls sing this — they can all sing together or break out from the group from time to time.)

Scene 3

(Women continue preparations for the evening — girls use first verse of "Take you in Hand" as background vocal as men speak.)

WHORES: (singing)
If you've got a little problem
with the shape of your desire
your little secret's safe with us.
We tend not to mope or sigh
Or make a mountain of your molehill
Fling hot fat right into your fire.
Don't think twice if your tendencies are
banned.
We're very well equipped right here to take
them right in hand
Ooh ooh! Ooh ooh!

PHILIPPE: Going to Madam T's is not exactly a treat. Well I suppose it is ... in a way ... But only in the way that putting sugar in your tea is a treat. Only in the way that biting your nails can provide a kind of seedy satisfaction. You'd miss it if you didn't but it's not enough to make your heart go pit-a-pat.

Scene 4

(Drink and chair for Pimpesse. Rosa drapes herself across his knee.)

PIMPESSE: If the ball and chain could see me now she'd have my guts for garters.
MADAM T: She's nervous. And that's no surprise!

PIMPESSE: No surprise certainly! But I mean, I mean she's so nervous she's makin' me nervous and me being nervous makes her more nervous and so on and so forth and well where's it all going to end?

(Madam T settles a pillow behind his head.)

MADAM T: Better?

PIMPESSE: Perfection! I mean, I mean I understand how she feels. I collapsed before the main course. Burnt my forehead in the chowder.

(Rosa kisses his face — Madam T very sympathetic)

She thought she's lost me for good.

MADAM T: Just like the Boss.
PIMPESSE: Of course, of course she's keen that I don't overdo it.

MADAM T: Polished off his favourite, pork chops and gravy. Got up to answer a call from nature and next I knew he was gone arse over tip, down the backstairs. Dead in the pantry.

PIMPESSE: Shocking! Shocking! Ticker trouble is a curse. But you can't wrap a man up in cotton wool. You can't keep him on your knee like a lapdog waiting for further orders. A man's got to live, Madame Tellier.

MADAM T: Of course! Of course!
PIMPESSE: A man has got to live until he dies!



* St. Patrick's festival *  * 10 YEARS *



COMEDY CIRCUS

BARRY MURPHY DAVID McSAVAGE
IAN COPPINER BRENDAN DEMPSEY
KEVIN GILDEA DAVID O'DOHERTY

FRIDAY 18th MARCH : LIBERTY HALL

DOORS 7:30PM. TICKETS €25 INCLUDING BOOKING FEE AVAILABLE FROM CENTRAL TICKET BUREAU
TEL. 01 8721122. WWW.CENTRALTICKETBUREAU.COM. MORE INFORMATION AT WWW.STPATRICKSFESTIVAL.IE

This Other Island

Plays about Ireland have always been popular on the London stage, but the number of Irish – and *Oirish* – plays now being written by England-based writers is unprecedented. In this Book Reviews special feature, **HELEN MEANY** samples three of the recent crop.

IT TAKES GREAT ARTISTRY TO PUT A great artist into a play. Christopher Hampton has succeeded, many times, but even Tom Stoppard stumbled over some awkward biographical upholstery in his recent trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*. Put two famous Irish writers on stage and the result can come close to farce, as in Michael Hastings' recent play *Calico*, which pits James Joyce's logorrhea against Samuel Beckett's silences. With Joyce's daughter Lucia popping up, shouting "shit fuck piss bum" while her brother Giorgio parades in operatic costume and Nora Barnacle makes tea, we've got the complete Mad Joyce Family cartoon strip.

Two decades ago Hastings wrote *Tom and Viv*, an influential play about T.S. Eliot's first wife Vivienne, which focussed on the damage inflicted on an unstable, talented woman by a brilliant poet whose work was of paramount importance to him. It was subsequently filmed and has contributed to the current,

somewhat tarnished image of T.S. Eliot. The play chimed with a general spirit of revisionism in the early 1980s regarding the male heroes of modernism, and established Hastings' reputation. Perhaps the RSC, which commissioned *Calico*, expected more of the same but the production, directed by Edward Hall, received un-enthusiastic reviews and ended its run prematurely at London's Duke of York's Theatre last year.

Here Hastings is concentrating on the story of Lucia Joyce, an aspiring contemporary dancer who suffered from a mental illness that may have been schizophrenia, or possibly Tourette's Syndrome, and spent decades in psychiatric hospitals until her death, aged 75. He is interested in the reputations and the private lives of great writers and how their pursuit of their artistic ambitions affected those around them, especially vulnerable, creative women. But while *Tom and Viv* did offer insights into some of the more personal elements of Eliot's

CALICO

by Michael Hastings

(Oberon Books, 2004)

Produced at the Duke of York's Theatre, Spring 2004.

THE NIGHT SEASON

by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

(Faber & Faber, 2004)

Produced at the Royal National Theatre, Autumn 2004.

THE PILLOWMAN

by Martin McDonagh

(Faber & Faber, 2003)

Produced at the Royal National Theatre, 2003
and on tour, 2005.

poetry, *Calico* creates an unfavourable portrait of Joyce without adding to our understanding of the complex emotional bonds between members of the Joyce family. In his strangely incoherent preface Hastings writes: "Sometimes it is necessary to look back at these artists of Modernism, take note of their mandarin litera-



MAD JOYCE FAMILY Dermot Crowley, Imelda Staunton and Romola Garai in the West End production of *Calico*

ture, their determination to make literature 'difficult', and ask yourself — yes, geniuses, each one, but have their works been kidnapped for an elitist agenda in the groves of academe?"

While a sentence like that certainly does not inspire confidence in the play that follows, the introduction prompts more serious misgivings than those of

style. From the lack of documentary evidence pertaining to Lucia, the fact that her letters, poems, diary, and possibly a manuscript of a novel, were destroyed by Joyce's friends and family, Hastings infers some foul play. His introduction suggests that an incestuous relationship between Joyce and his daughter pushed her further towards mental instability and institutionalisation, and that this has been covered up by the Joyce estate: "If the true root of her damaged life lies not with him, why this thunderous silence which surrounds her?"

In *Calico*, set in Paris in 1928, Joyce is portrayed as a fond but negligent father, either ignoring, or incapable of coping with, Lucia's volatility. He struggles with his failing eyesight while losing himself in the linguistic thickets of *Finnegans Wake*. The play glosses over his reluctance to have Lucia incarcerated and his lifelong grief over her illness. The fragmentary structure of the play, with its series of short scenes, adds to the sense of sketchiness in the characterisation. The tone seems facetious — too much so for the seriousness of what's being hinted at.

Lucia is portrayed as both highly vulnerable and sexually voracious; there is no sense of her talent as a dancer or her creative intelligence, as recently advocated in Carol Loeb Shloss' (admittedly overheated) biography. A number of different biographical details are mixed up, with Lucia's discovery of her parents' erotic correspondence somehow being made to suggest an inappropriate sexual dimension to the father/daughter and brother/sister relationships. In the midst of it all, the young Beckett, who worked as Joyce's unpaid secretary, is the straight man, generously playing along with, but not encouraging, Lucia's fantasies of marriage. His behaviour towards her is com-

book reviews

passionate and he is clearly viewed by Hastings as the hero of the piece.

Lucia is presented as being at the mercy of her family, particularly her father, but this Joyce is such a one-dimensional figure that we can't take him seriously; nor can he withstand the accumulation of grievances against him. His son Giorgio becomes the mouthpiece for these, saying: "We cannot live this famous and eccentric life of yours. Because it's like a shadow over us which allows of no light." More light — and shade — are certainly needed here.

Another colourful Irish family, a fictional one, is portrayed in the English playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz's second play, *The Night Season*, first staged at London's Royal National Theatre last year. Lenkiewicz has an Irish grandmother and a father who is a writer (Peter Quint). She has spoken in interviews about her fascination with the relationship between WB Yeats and Maud Gonne, and although set in present-day Sligo, her play has a touch of "romantic Ireland" timelessness. Yet, while the image of the creative free-spirits of the west of Ireland is somewhat stereotyped, the inflections of their dialogue are pitch-perfect.

Against the backdrop of the filming of a biopic about Yeats and Gonne, members of the fictional Kennedy family play out their own dramas of love, longing and loss. They are a sensitive, expressive bunch, inclined to quote their local Nobel laureate, and to succumb to the potency of cheap music and wine. Sexual hunger and an insatiable thirst for alcohol afflict them all, and the four female characters, sisters Maud, Rose and Judith, and their lusty grandmother Lily are unusually frank and graphic about their physical desires and frustrations.

The play is full of echoes: of Chekhov, Marie Jones, Aidan Higgins, John McGahern, and Sebastian Barry, and it's not quite clear what lies beneath the resonances. Yet although it lacks depth, it has a charm that stops just short of whimsy, thanks to Lenkiewicz's eye for detail and ear for humorous dialogue. The women's father, Patrick, is a feckless drunk with Lear-like delusions who has been abandoned by his wife; one of the most vivid scenes is between him and his disaffected eldest daughter Judith in the local pub, as his attempt to express his affection for her gets mired in self-aggrandisement and self-pity. This is a playwright who understands tangled family relationships and conveys them with a light and sensitive touch. It will be fascinating to see whether her own voice will emerge more clearly from its literary and dramatic influences.

The London-Irish writer Martin McDonagh has played with voices from the Irish dramatic tradition to great effect and may even be viewed an influence on another successful foray into that territory: Mark Doherty's *Trad*, which premiered to great success at last year's Galway Arts Festival. McDonagh's first play with a non-Irish setting, *The Pillowman*, was, like Lenkiewicz's play, first staged at the RNT just over a year ago. It is a characteristically taut script, seamlessly structured and paced, but with more complex narrative layering than his previous work. On the page it is riveting; a good production might help to fill out its somewhat abstract — not wholly convincing — setting in a totalitarian state. But then, it's not the actual place that seems to concern McDonagh here: it is the stories — and stories within stories — that unfold there.

Set in an interrogation centre where two policemen are torturing a short story



'NIGHT MOTHER Annette Crosbie
and John Light in the RNT production
of *The Night Season*

writer, Katurian, and his brother Michal, it plays with our expectations and sympathies. Katurian has been arrested because of a series of gruesome murders of children that have taken place in the unnamed city, which echo those described in detail in his stories. Three of his stories are re-enacted by Katurian, and one in particular, "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" becomes entwined with the narrative of the interrogation. McDonagh's inventive storytelling is further developed here. Katurian's tales have the atmosphere of archetypal Central European fables. They are cruel twists on ancient fairytales, ambivalent, ambiguous and completely absorbing: a boy whose toes are cut off by an apparently benevolent stranger; a girl who swallows razor blades covered in pieces of apple. Another

innocent child who thinks she is the reincarnation of Jesus is whipped and crucified and then, in a bleak denial of the resurrection, is buried alive.

Comedy and cruelty are intertwined and blended with ironic commentary, as characters step out of their roles: one of his interrogators says to Katurian, "I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?" Echoes of Kundera's absurdism, Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, and cinematic and televisual clichés accumulate to create a tone that is subtly unsettling and becomes more than the purveying of parody of which McDonagh has sometimes been accused.

Throughout his ordeal, Katurian's main concern is that his stories survive, and

book reviews

The Pillowman strives to demonstrate the power of literature, what theorists call its autonomy. This is somewhat over-asserted: if Katurian's belief in his own work faltered, even slightly, under duress, he might be a more engaging figure. But McDonagh likes exaggeration and ex-remes. This intriguing and complex play also touches on other questions, especially the very current preoccupation with children's safety and well-being. McDonagh satirises easy sentimentality about children — especially in the figure of the torturer, Ariel, who

wants to be remembered as a good person to whom children give sweets — while also presenting a kind of case study of the effects on adults of childhood experiences of cruelty. And although, surprisingly, it doesn't quite end in what Katurian calls a "fashionably downbeat mode", McDonagh has demonstrated that any story that begins: "Once upon a time" can go wherever its clever author wants.

Helen Meany is a freelance arts journalist and critic.

Through the Leaves

PATRICK LONERGAN thumbs the newest books about and of interest to Irish theatre.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OWEN McCafferty, who recently picked up the John Whiting Award for *Scenes from the Big Picture*, his 2003 hit for London's Royal National Theatre. His publishers remind us that this makes McCafferty the only writer ever to win the three major UK writing awards for one play — he also received the Evening Standard and Meyer Whitworth Awards. We're still waiting for an Irish production of *Scenes from the Big Picture* — a vivid exploration of life in contemporary Belfast, and one of the best new Irish plays since 2000. But in the meantime, the script will do nicely. It's available from Nick Hern Books, who have also published many of McCafferty's other works, including his adaptation of the film *Days of Wine and Roses*, currently running in London.

Nick Hern have been busy with Irish playwrights lately. Also coming soon from them is Enda Walsh's new play, *The Small Things*, which, like his earlier works, is presented in monologue form — this time from an elderly man and woman. Commissioned by the UK new writing company Paines Plough, the play is part of its "This Other England" season, and features Walsh's usual blend of high-powered lyricism with wit. It's also a disturbing consideration of genocide and fascism, making the play urgently political. This is an exciting new development in Walsh's career.

Nick Hern have also formed an interesting association with Rough Magic. After bringing out that company's 2004 offerings from Ioanna Anderson and Gerard Murphy, they are now issuing new Rough Magic work by Elizabeth

Kuti, whose *The Sugar Wife* opens in Dublin this summer, and are also publishing the book and lyrics for the Arthur Riordan/Bell Helicopter *Improbable Frequency* — the 2004 Irish Times/ESB Best Production. This should be out right on time for the transfer of the musical to the Abbey. The show is great fun, but it's also an extremely clever send-up of Ireland during World War II, which will surely give much pleasure to readers. And will surely facilitate sing-alongs at the Abbey.

Also busy these days are Carsyfort Press, who continue to produce high quality books about Irish theatre. They launched seven new books shortly before Christmas last year, and have lots more in the pipeline. Among the highlights of their 2004 offerings are *Playboys of The Western World*, Adrian Frazier's collection of essays about Synge's play, which focussed particularly on the Cillian Murphy/DruidSynge production from last year. Another interesting new title is *Sacred Play*, by Anne O'Reilly, a discussion of spirituality in Irish drama that includes explorations of such mainstream writers as Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr, as well as work on dramatists who don't always get the attention they deserve, such as Paula Meehan and Patricia Burke Brogan. For the light-hearted reader, Eric Weitz's *The Power of Laughter* is well worth checking out. It includes essays on an impressive range of recent Irish works, some more obviously comedic than other. We get Paul Meade on *Alone it Stands*, Aoife Monks on the Fiona Shaw/Deborah Warner *Medea*, Jim

Culleton on Fishamble, and Arambe's Bisi Adigun on Irish humour. O'Reilly's and Weitz's books come at Irish drama from different — even divergent — points of view; while both succeed on their own merits, it is notable how well they complement each other. Finally, there's Tom Murphy's *The Drunkard*, a play that blends the religious and the comic. One of the hits of 2003 in its B*Spoke production, *The Drunkard* is given a richly deserved printing. Carsyfort Press report that their plans for 2005 are well underway: Nicholas Grene and Christopher Morash's book about Irish theatre on Tour is due in May, and there are also studies of Sebastian Barry, Thomas Kilroy, and Martin McDonagh being planned.

There's some very interesting work from other Irish publishers, too. A useful new book from Liffey Press is the late Ted O'Regan's *A Sense of Wonder*, an introduction to drama in education. Full of original exercises for actors and directors, the book will certainly be of interest to educators, but it has much to offer practitioners too. Well presented and easy to use, the book deserves a wide audience.

Finally, we have the latest drama offerings from Gallery Press: Brian Friel's *The Home Place*, part of Gallery's longstanding relationship with the great Donegal writer; and an as-yet-unproduced work from Thomas Kilroy, *My Scandalous Life*, which is a counterpoint to Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* and focusses on Alfred Douglas, better known as "Bosie", Wilde's notorious younger lover.



A NUMBER by Caryl Churchill

Prime Cut Productions

Project Space Upstairs, Dublin

On tour; reviewed 20 October 2004

at Project, Dublin BY BRIAN SINGLETON

ONE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED THAT the Irish premiere of the latest one-act work by so eminent a dramatist as Caryl Churchill would be a significant occasion. Imagine my surprise to attend an opening night barely a third full. The lack of an audience constituency for a company performing outside its native city takes on even greater significance on opening night, in that the friends and guests of the company are not there to turn the event into an occasion and to spur the company to rise to that occasion. I had the distinct impression that the "real" opening night was yet to come, when Prime Cut took the production to home turf in Belfast a week after its Project run.

My sense of a preview is based also on a very hesitant performance. The text demands extraordinary precision from the actor who has to "triple up" as three identically cloned brothers, B1, B2, and Michael, in Churchill's moral and ethical questioning of genetic engineering. The play consists of their father Salter's first meeting with each of them separately, having just discovered that they have been cloned. Brian McArdie initially struggled vocally to find a register for B2 who discovers his cloning was the result of his father Salter's wish to reconstitute his original son, who had been killed in a car crash. McArdie strutted around the stage, covering his face, and brushing back his long hair with both hands in signs of obvious mental distress, but taking pauses that interrupted the inexorability of Churchill's rhythms. To pause in

such a nightmare would force the character to wake up. He does not and cannot wake up, so he cannot afford to pause.

To distinguish between brothers B2 and B1, McArdie simply shifted his vocal register to a much lower and aggressive one, all the while maintaining an English accent. This change was not sufficiently different, however, so that it took time to realise that he was not playing the same son, but another clone. The near-similarity might be a director's statement on genetic identity, but it seems incongruous with the character of B1 who is more traumatised than troubled at the discovery of his cloning. Salter this time gives a different version of the reason behind the cloning and we quickly come to realise that there is no essential truth, just like there is no essential identity.

The third son we meet does not have a number. He is Michael Black, who lives happily with his family in Scotland and points out to us that nurture is the key to identity. He is a perfectly well-rounded individual who rejects his father's suggestions that he should be traumatised by discovering he is cloned. Black actually likes the idea of being a clone and throughout the final scene his simplistic groundedness as an individual comes as a welcome relief after the angst of father and other sons. But this contentedness with cloning only serves to spark the debate, as Black's near-naïveté does not quite manage to negate the reaction of the other sons or the father who increasingly becomes more and more distressed at Black's lack of reaction. Salter needs forgiveness but Black cannot forgive him since, for him, there is nothing to forgive. For this scene McArdie spoke in his own Scottish accent, settling down comfortably with it and succeeding in connecting



with the character, finally.

The one-hour series of scenes was played out in a simple framed white space (designed by Stuart Marshall) with a backdrop featuring a tapestry of leaves and branches. This lent a hint of the natural world to what was, otherwise, a clinical laboratory. Bell Helicopter's sound design was futuristic and punctuated the scenes with an occasional shock effect that was very arresting, forcing us to suddenly sit up and digest what had just been spoken. But director Jackie Doyle's primary focus is with the actors. Barry Stanton as Salter had the arguably easier task of remaining with just one character, drowning superlatively in his own angst at times, while conversely spinning a web of truths

**WHO AM I? McArdie
in A Number**

and counter-truths. McArdie, however, needed much more work in character delineation both physi-

cally and vocally, since Churchill's point is that the cloned brothers may appear identical on the surface but their reactions to events are totally different. We needed to see more clearly that on the discovery that he is a clone, a character is able to range in reaction from tears, to anger, to bemusement — that nature does not determine to the exclusion of nurture. But perhaps by the time the otherwise high-quality production reached Belfast that necessary delineation had been achieved.

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

reviews

COLLECTED STORIES

by Donald Margulies

AboutFACE Theatre Company

Loose End, Civic Theatre Tallaght

19 Oct—6 Nov, 2004; reviewed 27 Oct

BY SUSAN CONLEY

DIRECTOR JOSH EDELMAN PLAYS US into AboutFACE's production of Donald Margulies' runner-up-for-the-Pulitzer play with some cooooo jazz, a choice that seems almost helpless. One can't but hear the metaphorical sound of shoulders shrugging in such a choice: when faced with a tale of Manhattan literati, what's a guy to do? In a play that encourages one to wonder how thin the pickings were the year that Margulies almost won America's top theatrical prize, the story's notes, like that jazz, are hit with considerable weariness, des-

WHOSE MUSE?

*Olson and O'Brien in
Collected Stories*

pite top-notch dialogue and several delightfully well observed nuances of New York life.

Lisa (Anna Olson) is a heartbreakingly awkward creative writing graduate student in desperate awe of her famous tutor, Ruth (Una Crawford O'Brien). Arriving in the older woman's sophisticated and intellectually lush Upper West Side apartment (superbly designed by Sonia Hacius), Lisa performs a series of self-sabotaging acts, from fumbling with the keys to Ruth's door and spilling her tea, to the ultimate faux pas, that of not being the student that Ruth had been expecting. Lisa's brittle self-esteem threatens to shatter; Ruth, however, takes pity and adjusts herself, a feat that, due to her unmistakable irascibility and fierceness, is of monumental solicitude. Lisa is so hopelessly dazzled by the



CHARLIE KRAZ

fact that she is sitting in her heroine's presence, in her heroine's spare chair, that she digs deep and finds the strength of purpose to put herself forward as Ruth's assistant.

She succeeds, and soon becomes an integral part of Ruth's partnerless, childless life, and the play rolls inexorably forward towards a conclusion that is not terribly hard to intuit: the tables turn, the paradigms shift, and little Lisa, happy at last, achieves success at the expense of her mentor. The novel that Lisa manages to write, after a struggle, co-opts a personal and deeply private story that Ruth had told her one Sunday over bagels. Ruth begins dying of cancer and Lisa, fully bloomed and presumably as heartless as we once perceived Ruth to be, leaves Ruth to die in her flat, amongst the detritus of a life lived in literature.

Expatriate American theatre critics can fondly gaze on such a production and laugh alone at the little touches that Margulies lays on; for instance, Lisa's maiden voyage reading at the 92nd Street Y, an Upper East Side venue of supreme snootiness that caters to NYC intelligentsia; having Lisa read here is shorthand for her launch into the highbrow stratosphere. Details like that are likely to pass an Irish audience by and one assumes that the producers are counting on identification from television and the cinema—not a baseless assumption, but one that feels rather hollow. Despite Edelman's American provenance, he has missed out on a crucial aspect of the play's New York spine, perhaps its only point of interest, and that is how the women create family out of strangers: family that is better than one's original clan, family that support one's projects, family that think you've got what it takes.

This nuance—this mother/daughter construction—is crucial, but it is not supported by the performances. One imagines that the slenderness of the play's textual innovation was, in previous incarnations, built up through tour de force performances; while Crawford O'Brien and Olson have truthful moments, unfortunately these never happen at the same time. Olson is particularly good at the beginning of the play as she enacts Lisa's painful admiration and self-loathing; Crawford O'Brien is on top of her game specifically in the moments in which the power plays begin to tip in the favour of what had been her little lump of clay. Neither manages to fully embrace the final scene, in which the dying Ruth confronts Lisa's betrayal: Olson is neither confident enough, nor Crawford O'Brien near enough to death's door to make the scene the emotional Armageddon that it ought to be. As a result, the play, while satisfying in short bursts of one-liners and arch observations, doesn't add up to much, and it doesn't help that we've already predicted the ending while still at the very beginning.

Susan Conley is a novelist, filmmaker, and critic, and is art director of this magazine.

CRYSTAL by Johnny Hanrahan

Meridian Theatre Company

English Market, Cork.

10-20 Nov 2004: reviewed 11 Nov

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

CORK'S ENGLISH MARKET IS A HIVE OF activity, where traditional butchers, fishmongers, and greengrocers work alongside more recently arrived exotics: the olive stall, organic food outlets, and artisan cheese, bread and pâté makers. If the way to a city's



heart is through its stomach, then the English Market must be the heart of Cork.

The attraction of such a venue for promenade theatre proved irresistible to Meridian Theatre Company. And the company, under the direction of Tom Creed, proved itself well able to overcome the technical challenges of a space consisting primarily of intersecting aisles, with only one large open area,

WHAT'S THE STORY? *Condon in Crystal*

a resource for artists and writers.

Each of the four monologues describes the speaker's reaction to an accident on the Western Road in which a young woman, Crystal, falls and cuts her hands on the bottles she is carrying. She stands in the busy traffic, blood dripping from

around the central fountain at its Princes Street entrance.

This is where *Crystal*'s author and Meridian's artistic director, Johnny Hanrahan, greeted the audience, explaining that we would be divided into four groups, each group witnessing four 12-minute performances before reassembling here for the finale. We were asked not to applaud, as it would disturb those listening to other monologues.

There was a genuine sense of excitement, the thrill of the strange, as groups were ushered efficiently from one location to the next along the shuttered aisles of the market. Street noise intruding through wrought iron grills only added to the ambience. And even though we were split up, there was a strong sense of a shared theatrical experience.

Crystal is loosely based on real events. It grew from "What's The Story," a project coordinated by Meridian, which aims to create a "bank" of stories relating to Cork City that will become

TOM LAWRENCE

her hands, while nobody stops to help.

A classic statement of urban alienation from Alexis de Tocqueville is projected above the first actor while the promenading audience assembles: "Each person, withdrawn into himself, behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others..."

Tony (Aidan O'Hare) is a brash young accountant, whose world includes a €700 hotel room cleaning bill after a paint-ball team-building exercise, and sewage-sodden shoes in the car boot. He knows Crystal, but does not want to acknowledge her in the company of his work-mate. It was a terrific performance. Even though the convolutions of Tony's manic rant were not easy to follow, you got the idea of a basically decent lad being led astray against his

own gut inclinations — which win out in the end.

Joe (Gary Murphy) had the familiar sing-song Cork accent, and was older, recently returned to Cork after a bad time with drugs in London. Eilis (Elizabeth Moynihan) harked back to a gentler Cork, where piety dominated. She describes her high state of nerves as "birds in the cage", and after vomiting in her handbag at the sight of Crystal, she starts to pray to St. Teresa and Our Lady for the number 8 bus to take her away.

Leo (Kieran Ahern) delivered his piece standing on a platform of packed ice in the fish alley — presumably to emphasise his cold-fish nature. In his drab knitted cardigan and cheap grey trousers (the nicely understated costumes were by Ailbhe Wheeler), Leo is one of life's losers, a



The Institute of Art, Design & Technology, which incorporates the **National Film School**, offers an exciting range of courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Applications are invited for the following one-year programmes commencing Autumn 2005:



BA (Honours) in PRODUCTION DESIGN

(Production Design/Art Direction for Theatre, Film, Video, Digital Media)
Applications to IADT by 31 March 2005



MA in SCRIPTWRITING

(writing for the screen)
Applications to IADT by 13 May 2005

Please contact the Admissions Office on (01) 214 4621 or admissions@iadt.ie

iadt 
DUN LAOGHAIRE

National Film School

Dun Laoghaire
Institute of Art, Design
& Technology

National Digital Media
Awards Higher
Education Award
2003, 2004 and 2005

Dun Laoghaire
Institute of Art, Design
& Technology
Kill Avenue, Dun
Laoghaire,
Co. Dublin, Ireland
t: + 353 (0) 1 214 4600
f: + 353 (0) 1 214 4700
www.iadt.ie

pathologically shy nay-sayer, who does nothing about Crystal from habitual inertia: "Out there in the middle of the traffic. An opera, a waking dream, playing itself out below my window. Why didn't I...?" It was a superb performance, evoking both Leo's stolidness and his vulnerability.

Crystal's concluding monologue, by the titular character, was delivered with verve and total conviction by Fiona Condon, but was over-long and repetitive, even though a certain amount of repetition would be consistent with *Crystal's* larger-than-life personality. *Crystal* is not the unfortunate loser described by the others, but an angry young woman with a mind sharp as a razor and a grim sense of humour. As the monologue progressed she got ever wetter from the fountain's water, recalling her previous immersion in blood.

The five performances were pacy and exciting, aided by atmospheric sound tracks by Cormac O'Connor, and effective lighting by Lucy Carter. But there was a missing link, or a central absence. *Crystal* remained a series of individual monologues, each carefully crafted, for all the colourful vernacular, but discrete entities, which shed little or no light on each other. I was surprised at its nomination for an *Irish Times/ESB* Theatre Award, as I found it stopped short of cohering as a play. It remained five monologues, inspired by a case of urban depersonalization. Its documentary nature effectively stressed the randomness of the different ways people experience the same event, but it never succeeded in pulling these experiences together artistically to create a coherent whole.

Alannah Hopkin has reviewed theatre for publications including The Sunday Times and The Irish Examiner.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS

by Donald Margulies

Gúna Nua Theatre Company

Andrew's Lane Theatre, Dublin

10 Nov 2004 - 6 Feb 2005; reviewed 17 Nov

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

DONALD MARGULIES' PULITZER-PRIZE winning play may seem as quintessentially American as David Hare's *Skylight* seems definitely English, yet both have found their way to the Irish stage. The latter was presented last year by Landmark Productions to sold-out houses and an extremely high profile; the former has been less conspicuously popular but is playing to the same kind of theatregoer — those who see themselves reflected in the hopes, aspirations, and frustrations of a social caste to which once the Irish could never ascend and now they find increasingly commonplace, if as yet under-represented locally.

Dinner With Friends arrives courtesy of Gúna Nua, who seem to be following a middle-class-relationship-play train of thought through *Scenes from a Watercooler* and *Taste*. This play particularly resembles the latter, given the shared subject of how the values of an educated and self-aware upper middle class are subject to scrutiny through an evaluation of their past behaviour. The difference is one of location. Where *Taste* transported *Macbeth* to contemporary Ireland, *Dinner With Friends* retains its original geographical setting on the Eastern seaboard of the U.S.

Karen (Karen Ardiff) and Gabe (Peter Hanly) are entertaining their friend Beth (Fiona Bell) over dinner. The conversation is trivial: meals they have eaten, products they have purchased, the sights, sounds, and tastes of Europe. He's a food critic, she's his editor, and in the way of the



affluent cognoscenti, they are confident in all of their judgments. Beth seems a little tense and distracted. Is she bored by the aura of self-satisfied coupledom radiating from her closest friends? Dinner is divine, but she's not sure about dessert - no, not even the one with imported ingredients Gabe has prepared. Eventually the story comes out: Beth's husband Tom (Paul Meade) is leaving her. He's met someone else.

"My God!" gasp Karen and Gabe, and the conversation becomes considerably more pointed. Later, when Beth has departed to the tune of "we'll be there for you" sounded particularly strongly by Karen, Tom comes over and feasts on leftovers as he tells his side of the story. Karen is huffy in solidarity with Beth, but Gabe is eager to hear. In the way of these things, Tom and Beth's breakup causes Karen and Gabe to ask questions of themselves,

SMUG MARRIEDS
*Ardiff and Hanly in
Dinner with Friends*

particularly the part they have played in the love story which has come to an end.

Initially an all-too-familiar tale of marital breakdown in the erudite Eastern American milieu, the play improves as it goes, and actually reaches an unexpectedly touching finale. The narrative shifts backward then forward in time, exploring the patterns and influences which have shaped Tom and Beth's romance. It begins with the break-up, then moves back to the beginning, then ends with the final dissolution of bonds between all parties. The common thread is the role played by the characters played by Hanly and Ardiff: "Gabe and Karen's job is to make the rest of the world feel incompetent," says Tom at one point, accurately reflecting how these people essentially see themselves in the role of puppet-masters, playwrights of a drama involving characters with

reviews

defined roles who are expected to perform in predictable ways.

The temporal break down of the narrative counterpoints the trajectory of the romance. This struggle between narrative forces represents its central characters' sense of how the world is constructed, and the audience is challenged in the same way. The play explores how stories are constructed around expectation, and dramatises the frustration of finding that you are necessarily always the protagonist in every story going on around you. "I set this whole thing in motion," cries Karen at one point, ennobling herself with self-pity as she sees her friend drifting away. Beth responds: "You need me to be a mess; you're invested in it!"

By the end of the play Tom and Beth both find new loves and new lives, and in spite of reassurances and promises of drinks and dinner, Karen and Gabe are last seen alone in their bed coming to terms with the fact that they are left (once again) with each other. It is at this point that the play actually becomes emotionally engaging, with the startling and curiously affirmative realisation that the feints and possibilities of life that the couple may have missed but which their friends have chosen to follow are not necessarily the things that make life better. "Marriages all go through a baseline wretchedness from time to time" says Gabe, concluding that fighting the urge to chuck it all is what makes you realise the strength of your love for one another. It is an ambiguous sentiment, to be sure, but one which concludes the play with a surprising scene of tenderness and marital fidelity.

The production benefits from well balanced performances from all of the cast, who handle the temporal transitions with

all attendant differences in deportment and attitude very well. Hanly and Ardiff made an effective couple in *Taste* (whose author, David Parnell, is the director of this production), and here they repeat the double act of portraying a not entirely mutual but shared sense of angst. Bell and Meade have the more obvious changes in register between past and present, from hesitant flirting under the watchful gaze of their benevolent overlords to an uneasy love-hate dynamic during their breakup, one scene of which ends with passionate lovemaking.

This is not a play which offers immediate satisfaction, perhaps partly because during the relatively uneventful introductory scenes, there is little to do but watch Irish actors struggling with American accents and wonder why Parnell didn't go with an original script this time. But it is one which ultimately rewards patience and perseverance, things which Gúna Nua evidently felt its production deserved, and in doing so have achieved results of some merit.

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

DOCTOR FAUSTUS

by Christopher Marlowe

Theatrecorp

Black Box, Galway

9-13 Nov 2004; reviewed 9 and 12 Nov

BY ROS DIXON

SPECTATORS ARRIVING AT GALWAY'S Black Box for Theatrecorp's production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* were assailed by a band of mischievous, masked pantomime devils. Gleefully giggling, they farted in unison at the front row and reacted with gibbering delight to the safe-



ty announcement, turning their tails into phalluses to extinguish the imagined fire. This production made much of such playful antics. Economy was a virtue; all magical illusions were evoked in our imagination or conjured by the simplest means. A red cloth, pulled to reveal Faustus slumbering in his study, was used as a wide range of costumes and props. Another cloth, painted with a map of the world in red and blue, which covered his desk, later on was transformed into the Emperor's cloak simply by fastening a button. The elfin Good and burly Bad Angels miraculously appeared through slits in the back curtain. Silver plates were spun through the air to create the movement of the planets, horns attached to Benvolio's head as a punishment were created by the actor's hands,

JESUS WEPT *The company of Dr. Faustus*

and Lucifer's chariot was a chair drawn by two others as charging horses.

Petra Bhreatnach's costumes — a comically singed red Teddy Boy jacket for Lucifer and a velvet cloak for Faustus — implied no particular historical period, but her backdrop and uncluttered stage were reminiscent of a traditional Medieval booth or Elizabethan thrust and thus entirely in keeping with a drama often said to bridge those two eras. So simple a setting allowed for a lively pace and rapid scene changes, signalled by the donning of a costume in full view and by the use of light to create new locales. Paul Noble's design provided some visually stunning moments as he sculpted the actors' naked torsos in side lighting.

The play was performed by just five

reviews

male actors. John Delaney as Faustus and Daniel Guinnane's Mephistopheles were joined by Jonathan Gunning, Sean O'Mealaigh, and Garrett Phillips, who broke ranks as a chorus of devils to play several roles apiece. The script — an amalgam of Marlowe's A and B texts — was heavily cut to accommodate so small a cast. Although passages, episodes and characters were excised, what remained of the verse was privileged, not swamped in visual effects. Added cabaret dance routines and short witty interludes were played with considerable aplomb by the dynamic trio. Max Hafler directed with flair, creating at times striking stage pictures of human statuary, but also channelling the actors' raw energy into modulated performances that moved from comic to menacing with ease. Frequently repeated gestures — bearing the doctor's learned books on their shoulders and a turning movement of the hands, which signalled conventionally the inexorable passage of Faustus's allotted 24 years — brought a stylistic harmony to this episodic play.

Though they functioned as a unit, all had their individual moments. Gunning's virtuoso performance in rapid succession of all Seven Deadly Sins was a highlight of act one and a memorable moment in the production as a whole. In a second act that allowed scope for greater humour, Gunning created a camp and ludicrous Pope, and Phillips was convincing as both the Emperor and Old Man. Sadly, these fine performances were not matched by Delaney's bloodless Faustus, who was neither delighted by his new-found powers nor tormented by the horror his transaction with Lucifer had wrought. In this production the devil's servant had all the best tunes, and played them to perfection. Though affecting in the pain of his ejec-

tion from heaven, Guinnane's poised and measured Mephistopheles was utterly convincing; he controlled this hell on earth (and the stage) not through exaggerated theatrics but silently and with deadly, mesmeric eyes.

This Mephistopheles was piqued by Faustus' request for a wife, and played Alexander the Great's paramour himself, although when asked to conjure the beauty that had launched a thousand ships his Helen of Troy was only allowed "to appear" off-stage. His final action was to extinguish Faustus' life in a long and silent embrace. This all-male production focused attention, subtly but decisively, on Marlowe's homosexuality — an aspect arguably present in his text but rarely exploited in performance.

This insightful and visually engaging *Dr Faustus* was the first outing for Theatrecorp, a company committed to the staging of experimental, but accessible productions from the European classic canon, and Galway audiences can look forward to a refreshingly new interpretation of *The Tempest* promised for later in the year.

Ros Dixon is lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies in the English department of NUI Galway.

DUBLIN BY LAMPLIGHT by Michael West in collaboration with the company

The Corn Exchange
Project Space Upstairs, 28 Oct - 20 Nov 2004;
reviewed 4 Nov BY BRIAN SINGLETON

CORN EXCHANGE SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY to mark the Abbey Theatre's centenary with a fictional tale of Dublin theatricals attempting to launch the "Irish National Theatre of Ireland" in 1904. Situations



from the real-life story are discernible, many of the scenes themselves have resonances of various now-canonical Irish plays, and the real-life figures of Yeats, Gregory, and Horniman are recalled, then reimagined. However much we may wish to draw parallels, Michael West frustrates us continually and hilariously with a thoroughly original new play.

The setting is the bare boards of a turn-of-the-century Dublin playhouse, complete with footlights and a back wall stripped to bricks and mortar. To the right a solitary street lamp towers ominously

'TWAS SHE! *The company in Dublin by Lamplight*

and to the left a grand piano completes the set (by Mike Carberry) that had an interior/exterior duality to facilitate the action, which careered in and out of the onstage theatre at breakneck speed. The play was performed by an ensemble of six actors who mixed storytelling with commedia dell'arte. Commedia convention has the actor speak out front, presentationally, while the others fix their gaze on the speaker. As dialogue ensued the looks were exchanged sometimes at extraordinary speed. The result is that we were constantly being addressed as if we were part of the drama

as well, and the constant exchange of looks between the actors lent an extraordinary dynamism to the whole proceedings. This was theatricality at its very best.

The play, however, goes beyond dialogue as the actors must narrate the action as well as perform it. They must be both character and narrator of character at the same time. As they drive on their own storylines, the energy and pace of the action is matched by the excitement of characters jumping in and out of the narrative. West focuses on events leading up to the first performance of Mr. William Hayes's new play, *The Wooing of Emer*, on the night of King Edward VII's visit to Dublin. The city is full of tension about the visit, and the new Irish national theatre company are deemed to be inciting insurrection, in a manner similar to Yeats's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. But behind the stage, in scenes worthy of a Michael Frayn farce, Ms. Eva St. John (Karen Egan), the actress who is to play Emer, who is also the lover of William Hayes (Louis Lovett), and the Annie Horniman-like financial backer of the company chains herself to the railings of Trinity College along with other Daughters of Erin and is arrested for handing out nationalist pamphlets. Will she make the opening night?

Meanwhile William's brother Frank (Fergal McElherron) is about to launch a terrorist attack, heeding the naked nationalist sentiment of the play in which he is to play Cuchullain. Will he make the opening night? Frank is involved in further complications as he has made the company's costume dresser Maggie (Janet Moran) pregnant; for her part, she harbours a secret passion to be an actress. Will she get to realise her dreams? And then there is the financially and theatrically bankrupt tragedian Martin Wallace (Mark O'Hall-

ran) whose desires for self-aggrandisement and self-protection push the tragic story to the greatest heights of farce and pathos.

It is nigh impossible to single out any one actor for praise, as it would be a disservice to the others (although I personally found O'Halloran's extraordinary physicality to be the greatest revelation of the evening). This was ensemble acting at its very best. All the actors worked together to change character and scenes, and in so doing they displayed some beautifully skilful moments of transformation. These were aided by lighting designer Matt Frey, who was able to alter such an open set into a multitude of Dublin locales, with a design that cut and marked out space, and also drove the actors into their next position. All this wonderful creativity was marshalled by director Annie Ryan in a production with the highest of values in its every aspect. And all the while composer Conor Linehan accompanied the action with a live piano score which swelled the farce and melodrama. As the play unravelled to an open ending, we were left wondering if the betrayed and pregnant Maggie would leave for England, while the "Irish National Theatre of Ireland" project lay teetering on the brink of being aborted. Corn Exchange's production opened barely a month after the real-life National Theatre had gone through its own farcical trauma in a face-off between management and artist. Michael West's imaginative treatment of a pseudo-historical moment in theatre thus could be read as a satire on the precarious position on the Abbey as it stands today. Will the incumbent director leave for Canada before the appointed date? And will the director-designate rescue the national theatre project from implosion?

FAIRYTALEHEART by Philip Ridley

Replay Productions

On tour: reviewed 3 December 2004 at
Glengormley High School, Belfast

BY DAVID GRANT

MUCH OF PHILIP RIDLEY'S EARLY work (his 1988 novel *Crocodilia*, and the plays *Sparkleshark*, *Fairytalesheart* (1999), and *The Pitchfork Disney*) is concerned with the power of the imagination in helping marginalised young people feel better about themselves. There is an intimacy about the reader's engagement with a novel which sets it apart from the stage plays, which are experienced in company with others. The experience of seeing Replay's recent production for younger teenagers of *Fairytalesheart* in the clanking coldness

of a gymnasium was all the more remarkable, therefore, to the extent that there was a palpable sense of the young audience connecting with the action in a surprisingly personal way.

I am used to Theatre-in-Education adopting a robust approach to technical support. The constraints of daily touring usually dictate a minimum of lights, and settings have to be both durable and portable. So it was a pleasant surprise to see Stuart Marshall's exquisitely detailed set had built into it a number of strategically placed lights and an array of candles. In Glengormley High School, the setting of the play, a draughty and disused community hall, was evoked all too credibly by the school gym. In this bleak environment, Gideon (Kevin Breen), a teenage runaway, has created a colourful and

FRINGE

WE WANT YOU!

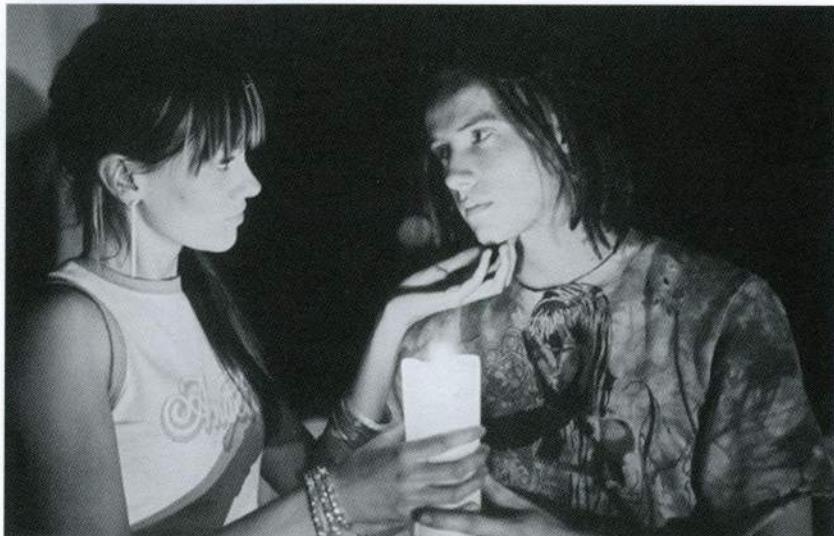
Calling Planet Fringe. The Dublin Fringe Festival comes early this year (12th September - 2nd October 2005) and the deadline for submissions is April 29th.

If you have a project or production in mind and want to avoid the last minute rush - when we are accepting literally hundreds of applications at the same time - contact us now!

The Fringe is a curated festival that welcomes innovative and daring work that impacts, moves and invigorates and challenges audiences.

www.fringefest.com





intricate backdrop to the stories his mother used to tell him. Into this little world of its own comes Kirsty (Bernadette Brown), a girl of his own age, who is seeking refuge from her own family problems.

As the young teenage audience filed in (the production was aimed at 12-15-year-olds), there was an immediate sense of restlessness at the departure from the usual routine. I could imagine the two young actors behind the scenery sensing the atmosphere and preparing to do battle for their attention. But the genius of this production lies in the way in which it turns the inherent challenges of the school environment to its advantage. The demanding acoustic and external noise become part of the environment of the play, contrasting vividly with the iridescent set and the spooky lighting. After a slightly clunky initial exposition in which we are introduced

FINDING REFUGE

*Brown and Breen in
Fairytaleheart*

to the characters, the candles are lit and the hall lights go off and we enter into an alternative reality. From my vantage point, I could watch the audience as easily as I could the actors, and their close attention was evident throughout, not least when the lights went out. There was none of the "ooh-ing" one expects from this age group.

Although some early sections of Ridley's script are so clunky as to be barely speakable, it develops a poetic intensity as it progresses, and the actors' easy rapport and sustained energy carry us over the more difficult sections. Brown's Kirsty is assertive while still allowing her vulnerability to show through. Breen as the storyteller ranges from sensitive lyricism to full-blooded expressiveness in an impressive display of versatility.

Having won over the audience in its first half hour, the play engages with a

variety of difficult ideas, mainly concerned with the loss of loved ones. But a tender and believably tentative love story also emerges, to which the audience could clearly relate, culminating in a teasingly tentative kiss. The capacity of both actors to read and play off an audience who were never more than a few feet away was wholly admirable. They refused to let even the frequent coming and going of teachers (a seemingly inevitable hazard of Theatre-in-Education!) break the spell of the performance.

Apart from the production itself, another memorable aspect of the experience was the support pack, which came in the form of a credit-card-sized CD-ROM, and which was made available to every member of the audience, few of whom (I'm sure) will have shared my difficulty in working out how to make it work in their computer. Once over this technical threshold, an excellent menu of resources flashes up on the screen. These include biographies of key personnel and interviews with the two actors. But more importantly they contextualise the main issues of the play with well-researched, no-nonsense advice under headings such as "when someone dies", "it's good to talk", and "survive your family". There is also a link to the Replay website and a feedback questionnaire on the production, the results of which are bound to make fascinating reading.

Overall, the whole project justifies Replay's new tag-line — "Knowledge through Interaction". The play addresses a wide spectrum of issues from simple loneliness to family crisis. It also provides a clear jumping-off point for further classroom discussion, as well as supporting materials which are perfectly tailored to an age-group which is all too

often neglected by the theatre, falling as it does in a hard-to-define never-never-land between childhood and young adulthood.

David Grant is head of drama at Queen's University Belfast.

THE GOOD THIEF and RUM & VODKA

by Conor McPherson

Everyman Palace Theatre and the Riverside
Theatre, Coleraine

Reviewed 15 October at the Riverside Theatre

BY TOM MAGUIRE

ALTHOUGH INITIALLY STAGED IN 1994 as separate productions, *The Good Thief* and *Rum & Vodka* are now often presented as a diptych exposing the underbelly of contemporary Irish life. McPherson's oeuvre is marked by the centrality of forms of story-telling within it, and these early pieces are well-crafted examples of the monodrama form now prominent in Irish dramatic writing. Drawing on aspects of Synge's playboy trope, each reveals the enduring capacity of the Irish male to imagine himself at the centre of an alternative life story while his inattention to his actual character and circumstances renders this alternative impossible. Such day-dreams conveniently overlook an inability to sustain personal relationships, commit to an honest day's work, or live beyond the satisfaction of his immediate impulses.

This was the first co-production between the Everyman Palace and the Riverside in Coleraine, suggesting a new turn in theatre production across the island as an imaginative response to economic strictures. Patrick Talbot and Andrea Montgomery directed one play each, and in so doing, they demonstrated the different stylistic choices available in

staging solo performance. Both plays were staged on the same set, designed by Patrick Murray, which provided an enclosing curved backdrop in front of which was laid a red oval carpet, with a white leather swivel chair providing the only prop. It was left then to Paul Denby's lighting design and the power of the actors to conjure up the different characters, locales, and events.

These could hardly have been more different. In *The Good Thief*, the story begins in the murky underworld of Dublin's gangland, where the narrator has been occupied as a hired thug who intimidates people for a living. When he is sent to frighten his boss' business rival, this is a routine job for a suburban Saturday morning. Unfortunately for him, this is where things go wrong, as the man in question is already being held by another set of thugs. With the kind of violent plot twist we associate with Tarantino, he escapes from what has turned out to be a bloody business, taking with him the wife and child of the man he was supposed to threaten. They head west and in road movie fashion, a relationship develops between them, cemented when they share an idyllic picnic with the family of a friend of the thug on the banks of a river. However, when the man's original boss catches him up, the resolution is violent and destructive.

Rum & Vodka is more contained in its scope: three days in which the central character abandons his job and domestic responsibilities to undertake a drunken binge in Dublin. On the first day, he throws his computer out of the office window and heads to the pub. The next day's "cure" sees him on the tear again and, despite the quantities of drink he consumes, he is taken home and to bed by a rich young woman. At a party the follow-

ing night, she abandons him and he returns home to face up to the destruction he has wreaked on his previous life.

There was a clear distinction in the playing of these pieces. Under Talbot's direction, Myles Horgan played the whole of *The Good Thief* within the single eponymous role: effectively we were listening to a thug tell his story directly to us, the moment of telling clearly separated off from the events recounted. Horgan's initial entrance was with the house lights still up and as if onto the set of a television show, with the apparent aim of vesting the audience's interest in the presence of the actor-in-role. This emphasis was accentuated since Horgan was largely confined to the white chair placed centre-stage and the lighting tightly focused onto him. Two problems presented themselves in this strategy. Firstly, the collapse of the actor's presence into the character meant that he was restricted largely to the modulation and nuancing of the character in his delivery and mannerisms: the ultimate naturalism. Secondly, and unforgivably, Horgan seemed frequently to be struggling to remember his lines and to stay within the fiction. These aspects hampered the taut delivery and differentiation of moment to moment on which the narration relies as a piece of theatre. Although the strengths of McPherson's writing were still discernible despite this, the sense was of an opportunity not fully realised.

Montgomery had clearly decided that a more theatricalised mode of presentation was appropriate for *Rum & Vodka*, influenced no doubt by her own experiences of working with Steven Berkoff. Not only had Gerard Jordan to inhabit the central narrating role, but to re-present in the here-and-now the key incidents of his story. This provided him with a variety of



physical demands, quickly switching from naturalism to more expressionist physicalisation. He met this challenge, inhabiting the whole space, with the stage animated both by his performance and the inventive use of lighting effects. Liberated from the confines of a single character, Jordan demonstrated a versatility which his television roles have rarely acknowledged; and exhibited a precision and attention to the moment which clearly demarcated the shifts in tempo, tone and content of the story. Thus, although he did not attempt a Dublin accent, Jordan was extremely successful in creating a character, locale and action which felt authentic. His skill and presence as an actor engaged us in the narrative.

This is not to suggest that there is only one way to stage solo dramatic performance. Each of the stylistic choices has

DOWN AND OUT

Horgan in The Good Thief and Jordan in Rum and Vodka

its merits. Each, however, relies on the quality of the punctuation of the performance matching up to the precisely nuanced shifts in the writing. So whether this

punctuation is marked theatrically in a stylised physicality or registered in more subtle and realistic changes in the body, its presence is essential in organising both the performer's actions and the audience's response. Otherwise, we may as well be given the script and enjoy reading it alone as a short story. This production may have signalled a new initiative by the producers: their next goal may be to find a way of supporting a production on a more ambitious scale, while ensuring that it is more than a night of two halves.

Tom Maguire is the subject director for drama at the University of Ulster.

reviews

THE GREEN FOOL

adapted by Declan Gorman from the novel by Patrick Kavanagh

Upstate Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 8 Nov 2004
at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

POOR PATRICK KAVANAGH. OVERSHADOWED at one end of the 20th century by Yeats and at the other by Seamus Heaney, his status as one of Ireland's great poets is long overdue a reappraisal. But we get the best opportunity in ages to do so — the centenary of his birth in 1904 — and what happens? It occurs in a year so dominated by anniversaries that he's just one name on a very long list of people whose achievements merit celebration.

That kind of bad luck characterised Kavanagh's career, especially the publication in 1938 of *The Green Fool*. This autobiographical novel by the young Irish poet was initially reviewed positively in the English press, which praised Kavanagh's romanticised presentation of his upbringing in Inishkeen. But his fellow Irish author Oliver St. John Gogarty sued Kavanagh for libel soon after publication, objecting to a throwaway comment made in the book about Gogarty having a mistress. The book's sales collapsed, Kavanagh lost the little money he had, and his career never fully recovered from this early setback.

This adaptation of the novel by Declan Gorman (who also directs) faithfully recreates Kavanagh's sentimentalised re-imagining of his youth. But it also brings onstage an elder Kavanagh (Padraic McIntyre) who enters into dialogue with his younger self (Nick Lee), overlooking the unfolding action, criticising its sentimentality, and expressing anger about the

effects that *The Green Fool* had on his life. So Gorman is giving us a welcome celebration of the life and work of the poet, while also providing a timely analysis of the instinct to commemorate, which was of course much in evidence in 2004.

Most of the action is a naturalistic account of the growth of the poet from innocent child to the young man on the cusp of a success that would never be fully realised. We get standard nostalgic schoolroom shenanigans and some nice rural business with donkeys and turf-stacking; and we get farmers' fairs and shadowy IRA gunmen lurking about farm outhouses. We expect most of the characters to say things like "arrah sure, that Patrick Kavanagh: something wrong with him, his head forever in a book" — and for the most part that's exactly what we get.

This action is presented on Paul O'Mahony's efficient and flexible set, at the centre of which is a raised structure that acts as the apartment of the young writer and, more importantly, as the vantage point from which his elder self looks on. This presentation of the elder Kavanagh as a kind of embittered umpire for the events unfolding below him acts as a powerful counterweight to the action's nostalgia. Gorman thus gives us the kind of happy-clappy rural setup so common in Irish theatre, where we're sure that a *Riverdance* moment lurks around every corner. And then he forces us to consider our willingness to accept such images as authentic, by making the action function on more than one layer, bringing the elder poet onstage to remind us that romanticized visions of Irishness are not necessarily written with an Irish audience in mind. In a year that saw John McColgan's troublingly inauthentic, *Riverdance*-inflected



Shaughraun as the big hit, this is a valuable point.

The only problem with the play is that it risks overstaying its welcome. The emotional impact of the conclusion is based upon the audience's realisation that the story they are watching helped to ruin its author's life. That ruination cannot be shown naturalistically onstage, so the audience must instead be told about it. And so we are told, again and again, by the elder Kavanagh of the problems with the story being represented to us. This extends the action of the second act to a point where events become repetitive and

COLM HOGAN

KAVANAGH AT 100 *Lee and Daly in The Green Fool*

sometimes tiresome. Gorman's instincts here are understandable — he seems to be trying to conclude the action with an emotional punch. But perhaps it would have been more effective to have the ruin of Kavanagh's life made more explicit from the beginning of the play, framing the action in its entirety.

Nevertheless, the intelligence and self-conscious theatricality of this work allows *The Green Fool* to take its place with other important Kavanagh adaptations. Its style of performance is reminiscent of Conall Morrison's brilliant 1997 version of *Tarry*

reviews

Flynn, for example. The supporting cast of four (Peter Daly, Brendan Laird, Deirdre Monaghan, and Jennifer Mooney) move fluidly through more than 70 roles, ranging from Monaghan villagers to Dublin hacks to farm animals. Both Gorman and movement director Mairead Vaughan deserve praise for the kinetic energy they've infused into this production. As such, it also bears comparison with the celebrated Tom MacIntyre/Tom Hickey/Patrick Mason collaboration on *The Great Hunger*, an adaptation of Kavanagh's poem about sexual repression. The excellent performances mean that although this is an adaptation of a novel by a poet, *The Green Fool* succeeds as a surprisingly theatrical work. In doing so, it achieves a level of complexity that does justice more to Kavanagh's career in its entirety than to the novel that inspires the work.

KING LEAR by William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company
SFX Theatre, Dublin

17 January-11 February; 2005; reviewed 25
January BY PAULA SHIELDS

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that *King Lear*, both the play and the role, are mammoth undertakings. As a vision of humanity, *Lear* is one of Shakespeare's bleakest plays. Even the good are flawed and unsympathetic at the outset: Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, and Kent are all powerless and ineffectual, easily displaced or duped by the scheming opportunists Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. The Fool, as is Shakespeare's wont, shows consistent wisdom and perception from beginning to end, but in *King Lear* he is the only benign spirit to do so.

Here, a competent, at times powerful, performance from Alan Stanford as Lear

seems to have been achieved at the expense of the production he directs, an uneven affair made up of moments and individual players of conviction but ultimately lacking a sense of a coherent whole.

Shakespeare is Second Age's stock in trade, teenage students their target audience. On the night in question, the SFX's basic auditorium (plastic chairs reminiscent of 1970s parochial halls) was packed to the rafters with excited Leaving Cert classes, drumming their feet and cheering as the lights went down, the kind of unbridled response the Bard himself might have been used to in his day and certainly a heady atmosphere to experience firsthand. Given the problems of onstage audibility that lay ahead, it unfortunately would be the audience who continued to have the sonic upper hand.

Second Age approached the play as a mix of political thriller and personal nightmare. Publicity emphasised that the look of the play was pre-revolutionary Russia (in order to highlight the feudal nature of the society depicted), but in fact designer Sinead Cuthbert's costumes worked precisely because they dressed the actors in an ageless, classic fashion which did not identify too closely with any particular regime or country.

At times, the impact of personal and political disintegration did carry across, mainly in a series of believable individual performances: Stanford himself; the daughters, Niamh Linehan, Catríona Ní Murchú and Eithne Woodcock; Rory Nolan as Edgar; Gerry O'Brien as Albany; and John Olohan as a great Fool, chastising Lear for being old before he is wise. Alan Smyth as Edmund convinced for the most part but on occasion played the character almost for laughs, as if he were a



comic vaudeville villain.

But the production had too many blind spots throughout, leaving an impression that the director was too overstretched to see to every detail, weakening any clear sense of his overall vision of the play. Some of the youngest actors certainly didn't get the direction they clearly needed, and even more experienced players looked rudderless from time to time. Kent (Frank O'Sullivan) gave a speech early on that was indistinct and drowned out for no apparent good reason by the singing and carousing of Lear and his knights.

As Cornwall (Enda Oates) and his wife Regan left the stage after Gloucester's blinding, he asks her to give him her arm, telling her that he is bleeding (so badly, in fact, he will later die of the wounds). On the night I attended (a good week into the run), Ní Murchú looked as if she didn't

TALK TO THE HAND *Stanford and Ahern in King Lear*

know where to put her arm, and finally placed it across his shoulders, leaning on rather than supporting the dying man as they skipped far too nimbly off stage. A moment, among others, that spoke of a director with his eye off the ball.

But the problems didn't end there. Inaudibility proved a major obstacle. "I gave you all," Lear cries in a childish, moving mix of pain, confusion, when he rebukes Goneril for trying to clip his wings. It was one of the few occasions when his words were distinct. For the most part, many of the actors were so muffled that the emotion and the sense of the scenes were maddeningly cancelled out as audience energy went into working out exactly what was being said.

Second Age's target student audience laughed appreciatively at the frequent phallocentric visual gags. It may be just as

reviews

well that they knew the text already. Ultimately, the frustrating acoustic rendered a complex, difficult play virtually meaningless. What is the point of Shakespeare's exquisite verse, after all, if the audience can't hear it?

Paula Shields is a freelance arts journalist and broadcaster.

LORD OF THE FLIES

adapted by Nigel Williams from the

novel by William Golding

Red Kettle Theatre Company

The Forum, Waterford

15th – 20th Nov 2004; reviewed 15th Nov

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

LORD OF THE FLIES IS NIGEL WILLIAMS' dramatisation of William Golding's novel,

in which a group of English schoolboys, castaway on a desert island, rapidly descend into savagery. The adaptation was first performed in 1992 at King's College School in Wimbledon, and was given a professional production at Stratford in 1995 by the RSC. In those productions, as here, the roles were played by children who are the same age as the characters. As in the novel, the children initially set rules, elect leaders, establish symbols of power and authority, and generally order their society. But soon the two strongest characters, each personifying a different concept of leadership and authority, come into conflict. Jack offers rule by fear; Ralph believes in a gentler, consensual approach. At first, Ralph's way works, but when the children begin to speak of monsters in the forest, Jack's promise of pro-



filmbase

New Curved Street Premises

Spaces to hire for auditions,
casting, rehearsals and
exhibitions.



Contact
Filmbase
Curved St.,
Dublin 2

(01) 6796716
info@filmbase.ie
www.filmbase.ie

Irish and international cinema magazine



www.filmireland.net

tection through superior strength and violence proves more attractive. In interview, Golding describes the work as showing the breakdown of English parliamentary democracy.

There are good things about Red Kettle's production, which is directed and designed by Ben Hennessy: specifically, the young cast deliver strong performances, and the technical values are high. But overall, some of the directorial choices hinder rather than help the actors, and although the set and costumes are lovely in themselves, they do not work as well as they should in performance. Hennessy's design divides the stage into a number of levels, creating the multiple spaces of the island. Trees and rocks are the only features of a barren landscape; and the children in their grey school uniforms are simultaneously alien to, and part of, that landscape. However, the choice to give blood-red gowns to the choirboys, though it provides welcome relief from the otherwise monochrome design, is too obvious in its symbolism and marks that group as different and violent from the start. Greater use could have been made of the levels in the set; a choreographer might have helped here, particularly since there is a crowd in almost every scene. In this production the crowds tend to be static and the movement limited.

The major difficulty with the production, however, is that the play raises questions the production fails to address. This is a pity, because the choice of material at first seems to offer an oblique comment on contemporary world politics.

BEN HENNESSY



BOYS' TOWN Jack
Doyle Ryan and Joe
Condon in Lord...

The Law Lords' criticism of Blair's anti-terror legislation, the spectre of internment without trial, the ongoing controversy about Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and the "War on Terror" with its attendant debate on civil rights would seem to present an interesting backdrop to the conflict between Jack and Ralph.

Additionally, the representation on the Irish stage of Englishness as the epitome of civilization, and painted bodies as representative of savagery, raises another set of questions, which the production again skirts uneasily. Golding's novel, published in 1954, expresses the children's descent into savagery through the imperialist imagery of the colonial native: naked, painted, carrying a spear, violent and irrational. In the book, this is not a problem; but when the material is transferred onto

reviews

the stage it becomes uncomfortable. Our increased sensitivity to other cultures, as well as several decades of postcolonial theory, has complicated our understanding of these once simple signifiers. Further complicating the response of an Irish audience is the choice to have the actors perform with English accents. There are all kinds of reasons why this is both unnecessary and unwise, particularly when working with an inexperienced cast; but in this instance it also disregards Ireland's own colonial history. For an Irish audience, the simple equation of an English accent with civilisation and decency is alienating; yet if this initial premise is not accepted, then the boys' descent into anarchy is much less effective. Thus, when the children are eventually rescued by the ship's officer, his shocked rebuke to them — that he would have expected more of English children — falls flat. The actor playing Jack, rather than being brought to a devastating realisation of what he has lost, seems to shrug; and the whole escapade loses its wider significance. The play becomes, therefore, about schoolboys and not about human nature.

The major question facing Red Kettle, and one that the weaknesses in this production have thrown into relief, is where they are going as a company. The programme note describes the production as an opportunity to combine both their "adult remit and the community bias". But this blurring of distinctions between professional, youth, and community work is not helpful, if Red Kettle hopes to retain their identity as a professional theatre company.

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

MANY HAPPY RETURNS

by **Bernard Farrell**

Gate Theatre, Dublin

25 Nov 2004 - 22 Jan 2005; reviewed 30 Nov

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONALLY BRINGS colourful theatrical spectacles, clamouring for indulgent laughter in the spirit of the season. Though pantos are the most conspicuous specimens there is frequently more than a touch of Yuletide pandering even in productions with more moderate amounts of cross-dressing and sing-a-long. Memory calls to mind in recent years shows such as *Tartuffe*, *The Hunt for Red Willie*, the Gate's *A Christmas Carol*, and not least of all *The Shaughraun*, revived by the Abbey this year just in time for the holidays; all stop just short of screaming "oh no it isn't" in offering a taste of broad Yuletide fun.

Bernard Farrell's *Many Happy Returns* seems to have been offered in just this kind of spirit: a determinedly bourgeois holiday entertainment with only the most modest of ambitions to present insight into the mores and rituals of the Irish middle class, which is the playwright's most consistent muse. Reading journalist Orna Mulcahy's introduction in the programme, one learns of her insights into the encroachment of seasonal festivities in a well-to-do household: the strains on family life which come with decoration plans built around the chandelier, designer Christmas trees, and gold-trim plates in the dishwasher. All very entertaining (if you are of a mind and income level to appreciate it) but the play you're about to see isn't even mentioned in passing. The reader is simply immersed in the mindset and asked to think warm thoughts as they prepare for the delights in store.



Unfortunately, it is with the best of intentions that Farrell has taken the path of least resistance to light seasonal entertainment. Instead of finding self-reflexive contours around which to wrap a disarming take on conventional fare, the playwright has simply presented a very straightforward sitcom farce in a Christmas setting. The situation from which the comedy is presumably meant to spring is that Arthur (Stephen Brennan) and Irene (Lynn Cahill), denizens of a sumptuous residence "not too far from Dublin" are about to receive some important guests. Everything has to go just right, so we know it simply must go all wrong.

Declan (Mark O'Regan), local boy made good abroad, is dropping round for a Christmas tipple with new wife Amanda (Kathryn Sumner) in tow. Arthur, a motivational lecturer fallen on rough

ASSETS *Sumner and O'Regan in Many Happy Returns*

times, was once a role model to Declan. Irene especially is hoping that Declan might offer thanks in the form of opportunities to his former

mentor, and hence has prepared an elaborate drinks party involving a borrowed hot tub and a live appearance by Santa, alias Arthur. Meanwhile Irene's father Matty (Bill Golding) lurks in doorways eavesdropping and passing a variety of curmudgeonly comments about his son-in-law's inadequacies, all the while pining for his own independent-minded spouse Gladys (Geraldine Plunkett) who after years of being promised round-the-world trips after retirement, has simply decided to take one by herself. The scene is set for disaster: miscommunications, revelations and embarrassments aplenty, including full frontal male nudity and an inevitable bit of business involving the open fireplace and the Santa Claus suit.

reviews

There are no surprises anywhere in this play: not in the characterisation of familiar middle class types, not in the plot which echoes a score of others and would not be out of place on American television, not in the set design by Eileen Diss, not in the direction by Alan Stanford, not in the performances of a game cast. While seasonal goodwill can carry you so far in allowing them to get on with it, the lack of invention is wearying. O'Regan's strikingly obnoxious portrayal of an adolescent in a businessman's body is amusing enough for a short while, as is Brennan's determination to squeeze sympathy out of his difficult relationship with the entertainingly growly Golding, but nothing happens to these characters in the course of this story that wasn't so painfully predictable from the outset that it barely required writing. This leaves the actors with nowhere to go beyond obvious physical and vocal cues, all of them attuned to the rhythm of the sitcom, all of them begging for a laugh track to save them from sheer mediocrity.

Even the long-foreshadowed twist involving Sumner's excessive femininity (big breasts, bare midriff, flirty as hell, men falling over themselves to impress her) relies upon a mind so numbed to narrative probability as to consider it shocking. She's a transsexual, you see — "Amanda": A Man da... geddit? — and it is testimony to the blandness of the world in which this play has been set and received that this particular bit of gender play is featured not so much as an issue or a challenge for the audience, but as simply another bit of vaudeville cross-dressing aimed at eliciting cheap laughs and then cast aside like so much discarded tinsel. By the time Brennan is reduced to being stripped naked at the most impossi-

bly inopportune moment, it is not John Cleese in *A Fish Called Wanda* that comes to mind so much as David Kelly in *Waking Ned* — it is sad and humiliating rather than funny.

**MARTHA by Annie Wood,
Jay Manley and Gill Robertson**

Barnstorm Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 9 November, 2004 at Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

MARTHA, THE LATEST PLAY FOR UNDER-SIXES from Barnstorm Theatre Company, is a vivid and colourful exploration of friendship, forgiveness, and social behaviour. Directed by Philip Hardy and designed by Sabine Dargent, *Martha* continues the company's ongoing experimentation with dramatic performance for the very young. These performances combine puppetry, music, and song, physical comedy and professional actors to explore complex issues in an accessible and entertaining way.

Martha opens on the beach, in front of a hut built from flotsam and jetsam. A toilet seat makes one round window frame, a fishing-net is nailed to the wall to hold groceries, and the stove is made from an oil-barrel. The seating area is yellow and padded, and shaped like sand dunes. This clever design incorporates the spectators into the set and the action, while recreating a familiar story-time atmosphere. It has the additional advantage that the spectators can move around without disrupting the performance or each other, and anyone who finds the eponymous Martha a bit scary can find an adult lap to sit on.

Martha is a bad-tempered and solitary woman who lives all alone. Signs sur-



rounding her land read "Go Away" and "Private Property". The postman is afraid of her, and her neighbours shun her. Then a cheeky goose lands in her garden and inveigles his way into her home and her heart, and Martha discovers the rewards of friendship. As she does so her hut, which is hinged, opens out to reveal the interior of her world, physically representing Martha's own psychological journey.

Different aspects of the performance were designed to appeal to different age groups. The slapstick stage-business at the beginning of the show, when Martha's hand reaches out through the door and windows to grab things from the outside, amused the smaller children. They generally reacted most enthusiastically to the non-narrative elements, enjoying the set, the physical comedy, and the goose puppet. The older children were more atten-

LOOSEY GOOSEY *Gribbin and friend in Martha*

tive to the storyline. However, it became apparent from informal chats after the show with audience members and some of the child-care work-

ers accompanying them that the smaller children had also understood the movement of the action. Although there was no formal feedback session for the performance I saw, Barnstorm distributes Teachers' Resource Packs to school groups attending the performances, thereby providing materials and structure for later in-class discussions of the show and the issues raised. The components of the story target experiences familiar to many children: for example, the goose messes up the house while Martha is away, and makes her angry. He is scolded and sent out, but he apologizes by bringing her a flower, and is forgiven. Martha, for her part, learns how to share. Finally the goose flies away, but though temporarily

reviews

lonely and upset, Martha understands that, having made one friend, she can make more. She arranges to go to the boat race with the postman and his friends, so that at the end of the play a new, sociable life is beginning for her.

The acting was strong and broad, with facial expressions and voice establishing clear and simple emotions that communicated the essential aspects of the characters. The blurring of age in the performance — Martha is an old woman with a childlike manner, for example — allows the children to identify with the characters and their problems while maintaining a certain critical and thoughtful distance. The goose was a puppet on two sticks, operated by Johnny Hopkins, who doubled as the Postie. At the outset of the play, when Roisin Gribbin as Martha entered the stage from her hut, the smaller children shouted hello; by not responding, Gribbin set the boundaries of the action and established her character. This also neatly overcame the problem of audience interruption and unwanted interaction. Furthermore, the failure to respond as expected created a kind of tension, an awareness that something unusual was about to happen.

Barnstorm's strength is their refusal to underestimate or patronise their audience. In *Martha*, they deal with complex aspects of childhood development and socialization, reflecting the experiences and struggles of the spectators back to them, teaching lessons about the world without descending into didacticism. Furthermore, *Martha* engages the sophisticated appreciation of theatre amongst even small children, harnessing their ability to distinguish make-believe from reality, their pleasure in imitation, and the clarity with which they understand the world through stories.

Martha, a story of loneliness and the transformative power of friendship, was lucid, thoughtful and entertaining — an excellent piece of theatre.

MR. KOLPERT by David Giesemann,
TERRORISM by the Presnyakov Brothers,
and 4.48 PSYCHOSIS by SARAH KANE

Granary, Cork

Reviewed 8, 15, and 22 Oct 2004

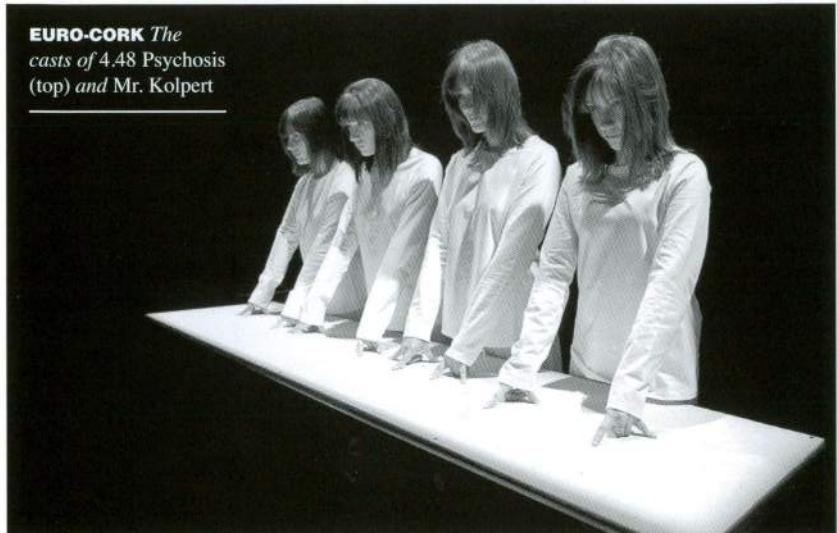
(respectively)

BY LYNDY RADLEY

IN THIS REPERTORY SEASON GRANARY presented three professional Irish premieres, all written since 2000, one German, one Russian and one British. Granary should be commended for taking the initiative to produce little-seen and challenging new writing. However, the specific interpretations of these plays left me feeling somewhat out of sorts.

An ordinary couple, invited round for supper, becomes involved in a perverse game with their hosts, who may, or may not, have Mr. Kolpert's dead body in a trunk. Loosely based on Patrick Hamilton's *Rope*, *Mr Kolpert* (produced here in association with Be Your Own Banana) rejects the sanitised violence which pervades contemporary culture. The play opens with Sarah (George Hanover) and Ralph (Denny Klatt) discussing the implausibility of a Hollywood movie in which the protagonist suddenly loses it and opens fire on the world: where, they ask, did he get the gun? Director Brian Desmond has an unmistakable flair for dealing with stock characters and directing physical, commedia-influenced performances. However, *Mr. Kolpert* is a play which examines the spectacle of violence, brings bodily functions to the fore, and deals in the abnormally normal. In this

EURO-CORK *The
casts of 4.48 Psychosis
(top) and Mr. Kolpert*



4.48 — TOMÁS McCARTHY; MR. KOLPERT — TONY McCLEANE-FAY

respect it has something in common with the In-Yer-Face British drama of the '90s: it is about bringing disturbing truths to an audience in the most unflinching way possible. *Mr. Kolpert* is full of black humour, but in emphasising the comedic value of one-dimensional characterisation and slapstick physicality over the darker underbelly of the work, this production was awkwardly pitched. It embraced rather than investigated the Hollywood values its characters claim to reject. The audience laughed when they should have been squirming and, consequently, the emotional impact of watching three ordinary people commit violent acts in order to "feel human" was lost.

In addition, Hanover and Klatt played it far too sinister from the outset. The knowing looks they exchanged left us in no doubt but that they had committed a crime and the Tarantino-like playing style meant that they came across more like Bonnie and Clyde than a bored middle class couple who are sick of going to the movies and ordering out and consequently decide to do someone in. Marcos Bale captured the irrational violence of Bastian the architect, but failed to engage with the moral ambiguities of this man who beats his wife but is determined to get to the bottom of the suspected murder of a stranger. John McCarthy was human and funny as a confused pizza delivery man. The moment when Edith (Kate McSwiney-O'Rourke) beat him to death was the most technically well executed scene of the evening, but could have packed a far more powerful punch if Edith had not been played in such a one-dimensional and robotic manner. The most morally ambiguous character of the piece was reduced to a mere — though often hilarious — caricature. When a

woman with no apparent interior life pisses on a corpse, one sees only the act and not the process of slippage which has seamlessly transformed her from an ineffectual dinner-party guest into a remorseless killer.

The production failed to adequately address the complex interplay of reality and simulation which is the essence of Gieselmann's writing. In short, it often simulated what it should have honestly portrayed, made too real that which should have been kept at a distance from its audience and, when it came to the most basic of events, didn't know whether to fake it or not: ice cream was eaten live while pizza-munching was mimed. At the climax of the piece, the use of full body stockings complete with comedy genitalia was the most blatant example of ill-judged sham and failure to engage with the dark and complex themes of the play which characterised this production.

Terrorism, directed by Adam Curtis and produced in association with the Bone Ensemble, was a thought-provoking, if slightly tepid, night at the theatre. Written post-9/11, the play explores the various meanings and expressions of terrorism; physical and psychological, interior and exterior. In particular, it dramatises the connections between minor acts of psychological torture, localised paranoia, and mass destruction. Beginning with a bomb alert at an airport, *Terrorism* maps a course through a number of different lives demonstrating through each snapshot how the characters are paralysed by fear, plagued by suspicion, and variously desensitised. Each act of "terrorism" connects to another in a circular narrative which wasn't always completely obvious in this production. Many of the actors



"doubled" but played more than one part in curiously similar ways which caused some confusion in the interconnected plot.

Some of the performances were understated to the point of being undercooked. The office scene in particular, in which workers are shocked to find that a colleague has committed suicide and end up fighting amongst themselves, seemed haphazard and unsure. Mairin Prendergast shone as an old woman who spoke the rhetoric of war about the problem of evil son-in-laws. Prendergast injected a lagging production with a shot of pace, energy, and comic timing. The rest of the production seemed to belong in a slightly stylised "anywhere." While many of the performers spoke in neutral accents, Prendergast adopted an exaggerated inner-city Cork accent and the manner in which she located her character while still

PARANOIA McCleane
and Prendergast in
Terrorism

TONY McCLEANE/FAY

expressing universal concerns was grotesque, comic, and effective. She seemed to be in a different play to the rest of the actors, but I think I might have preferred to be in her world, as her playing style seemed to complement the pithy Russian writing.

As with *Mr. Kolpert*, this production shied away from nudity which was integral to the script. In a scene in which a man soliloquises about feeling nothing while fucking a married woman who has asked him to tie her up, John McCarthy and George Hanover were involved in an awkward piece of under-the-covers semi-clothed coitus which detracted from the power of this curiously macabre speech, which was otherwise well-delivered.

4.48 *Psychosis*, produced in association with Bare Cheek Theatre Company, suffered from the opposite problem to the first two productions: it featured nudity where none was necessary. And unfortunately nudity wasn't the only gratuitous element of the production. Kane's work is notoriously difficult to do well and this, her last play, is arguably the most challenging of all. It gives no instructions as to how many actors should be used, or how the text should be staged. As a result any director must walk a fine line between putting his or her stamp on a production and allowing the text, which so richly expresses issues of madness, love, pain, and loss, to speak for itself through the actors. In this instance the director /

reviews

designer, Tony McCleane-Fay, was so busy bombarding his audience with images apparently intended purely to shock that the text hardly got a look in and, as a consequence, Kane's words often sounded hollow and self-indulgent. Rather than complementing the lyricism with powerful and unusual stage images, McCleane-Fay imposed that oh-so-typical interpretation of what insanity means for a young woman: hysteria.

The evening started promisingly with breathtaking lighting. The use of a mirror on the back wall which reflected a somewhat distorted audience back on themselves was an obvious, but effective, nod to the original Royal Court production. Then we met the women: four brunettes dressed identically in white peeking out from behind long flat fringes and doing their level best to act mad. They shrieked, they rocked, they ran around in circles, they crawled along the floor looking suspiciously like the girl from *The Ring*. They did everything *but* engage in a meaningful way with the text in order to convey a sense of the character's (presumably we are looking at one fractured psyche here) inner life.

Charlotte Murphy, the youngest of the cast, was the focus of the production and had many of the key speeches but, what with all the breathless declamatory lunacy, it was often difficult to understand what she was saying. She was revealed in various states of undress, her body covered in self-inflicted scars. Here McCleane-Fay seems to have latched on to one aspect of Kane's work — self-harm — and milked it for every ounce of schlock it was worth, at the expense, for example, of the play's glorious gallows humour which went largely unplayed and unnoticed. The whole experience

ended for me right about the time that Murphy started writing on the mirror in large quantities of menstrual blood. I fainted, and not because of any overpowering emotional impact, but from the sheer quantity of the gore. Once I came to I managed to stick it out a little longer, but I left just before the ending and missed the closing image which saw a naked Murphy standing on a tabletop, her clothes having been removed by her cohorts. I might have been a little nauseous but really, as Sarah Kane might put it: nothing, nothing, I felt nothing.

Lynda Radley is a Cork-based writer and performer. She recently completed an MA in theatre at Royal Holloway.

THE NUTCRACKER

CoisCéim Dance Theatre

On tour; reviewed 22 Jan 2005 at
the Project, Dublin **BY PETER CRAWLEY**

IT'S A HORRID QUESTION TO ASK OF ANY company, never mind one of Ireland's foremost dance-theatre ensembles, but has CoisCéim suddenly lost its nerve? The decision to mark a decade of innovation for the company — one that has found inspiration everywhere from hotel-rooms to cardboard boxes, from the Irish famine to contemporary urban dereliction — with a grown-up version of *The Nutcracker* first resembles a determined retreat from the cutting edge.

The much-loved and, thus, widely-reviled classic of ballet is such a seasonal money-spinner that almost every ballet company keeps it on standby, presumably held in a glass case marked "break in case of emergency." A Christmas treat of bright melody, treacly fairytale, and glittery spectacle, of childhood innocence



and adult wonder, at best *The Nutcracker* is usually a cash cow that bankrolls a company's experiments.

At worst, it can be a cynical choice — as safe as full houses.

Choreographer David Bolger, of course, knows that this is what challenges are made of, and so his *Nutcracker* treads carefully away from congealed schmaltz, attempting instead to strip the story back to its essence and then build it up again. The reason that his investigation yields such mixed results might have something to do with the corrupted origins of the classic ballet itself.

How the sinister and supernatural imaginings of E.T.A. Hoffmann's fairy tale, "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," became an unsophisticated narrative of a children's party, where toys come magically to life and large divertisse-

PYJAMA PARTY Tom Hickey in *The Nutcracker*

ments, battle scenes, journeys, and season changes follow, was a matter of contention for even the ballet's

composer. "I like the plot of *The Nutcracker* — not at all," noted Tchaikovsky, a man whose appreciation for detail and emotional depth rang through every note of his score. A composer who hid his homosexuality behind a disastrous marriage, and whose death is still a matter of some contention (scholars suggest he committed suicide at the behest of a court of honour, upon being found guilty of a relationship with a member of the Russian imperial family), Tchaikovsky's life was no bowl of sugar plums. The strained gaiety of his *Nutcracker* writhes with the struggle for happiness, where anxiety and anticipation twirl even through the waltz of a snowflake.

Here, Bolger seems to try and have it

reviews

both ways; taking the dark progression of Hoffmann — in which fantasy periodically intrudes upon the narrative rather than overtaking it — while retaining Tchaikovsky's music through the absolute fidelity of the CD player. Hoffman's complexity can be reinstated, it seems, but Tchaikovsky's score is non-negotiable. Despite his more thoughtful and witty efforts, this leaves Bolger's production striving to reinterpret the fairytale, but strangely moored to the fantasia. It is set in an office, positioning Clara as a young, mechanistic office worker whose imagination is periodically stoked by the resolutely undancing, yet always attention-demanding form of Tom Hickey's Drosselmeyer and his gifts to her. Clara, ably danced if less fluidly expressed by Lisa McLoughlin, is trapped behind an obsolete typewriter and surrounded by

co-working caricatures (the jogger, the holiday-planner, the headphone-groover, the yawning sloth). In this context the feats of Robert Jackson, a magnificent dancer, who plays the attractive co-worker and — wouldn't you know it — the Nutcracker too, are made more impressive by the whirling blur of his striped shirt and braces. Not for the first time, Bolger benefits enormously from placing dance in an unlikely setting. As swivel chair frivolity allows for startling duets, the desks and jagged backdrop of Joe Vanek's supple set parts to reveal a white winter wonderland with dancers in bright woollen ware, demonstrating all the choreographed fun of a Gap advert.

Better are the moments where Muirne Bloomer, as a domineering, jealous manageress (replacing, on the night I attended, the injured cast-member Emma O'Kane),

SCHOOL OF DRAMA TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

M.PHIL IN IRISH THEATRE AND FILM

A one year taught post-graduate course focussing on Irish film and theatre since the 19th century, including the history of the Abbey and Gate Theatres and the independent theatre sector and exploring a range of theatre practices and the work of major Irish playwrights and directors, drawing on current productions as much as possible. The film component investigates the construction and representation of 'Irishness' in British and American cinema as well as the historical phenomena which shape indigenous Irish film-making.

APPLICATIONS TO: The Graduate Admissions Office, Trinity College, Dublin 2, phone (01) 608 2182, by 1 April.

The School of Drama, TCD, provides for a range of other undergraduate and postgraduate studies in theatre, drama and film, including Ireland's only professional degree level actor training programme.

Further details: www.tcd.ie/Drama

takes a paper cone from a dispenser, holds it in her mouth and then slinks into position as one of the treacherous mice, the watercooler glowing ominously behind her. Less spectacular, though, is what Bolger and Hickey have conspired to do with Drosselmeyer — a figure that has ranged, across countless interpretations, from benign uncle to sinister machiavellian — here played with tiresome shuffling and toy whistles as a near perpetual sight-gag.

A final *pas de deux* between the lovers is so strangely devoid of heart that one wonders if Bolger ultimately wants to sour the sugariness, but then Tchaikovsky's crisp melodies and sumptuous descants will forever conceal such darkness, and finally CoisCéim simply gives in to its easy pleasantness. They're certainly not the first company to want to fracture Tchaikovsky's ballet with innovative fervour, and certainly not the last to discover that it's still a tough nut to crack.

PILGRIMS IN THE PARK by Jim O'Hanlon

Fishamble Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 16 Dec 2004 at Draiocht

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

1979 IS MEMORABLE IN IRELAND FOR two reasons: the visit of John Paul II, and the release of U2's first single. The confluence of these events reveals the transformation of Ireland from catholicised banana republic to globalised home of rockstar millionaires — a contrast at the core of this play, which suggests that the Pope's visit was not a triumph for Irish Catholicism, but its last hurrah.

We open in the living room of Gerard and Ruth (Enda Oates and Catherine Byrne), where mass is being said by Francis (Barry Barnes). Religious unity soon gives way to conflict. Gerard and Ruth

snap tetchily at each other; their son Paulie (Paul Reid) is in open rebellion, as signalled by his leather jacket and his tendency to say sarcastic things like "father dearest" (he was educated by Jesuits, you see). Cute hoor Michael (Steve Blount) arrives, in Dublin to make a fast buck by selling chairs during the pope's mass next day. Meanwhile, Fr. Francis lights a cigarette, pours another whiskey, and gazes longingly at Ruth.

Gerard leaves for his nightly soup run. But he is not serving pensioners. Oh no. He is meeting an attractive young woman, a mentally-ill homeless drug-addict culchie with an imaginary friend. In a masterstroke of irony, O'Hanlon has named her Joy (Neilí Conroy). She reminds Gerard of the daughter he'd given up for adoption years before. Joy calls Gerard her "holy father". Which is a coincidence, what with the pope visiting and all.

From this setup, we get enough Serious Issues to keep a team of social workers busy for another 25 years. Alcoholism, marital problems, father-son relationships, mental illness, homelessness, abortion, unrequited love, religion, flares versus bell-bottoms — it's all there, in this everything but the kitchen sink drama. Character thus becomes a vehicle for the superficial exploration of these problems, with predictable results.

The male characters aren't too bad: they do display some evidence of intelligence. Fr. Francis represents the human face of the Church, and proposes a more humane form of religion. But his interpretation of Catholicism (which actually amounts to Protestantism, more or less) means that he's supporting a system of morality that he doesn't believe in, and won't abide by. He shares this attitude to his vocation with the



two priests who fronted the pope's visit, Michael Cleary and Eamonn Casey. We now know about the double lives of those men — a fact that O'Hanlon has fun with. Yet while criticising their hypocrisy, he seems to praise Francis for being equally duplicitous. That contradiction could have been interestingly explored; here it's just an exasperating loose end.

Then there's would-be entrepreneur Michael, who embodies the spirit of capitalism that turned Ireland into a Celtic

PARK PIETA *Byrne, Oates, and Conroy*
Pilgrims in the Park

Tiger economy with one of the widest gaps between rich and poor in the world. Michael sells lousy products at inflated prices, ignores the law, and makes tonnes of money doing so. Bizarrely, we're invited to admire this feckless moron. "The Pope knows there's a growing tide of us who don't intend to be poor in worldly wealth but rich in spirit for much longer", he declares — delivering the line as if we're supposed to cheer him off stage. The suggestion that the exploitative pursuit of wealth is actually a form of heroic resistance to Catholic oppression is deeply objectionable, given the inequalities that currently exist in this country (and the role of Ireland's churches in attempting to alleviate them).

The presentation of women is even worse. Catherine Byrne's sole function is to listen to the men, tut consolingly, and accept them for who they are. And absurdly, the play concludes with Gerard and Ruth kneeling over Joy's dead body. Do they talk about homelessness? Drug-use? The

injustice of poverty? Do they wish they'd helped her? No: they observe that, in 25 years, people will have lost their faith. And this is presented as if the tragedy is Ruth's and Gerard's, rather than Joy's. As in O'Hanlon's last play, *The Buddhist of Castleknock*, an act of violence against a marginalised woman functions only to make middle-class characters feel guilty.

As directed by Jim Culleton, the production takes this material at face value, and everything chugs along with grinding efficiency — helped by Sabrine Dargent's clever set design, which is split between the living room and the Phoenix Park. Leonore McDonagh's costume designs commendably resist the impulse to turn the piece into *Saturday Night Fever*. And the actors do their best with this underwritten material. But when most of the characters have less presence and personality than Joy's imaginary friend, it should have been time to start rewriting.

RUDOLF THE RED devised by David Boyd, Annie Ryan and the Company

The Ark

13 Dec 2004 – 16 Jan 2005; reviewed 19 Dec

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

ADVENTURE, FANTASY, FEAR AND friendship are just some of the themes explored in the 60 minutes of this whirlwind production for children. *Rudolf the Red* produced an engaging, magical world of fantasy that catered for the entire audience, children and adults alike. Unusually, however, there was only one public performance of the show prior to Christmas, the remainder reserved for school bookings. Such a programming schedule seems unfortunate for a seasonally-themed show, with many wishing to see it during the run up to Christmas, rather than in mid-January.

David Boyd's inspiration for the piece lay in the traditional Christmas song — everyone knows it, but do we really know the circumstances that result in Rudolf (as this production spells his name) leading Santa and his sleigh around the world? As the story unfolds before us, we realise that events that

Christmas Eve were in fact much more complicated than originally assumed.

With four actors dressed as reindeer, the show encompasses music, dance, movement and song, continually encouraging audience participation, yet never becoming a pantomime. On entry to the theatre, each child is given a reindeer identity card to fill out, thus establishing from the beginning that the audience is just as much part of the production as the actors onstage. To reinforce this element, the actors chant "Are we reindeer?" as the audience respond with "Yes we are!", a motif that is repeated throughout, at once energising the audience and ensuring engagement. Despite employing this call-and-response technique traditionally associated with pantomime, the production avoids descending to the level of farce.

The story begins with a discussion among a group of toys (manipulated and voiced by the actors) in Santa's workshop, who devise a plan that will fulfil Santa's dream of delivering all his toys to every child across the world in one night. However, they need to find a group of reindeer in order to execute such a task. Ted (the teddy bear) volunteers to trudge through the snow in search of a likely herd. The remainder of the production follows Ted as he finds the reindeer and then journeys with them across the snow trying to get back to Santa's workshop.

The four actors, Clare Barrett, Fergal McElherron, Fiona Condon, and Louis Lovett, tell the story through a series of narrations and re-enactments, drawing upon lines from the familiar song in the creation of witty dialogue that plays with audience expectations. These events are repeatedly interrupted as the actors skip about chanting to the audience "Show us your Reindeer Hooves" and "Show us your Antlers," the



audience responding with the appropriate lines and actions. The success of the play lies in its ability to position itself within a world relevant to children, yet never talking down to the child spectator. By using the Rudolf song, the company presents the child spectator with a text with which they are already familiar. Such a technique places the audience in a position of power where they are sometimes given the opportunity to amend the actors' incorrect narration of events. On one such occasion there was a significant uproar from the audience as they rectified Rudolf's description of Santa — he is not small, with a blue jacket and slippers. Meanwhile, the exclusion of Rudolf from the reindeer games is

HORNY DILEMMA
McElherron, Barrett and Lovett in Rudolf the Red

also explored.

At the pre-Christmas performance I attended, it soon became apparent that the four actors were having just as much fun as the audience;

Annie Ryan's ensemble production ensured that momentum was never lost. Much of the humour of the play derives from David Boyd's original music incorporating such songs as "Tis Grand to be Afraid" and "Polish your Bum" (a strategy used by the reindeer to slide down the mountainside). Using an excellent combination of Ferdia Murphy's frosty set design and Sinead McKenna's icy lighting, the play culminates in a dreamlike landscape with wind blowing snow into the audience as the reindeer take flight with Santa's

sleigh. The scene reaches a crescendo with the aid of unprovoked communal stamping from the audience, signalling the end of a wonderful production that made even the most cynical among us look forward to Christmas.

Pádraic Whyte is studying for a PhD in children's literature and film at TCD.

SHUTTER

by Selina Cartmell and Ella Clarke

Siren Productions

Project Cube, Dublin

25-30 Oct 2005: reviewed 27 Oct

BY FINTAN WALSH

WITHOUT LANGUAGE OR OBVIOUS PLOT,
Siren Productions' performance piece

Shutter asks a lot of its audience. Those who bear with the challenging work, which combines dance, music, and sound, are given a lot in return, in the form of a technically accomplished, thought-provoking, and moving performance. The title alone is a useful guide, its many resonances steering the audience along. Most obviously the word "shutter" relates to the action of a camera lens in the moment of taking a photograph. The production forges this connection from the outset, when the audience is invited to enter a dimly-lit space that resembles a darkroom, and sit on fold-up stools. The link is bolstered when the sole performer, Ella Clarke, sits in the corner of Project Cube and assumes numerous poses in the direction of a clicking noise. The relevance

SUMMER SCHOOL IN SPIRITUALITY 'EXPLORING SOUL PATHS'

**13 June - 1 July 2005
(MON-FRI 9.30AM - 4.30PM)**



Take this opportunity to explore spirituality through the lenses of theology, philosophy, sacred texts, poetry and psychology

PROGRAMME

Week 1: Spirituality and Health

Week 2: What is Spirituality?
Journalling as Personal Development
Transformational Reading

Week 3: Beginnings, Journey, Endings

Contact: Milltown Institute, Ranelagh, Dublin 6

Tel: (00353 1) 269 8388

E-mail: info@milltown-institute.ie www.milltown-institute.ie



is also made in the projection of images of horses, cowgirls, and birds inside a centrally placed square pit.

And when Clarke moves close to the frame, as if a horse inside a training ring, she establishes a link between the action of the camera lens and the function of animal's fencing — they are devices designed to arrest, capture, and curtail the objects of their interest. The photograph and the ring are also sites of (re)presentation, traditionally suited to the display of stylised appearance and disciplined behaviour.

Not long after the adroit Clarke walks on stage, the Wild West images, framed by the pit, fade to reveal a sand-filled base. With this, Clarke begins to physicalise the

RIDE 'EM, COWGIRL
Clarke in Shutter

depictions herself, forging a biding link between herself and the horses. Initially she enacts a dressage trot, as if

inside a training ring, and later attempts to balance on the frame itself, cautiously toeing its perimeter. Ultimately, Clarke's journey sees her step outside the border, sprinkling sand near the audience in discovery of the wider playing space. As this action proceeds, her movement — sometimes sportive, other times distressed, all the time riveting — is accentuated by Denis Clohessy's pulsing electronic score and held in warm focus by Paul Keogan's lighting design. The show's programme note claims that the piece is concerned with photographs of the iconic cowboy image and the legacy of the Wild West. While this

ROS KAVANAGH

seems like an odd area of interest, the actual performance downplays the advertised promise, instead using this idea as a backdrop to explore connections between the body, power, performance, and representation. This examination is conducted in a specifically gendered context, with the female form presented, like the fenced horse, as an object of discipline. This alignment figures the piece as being less concerned with shutters than "shut-hers" — those structures and forces which limit female experience. Clarke does not comply with the restrictions imposed on her body, however. Although she initially moves like a trained animal, she also contests curtailment with the unruly verve of her body. Similarly, she escapes from the training arena. To the same effect, Clarke assumes the role of trainer as well as animal, as indicated by broad lassoing gestures, in a bid to renegotiate the power dynamic.

While the piece relates the disciplined animal to female experience, by acts of power-play and role-reversal, Clarke's body challenges these expectations. Though images of birds and skyscapes which fleet across the pit signify a will to escape all associations with the confined and the earth-bound, Clarke's repeated falling on the sand towards the end of the short performance points to a difficulty in transcending these associations. The oversized boots she dons, coupled with the bone she grasps between her legs (a symbol which is both patriarchal, in its referencing of the Genesis story, and phallic, by virtue of its appearance and positioning) emphasises that woman exists in relation to man and the "masculine."

While *Shutter*'s programme note seems to stand a little at odds with the actual performance, its obscurity creates room for multiple interpretations by the audi-

ence. By the end of the piece, there is indeed a sense of having spent the past hour in a darkroom, not to view images of the Wild West, but to bear witness to the processing of an individual, more specifically to the rigorous formation of female identity. While the dominant tone of Cartmell and Clarke's production is interrogative, the performance seems to end on a note of resignation, with Clarke trotting off-stage like the dressage horse from the play's beginning. Not so this spectator who, with a mind full of steely sounds and fragmented images, realises he's just at the starting-line.

SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME

by Frank McGuinness

Decadent Theatre Company

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

16-20 Nov 2004; reviewed 16 Nov

BY DIARMUID O' BRIEN

THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES YOU about Decadent Theatre Company's excellent production of Frank McGuinness' chillingly relevant play is the set. All too often, on that eager canvas framed by the proscenium arch, everything seems to go on at the bottom, like a child's painting. You get a lot of colour in the foreground but nothing above the horizon. Ahead of the class, set designer Eoin McCarthaigh has learned to look up. A narrow circular dungeon towers up into the gantries, but shrewdly imposes depth rather than elevation. The actors are shackled at the bottom of a pit and the audience are held down there with them.

Inspired by the book *An Evil Cradling*, Brian Keenan's account of his captivity by fundamentalist militants in the Lebanon in the late 1980s, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* was first produced in



1992, and has enjoyed acclaimed runs on Broadway and the West End. Most Irish people are familiar with Keenan's story but, curiously, it is rare to see an Irish production of McGuinness' play. Of course the predicament in question, the taking of western hostages in the Middle East, has sadly seeped back into topicality, but the play's more enduring appeal lies in its powerful discovery of friendship and survival. That said it is perhaps one of McGuinness' structurally weaker scripts, where his prevalent motifs of nationality, class, and homosocial ritual do not blend as seamlessly into the content as they do in his more stylised work.

Three men are taken hostage in Beirut: An Irish journalist, an American doctor, and a teacher from England. We don't meet their captors, save for the occasional

PRISON DRAMA *Goodall and de Faoite in Someone...*

menacing shadow through the slats of the door set unreachably high up the wall. The hostages are denied a more objective scope. They do not understand the politics behind their capture; their only concern is to get home and, as a bond is painfully forged, get each other home. Down in the perpetual dimness the three distinct voices share duties as confidant, comforter and antagonist in turn, for no end more ambitious than to keep each other from breaking.

Andrew Flynn's direction emphasises the psychological texture of the script. The three men constantly redefine their perceptions of their predicament and of each other. The initial stock discourses of nationality, religion, and class gradually withdraw. In an enclosed vacuum where language is the

SEAN MCGORMACK

only instrument, every word is loaded. "Don't put me in a cell," protests Michael, the generally timid Englishman. "I have never been in a cell in my life. This is a room."

Actual escape impossible, they indulge in escapism. With desperate exuberance, ever-punctuated by the rattle of their chains, they create movies, sporting events and fantasy. They sing for each other, evocative songs of freedom and home. Their most touching, if emotionally dangerous, diversion is when they orally compose letters to family. Not knowing about the outside world is a torture onto itself.

The grouping of an Irishman, Englishman and American evokes certain stereotypes and there is always a danger that the whole thing could come off sounding like a bar joke. Thankfully the cast rises to the occasion and provides convincing, informed performances that show us actual people. Clareman Diarmuid de Faoite adds credence and a touch of malice to the emotional, ever-goaded journalist Edward. Paul Roe brings sensitivity to the focused, self-improving Adam, and Englishman Rod Goodall gamely almost manages to rescue the effete Michael from being an utter mama's boy. The audience are so invested in the drama that they readily gasp, laugh, and cry.

The rambling stream of shared consciousness twists through high camp and morbid gloom, and yet that vertical space is never free of the suffocating ennui of prolonged captivity. The play itself is a sentence and the audience wants to get out, but they want to free the characters as well as themselves.

Diarmuid O'Brien is completing a MA in writing in NUI, Galway.

TALL TALES (FOR SMALL PEOPLE)

Kabosh Theatre Company

in association with BT

Tel. 0044-870-243-0179

Feb 15, 2005 – ongoing through Aug;

Reviewed BY PETER CRAWLEY

LONG PAST MY BEDTIME, A WARM AND resonant voice (whose owner is later revealed to be John Hewitt) is keeping me awake. Through no fault of his own, Hewitt is not as clear as he could be, yet his story pushes on briskly, lucidly, purposefully: "In a garden untouched by the Spring and the Summer, where a cruel and penitential Winter has set up its shop indefinitely, the chilly north wind dances about through the trees and..." — Doo. Doo. Doo. Doo. Doo.

Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* has hung up on me. And, with that, the spell of Kabosh's experiment in dial-up theatre, originally conceived with the Belfast Festival at Queens and now presented with the Old Museum Arts Centre, is suddenly broken. Picking up the shards of illusion, I ring back for *Tall Tales (for small people)* — or "Bedtime stories for children" as the fairytale switchboard puts it — and the correctly enunciating British Telecom robot spells out our options again: "To hear *The Selfish Giant* part two, press 2". One tone later, and crackly John Hewitt takes up the tale.

There may be considered reasons for the same broken dial tone that will unceremoniously cut off Richard Dormer's retelling of Wilde's *The Happy Prince*, dividing the story into three parts, and it may simply be the risk of a child drifting safely into dreamland while the phone bill steadily becomes a nightmare. But when this production has already been besieged by technical problems (which conspired to



change an originally advertised phone number and to delay its running dates by a matter of months), one wonders if Kabosh's dial-a-fable project has simply abandoned the potential of technology, and let whimsy get the better of it.

The fact that children are already encouraged to form personal relationships with their handsets young in life (25% of all seven-to-ten year olds now own mobiles, apparently), and that those handsets are fast evolving to include music players, games-devices and, perhaps, cappuccino makers, means that kids expect interaction from their phones. But if you'd like Hewitt to slow down a tad (perhaps he too is conscious of your bill), unlike the more traditional bedside narrator, he is not open to negotiation. This also renders him nearly as lifeless as the "please hold" drones who assure you that your call is important to them; and the only living relationship you may get from the experience arrives via call waiting: "Can I call you back? I have the Happy Prince on the other line."

This points up how inherently limited the recorded message is as a narrative

NIGHTY NIGHT

Tall Tales...

medium. Sensibly, perhaps, neither Karl Wallace, director of *The Selfish Giant* and *The Devoted Friend* (read by Cathy White), nor Rachel O'Riordan, director of *The Happy Prince* and two recitals of Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (read by Sheelagh O'Kane), choose to go down the radio drama route, keeping other voices, sound effects, and audio set dressing to a bare minimum. However, this also leaves Dormer, who must portray countless separate characters in *The Happy Prince*, with a problem, deciding to distinguish his speakers with a baffling sweep of accents, from a Ken Livingstone councillor to a Mrs. Doubtfire sparrow.

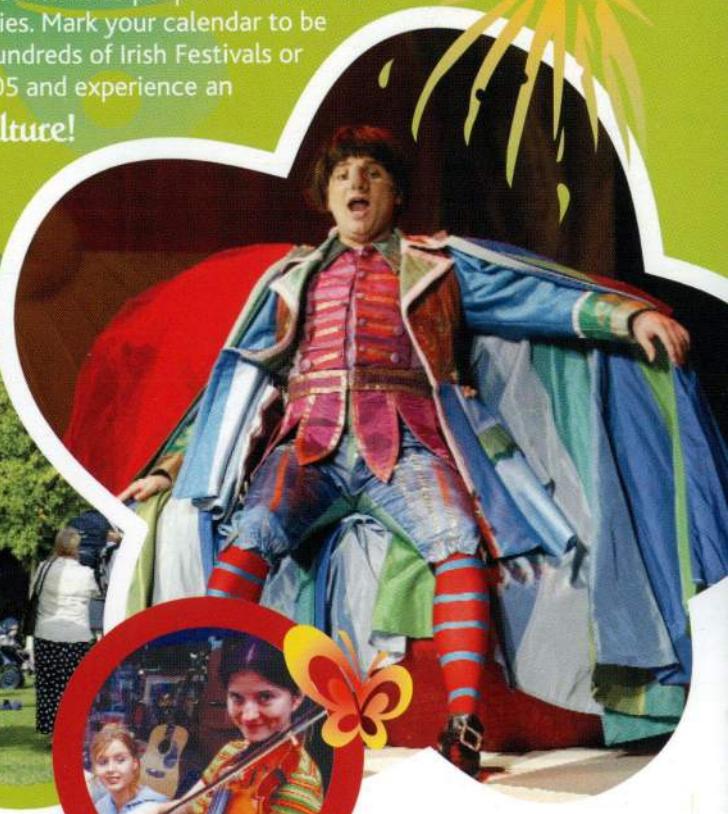
Between phone calls there is plenty of time to ponder what led to such an odd array of children's stories in the first place, from the blanket misery and redeeming charity of Wilde's Christian parables ("More marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women") to the stinky, crude verses of Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood* interpretation ("The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers. She whips a pistol from her knickers."). But when option number nine — "some silly nonsense," chirrups the robot — leads to the twin macabre offerings of Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* and Tim Burton's *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, Kabosh seems positively intent on showing up the limitations of the medium. Two dark fantasists, known best for their warped illustrations rather than their word power, were never going to work down the blower. And then, in the delightfully grim fatalism of Burton's rhyme, as poor doomed Oyster Boy realises that he was well and truly shucked from the start, the line goes dead for the last time.



Life, Theatre, Music, Dance, Celebration...Discover

A World of Festive Culture

In Ireland, the spirit of celebration crosses languages, cultures, rivers and mountains as people revel in their heritage & communities. Mark your calendar to be at one of the many hundreds of Irish Festivals or Cultural Events in 2005 and experience an **Explosion of Culture!**



 **ireland.ie**

 **Fáilte Ireland**



The Bald **SOPRANO**

by **Eugene Ionesco**

The Factory Performance Space

Lower Quay St, Sligo

March 22 - April 2, 8pm (no shows Sundays or Mondays)

Tickets €15/€12

Information & Booking:

071 917 0431 / www.blueraincoat.com



ISSN 13937855

