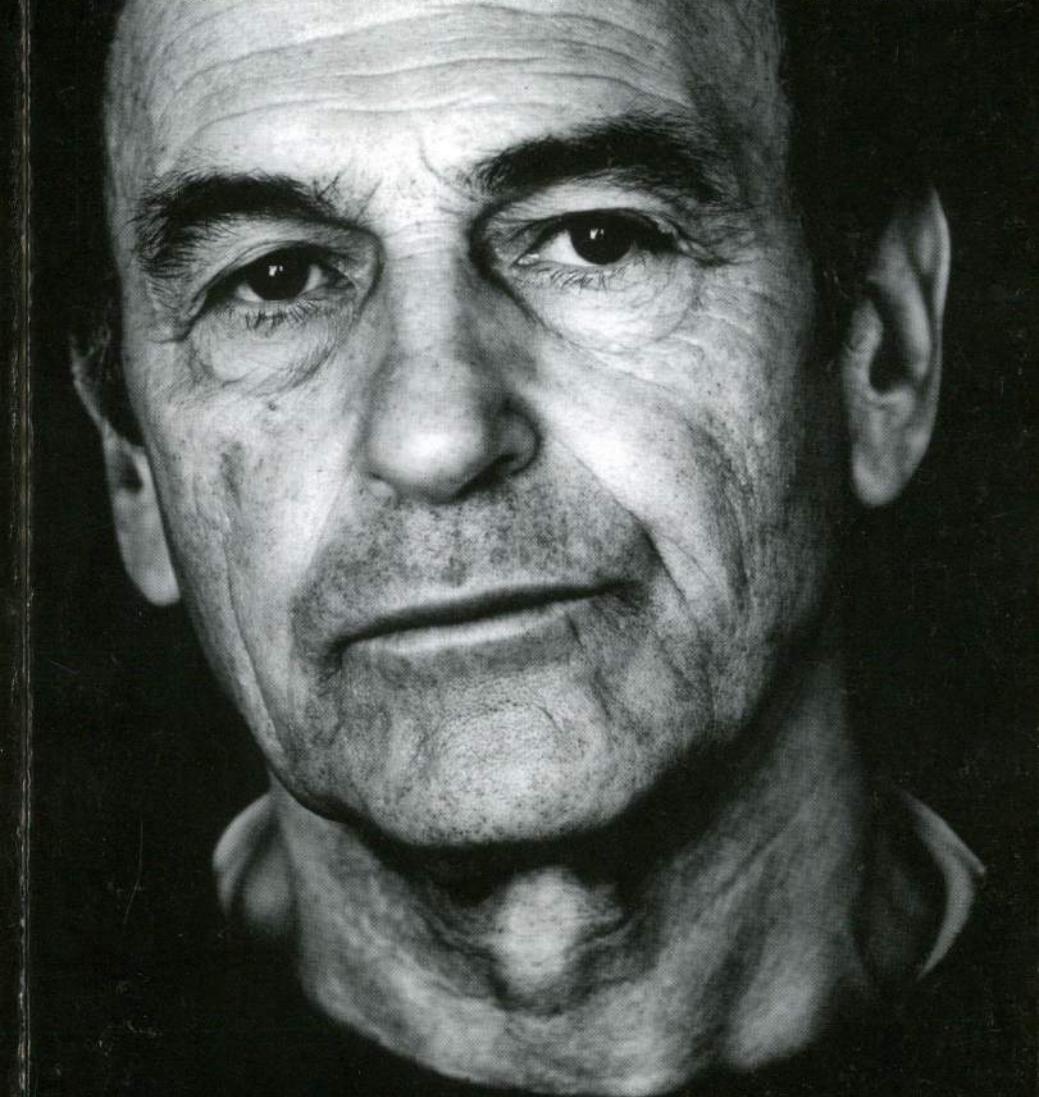


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MAGAZINE



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2 WHAT'S NEWS

8 FESTIVAL FEEDBACK In October, *itm* hosted its second annual international theatre critics' forum. Here's a transcript.

30 21 DAYS ON THE BOARDS Peter Crawley responds to this year's Dublin Fringe Festival.

36 MEETING THE MASTER Annie Ryan describes her encounter with director Peter Brook.

40 CITY ARTS CLOSES ITS DOORS Patrick Burleigh reports on the controversy surrounding the recent closure of City Arts Centre's Moss Street facility, and on the ramifications for the theatre sector.

44 A GOOD YEAR FOR WOMEN 2001 has seen a bumper crop of plays by women on the Irish stage. Cathy Leeney reports.

50 SHOP OF DREAMS Billy Roche offers an excerpt from his new play *On Such as We*.

53 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Peter Crawley reports on comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

54 REVIEWS Our critics on *Ag Clai na Muice Duibhe* (*At the Black Pig's Dyke*); *Blithe Spirit*; *The Carnival King*; *Death and the Ploughman*; *Educating Rita*; *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (*Anwoite Mir*); *Kvetch*; *Living Space*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*; *The Old Lady Says No!*; *The Original Night of Francis Fahy*; *The Playboy of the Western World*; *The Promise of Sex: Two Plays* by Howard Barker; *Richard III*; *Shopping and Fucking*.

ON THE COVER: Tom Murphy, photographed by Paul McCarthy

CREATING THE TRACES

NA PAPER DELIVERED AT A CONFERENCE this past November on "Theatre History, Archives, and Politics" at NUI Galway, Chris Morash gave a paper which offered a fresh way of thinking about the relationship between Irish theatre, the Irish nation, and the work of those of us who document and comment on that theatre.

Morash frames the act of seeing theatre as an essentially local event, shared by the performers and the group of people who assemble in an auditorium on a given night. Theatre companies like the Abbey have tried and in many ways succeeded in fostering a sense of national consciousness through their work, but such national theatrical gestures, he argues, will always exist in tension with "that which resists the national — the local." Morash cites as evidence of that tension the early Abbey tours, which, in their efforts to spread a national message, ironically inspired the founding of theatres in cities including Cork and Belfast.

These ideas may seem simple and to a certain extent self-evident; however that they present a new and challenging angle on Irish theatre was proven often throughout the Galway conference, as historians proved themselves much abler to theorise Irish theatre in a national context than to talk about the actuality of its localness with much precision or accuracy. A troubling romanticisation persists in the way that historians discuss non-Dublin-based theatre: the very fact that companies exist in Galway, Waterford,

Cork, Clonmel, and so forth, is presented as evidence of a healthy Irish theatre system and not interrogated much further than that.

But as we all know, the Irish regional theatre movement is more than a quarter of a century old, and current tensions between, say, Ireland's inaugural non-Dublin-based company, Druid, and its local community of Galway are a clear indication that the relationship between a theatre company and its community is something that, if not constantly interrogated and renegotiated, can grow stale.

Historians and critics have a role to play in investigating how theatre actually works in Ireland, and how the systems by which it is created and received continue to evolve and shift. New systems, new languages, new ways of thinking — and new forms of documentation — are called for if we wish to embrace Irish theatre's essential localness. For, to complete Morash's argument, it's through the act of documentation that Irish

theatre (that *any* theatre) reaches an audience outside its immediate circle; it is the work of theatre historians and critics that turns the essentially local event of theatre into something that can be accessed by people across space and time. That's a big responsibility, and it's also a creative act: history is not objective, but is crafted by historians. When we document, criticise, and comment on theatre, we are creating the traces of culture that later historians will piece together to create the "true story" of Irish theatre in the early 21st century. Learning to think local as we write national is of paramount importance.

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WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

THERE'S NOTHING LESS THAN A SEA CHANGE GOING ON IN Irish theatre management. As reported in this and past issues of *itm*, the last few months have seen the artistic directors of Project Arts Centre and the Lyric Theatre, the directors of the Dublin Fringe Festival and the Pavilion Theatre, the managing director of the Abbey Theatre, the executive director of City Arts Centre, and the managing director of Druid Theatre Company step down or move on. Is it just a coincidence that so many of the key management jobs in the sector are suddenly up for grabs, or are there larger issues of training, board-level management, funding, and artistic vision at play? And who is out there to fill all these jobs?

ON AND ON THEY GO

Just when the actors' knees were starting to heal — *Alone It Stands* lives on, in the West End no less. John Breen's rugby comedy opened at London's Duchess Theatre on 2 Jan. for a six-week run, produced by Pat Moylan and Breda Cashe for Lane Productions. And *Stones in his Pockets*, which finished performances on Broadway in September, returns to the Gaiety Theatre from 4 Feb.–23 Mar. featuring its indomitable original cast, Seán Campion and Conleth Hill; Moylan, Paul Elliott, and Adam Kenwright are the producers.

DOSH FOR TV WRITERS

BBC Northern Ireland is accepting applications for the second year of the Tony Doyle Bursary, designed to foster quality television writing. Writers with an Irish background are encouraged to submit an outline for an original idea for television as well as samples of past work; the winner will receive a £2,000 (stg) cash prize and he/she and five finalists will be invited to a residential seminar run by BBC Northern Ireland's Drama Department to work with experienced television practitioners. The award is named for the late actor, and the judging panel includes Liam Cun-

ningham, Alan Moloney, Peter Norris, Lorcan Cranitch, Tina Kelleher, Sally Doyle, and Robert Cooper. Submissions by 31 Jan. to: Tony Doyle Bursary, BBC NI Drama Department, Broadcasting House, Ormeau Avenue, Belfast BT2 8HQ; Tel: 02890-338-997.

TALKING ABOUT PLAYS

irish theatre magazine is planning a live event on 24th February together with the Lyric Theatre to examine new writing for the stage. Further information can be found by emailing us at info@irishtheatremagazine.com or on the Lyric Theatre's website, www.lyrictheatre.co.uk.

BOOKS RECEIVED

itm's longtime books columnist Jocelyn Clarke has stepped down following his appointment as commissions manager at the Abbey Theatre. Book reviews will return to the magazine in Issue 11; in the meantime here are some new volumes that have caught our eye. Upstate Theatre Project has published *Way Out in the Country*, the first-ever anthology of community plays from Ireland. The volume comprises three scripts — *Together, Connected; Tunnel of Love; and Zoo Station*, all written by members of Macra na Feirme clubs in Louth and Monaghan working with professional theatre artists and writers. Syracuse University Press have brought

out Volume Two (1996-98) of the *New Plays from the Abbey Theatre* series; the plays included are Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, Michael Harding's *Sour Grapes*, *Melonfarmer* by Alex Johnston, and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* by Thomas Kilroy. And the burgeoning Caryfort Press have two new titles on their list: *The Starving and October Song*



TONY DOYLE



UPSTATE THEATRE PROJECT

(*Two Plays by Andrew Hinds*) and *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*. The latter comprises some 40 interviews with, among others, no less than five past or current Abbey artistic directors; and playwrights, directors, and performers including Olwen Fouéré, Frank McGuinness, Paul Mercier, and Vincent Woods.

DANCE FESTIVAL DATES ANNOUNCED

The first International Dance Festival Ireland will take place between 8-26 May, 2002 in venues including the Abbey Theatre, Project, the Irish Film Centre, the Samuel Beckett Theatre, SFX City Theatre, Temple Bar Galleries, the Ark, and Meeting House Square. A centrepiece of the Festival will be the first-ever visit of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company to Dublin. The programme will also include work from the U.S., South Africa, and Europe, as well as a platform for new Irish work, workshops, a community and outreach programme, a fringe festival, and a festival club. The

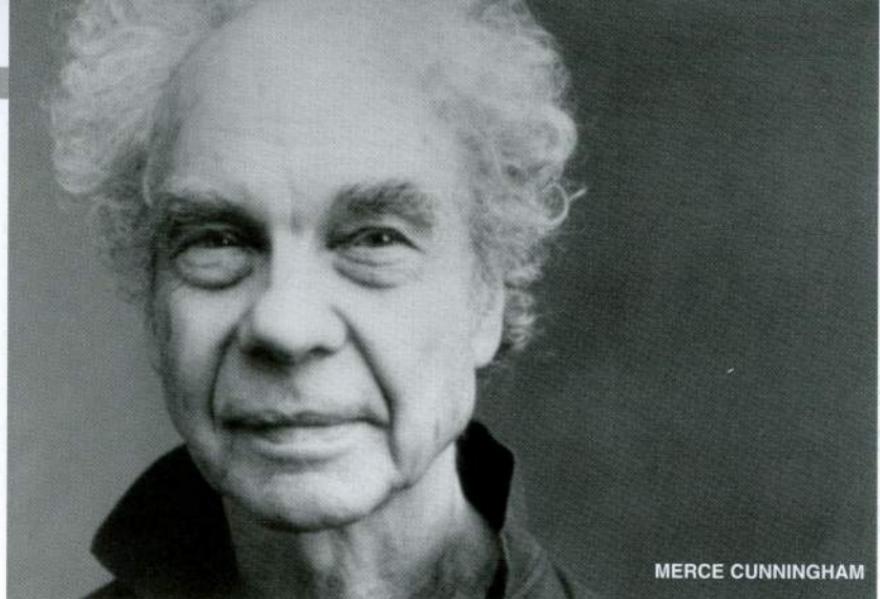
Festival office is at 26 South Frederick Street, D2; telephone 01-679-0524; fax 01-679-1685; email info@dancefestivalireland.ie. The festival artistic director is Catherine Nunes and the general manager is Marina Rafter.

FISHAMBLE NARROWS IT DOWN

Rosalind Haslet, Mark Lynch, Martin Maguire, and Michael Regnier are the shortlisted candidates for the "Summer in the City" playwriting contest, which Fishamble are sponsoring in conjunction with Temple Bar Properties. Writers were asked to submit ideas for a 15- to 75-minute play set somewhere in Temple Bar; the winning script will be produced as part of Temple Bar Properties' Diversions 2002 series. A winner will be announced on 31 January.

UP CORK!

Cork has been named the European Capital of Culture for 2005, beating out submissions from cities including, in Ireland, Galway, Waterford, and Limerick. Following ratification from the European Council of Ministers, a board of directors will be set up through Cork Corporation. The budget is £10 million — half to come from national government and half from local government. Liz Meaney, Cork's cultural officer, says, however, that this is a "baseline" figure and that significant other fundraising will likely be undertaken. For more information as it comes available, Meaney can be reached via email at arts@corkcorp.ie.



MERCE CUNNINGHAM

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

The Irish Times/ESB Theatre Awards will be held on 10 Feb. in the Burlington Hotel, Dublin.

Lots coming up at **Yew Tree** this year: the company's a.d. John Breen is directing Max Hafler's *Grand*, opening at The Belltable's Unfringed Festival on 24 Feb. It will tour in Feb. and Mar. and plays the Civic, Tallaght from 11-16 Mar. In early July Yew Tree will co-produce *Drama at Inish* by Lennox Robinson with the **Hawk's Well**, Sligo; the production will then tour nationally. Other productions planned for this year include a co-production with **An Grianán** of *The Silver Dollar Boys* by Neil Donnelly in Sept. and a new play by John Breen about Charles Haughey (Nov./Dec.).

Along with Yew Tree's *Grand*, theatre at the **Belltable Unfringed Festival 2002** includes Common Currency's *Trainspotting* (Jan. 28-29) and Russian company Do Theatr's *Upside Down* (31 Jan.-2 Feb.). Children's theatre at Unfringed includes Amharclann Siog's *Dha Cluas Capaill ar Labhas Loinsigh* (Jan. 25), Púca Puppets' bilingual *Peg! Peig!* (31 Jan.-1 Feb.), and Theater Triebwerk's productions of *A Friend for Bolton the Lion* by Klaus Kordon (4-7 Feb.) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (4-7 Feb.).

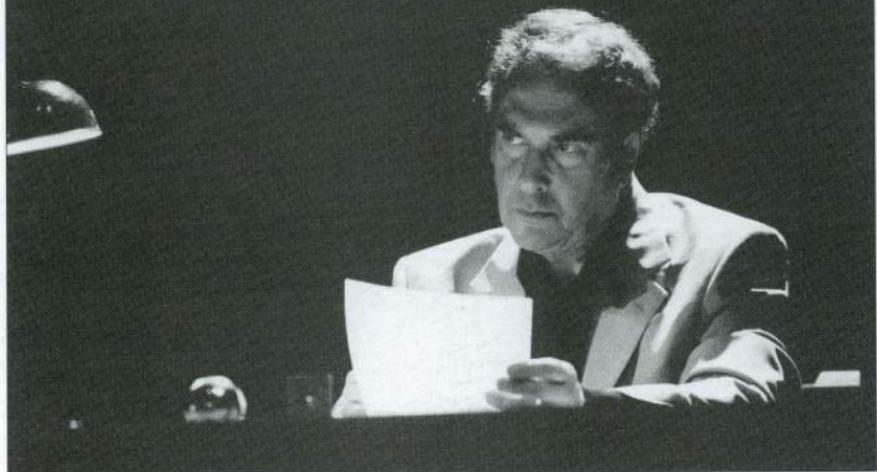
Quare Hawks

Land in Monaghan

Quare Hawks is now company in residence at the Garage Theatre, Monaghan. They can be reached on 047-77809 and info@quarehawks.com. Their new production, *Oblivion*, focuses on suicide among young men, is based on research by English writer Philip Osment, and will be developed through workshopping. The piece will premiere in May and tour extensively.

Passion Machine's latest is *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, written and directed by Paul Mercier and co-produced by Abhann Productions. It continues its nationwide tour from mid-Jan. to early Feb. before taking up residence in the

ONE FOR THE ROAD



Olympia, Dublin from 9-30 Mar... **Second Age** is presenting *Macbeth* at the Town Hall Theatre (6-9 Feb.), Everyman Palace (11-16 Feb.), and the Olympia (18-28 Feb.)... **Galloglass** will mount a four-week tour of *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, touring the regions as well as playing Dun Laoghaire in March.... Terry Byrne's production of *Twelve Angry Men* continues deliberations until 2 Feb. in **Andrew's Lane Theatre**, Dublin... Karen Hebden and Stephen Edwards' production of *Quest 2: The Good People Try Harder* continues its run at the **Pavilion Theatre** until 19 Jan... Noel McDonough's production of *Annie, The Musical*, continues its run in the **Tivoli Theatre** into early Feb...

Tall Tales, in association with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght, will present Deirdre Kinahan's new play *Knocknashee* from 22 Jan.-9 Feb.; it will then tour nationally

from 11 Feb.-16 Mar... A new play by Gerry Stemberge, *Denis & Rose* (based on a Maeve Binchy story) plays at the **Civic** from 12 Feb.-9 Mar... **CoisCéim** will present the world premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, choreographed by David

FUNDRAISING HOW-TO

The (U.K.) National Arts Fundraising School is being hosted in Belfast for the first time from 27 Jan.-1 Feb. Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of N.I. have provided six bursaries to allow representatives of not-for-profit arts companies to attend the intensive residential course in strategic funding skills for the arts and culture sector.

Bolger, as part of a double bill with Bolger's *When Once is Never Enough* at Project (22 Jan.-2 Feb.) before a national tour in Feb... Next up for **Tinderbox** is *Caught Red Handed*, a topical political comedy by Tim Loane, directed by Simon Magill, running 4 Feb.-2 Mar. in the Assembly Rooms, Belfast (the former Northern Bank Building) and then touring the North through 23 Mar.

Next up at the **National Theatre** is the first-ever Abbey/Royal National Theatre co-production, *Hinterland* by Sebastian Barry; this world premiere is directed by Max Stafford-Clark, whose company, Out of Joint, is the third co-producer. It plays 1-23 Feb. at the Abbey before transferring to the RNT Cottesloe for a run in rep from 27 Feb.-1 June; it will also tour to various British cities during that time. Gordon McCall of the Centaur Theatre, Montreal, directs Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay's *The Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* from 5 Feb. on the Peacock stage.

Abbey a.d. Ben Barnes is announcing the full year's season in early February... Meanwhile, at the other end of O'Connell Street, *A Christmas Carol* continues in the **Gate Theatre** through 26 Jan. A planned week-long run of Harold Pinter's *One for the Road*, featuring the author, has been postponed until Nov. Next up at the Gate will therefore be the new Neil LaBute, *The*

Shape of Things, directed by Michael Caven (31 Jan.-23 Feb.). Brian Friel offers two world premieres, *Afterplay* and *The Bear* (28 Feb.-20 Apr.), followed by a Frank McGuinness world premiere, *Gates of Gold* (25 Apr.-1 Jun.).

Next up at the **Lyric Theatre** is a **Prime Cut** production, David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, directed by Jackie Doyle (16

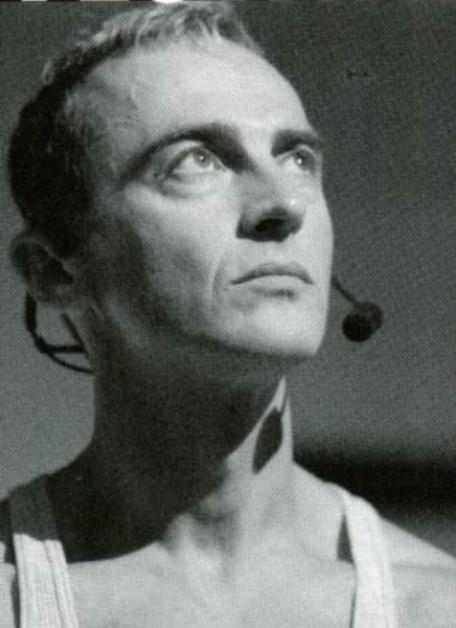


QUEST 2: THE GOOD PEOPLE TRY HARDER

Jan.-2 Feb.); Carol Moore will direct Frank McGuinness' *The Factory Girls* from 8 Feb.-2 Mar.; and **Big Telly** in association with the Lyric will present *McCool XXL* — in which folklore goes hardcore with the story of Finn McCool told as a giant rock show directed by Zoë Seaton. *McCool XXL* plays the Lyric from 11-23 March and Big Telly then hope to tour it in Apr.-May.



FESTIVAL FEEDBACK



KAREN FRICKER (*itm* editor in chief, panel chair): The centrepiece of the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival has been the Tom Murphy season at the Abbey. Can you all tell me a bit about your interest in Murphy and how you thought this season worked?

JOYCE McMILLAN (theatre critic, *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh): I suppose the real excitement of coming here this time, for me, was seeing the production of *Whistle in the Dark* at the Abbey Theatre, because it shows the groundwork and explains an awful lot of things

On Monday, 8th October, four theatre critics from Ireland and abroad shared their views on productions in the eircom Dublin Theatre Festival and Dublin Fringe Festival as part of the second annual Irish theatre magazine international theatre critics' forum. Here's a transcript of the proceedings.

about Tom Murphy as a playwright.

It was his first play ever to have a major professional production — it's a hugely intense, dramatic, and vibrant family drama with huge issues of hatred and violence running beneath the surface. He lays out a lot of the territory which is important in his later work, particularly the construction of masculinity: the idea that the capacity and willingness to commit violence is a key element of what it is to be a man. That has terrific resonance not only in Ireland, but it also in Scottish culture and in many aspects of culture all across the West — and all across the planet. The

isolated and terrifying position of Michael's wife in that play, I think, prefigures a lot of the sensitive and fine writing that Murphy has done about women since then. There are also issues of class in the play; issues of, if you like, education; and issues of nationhood as well, which are present perhaps more as undercurrents.

It was a real revelation to me, and I thought it was a very fine production. I'd never seen or read *Whistle in the Dark* before, although I knew something about the circumstances of its first production, so seeing it was a really exciting moment for me.

BENEDICT NIGHTINGALE

(theatre critic, *The Times*, London): I find it exciting too. *Whistle in the Dark* was written in 1961 and it was the one of Murphy's plays I'd seen before. It says something to me about that era — that angry era. Here was not just an angry young man, but an angry young Irish man actually turning on his own people, saying such dark things

about them that the play couldn't be shown in Dublin — originally it was rejected by the Abbey and had to be put on in London. And it is a most forceful piece of work, though think it might have been a good thing if it were done in a slightly smaller theatre. I think part of the point was they're all compressed in a sort of violent bubble. And if I'm going to make another criticism, it is of the conflict between women and men — I think that could have been better explored both by the author and by the actors involved. That was my one worry with it. But the sheer ferocity of the occasion and the com-

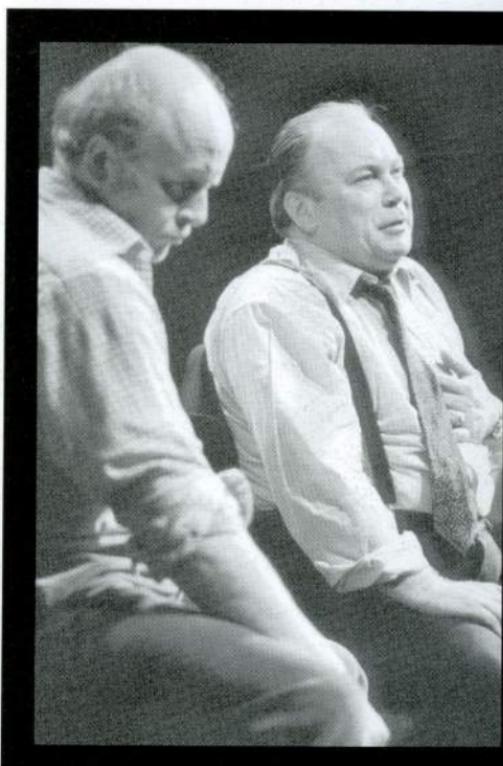
mitment of the writing were extraordinary.

And it raises, as Joyce says, several themes that are central to Murphy and perhaps much of Irish drama: the mythologising of brutality and viciousness — this is a theme from Synge onwards. And rootlessness, as well: there they are, not quite knowing what to do in another country. Also the yearning for something else, something better, something different — which interestingly was apparent not in just the young, distraught, worried husband, but in the most virulent and violent brother, Harry...

Murphy also seems obsessed with the past, with history; and there's also perhaps a feeling of what one might call 'soul,' which is something you don't find in English drama, and you really don't find in very much drama at all — a kind of metaphysical sense. And here I'm thinking in particular of Murphy's play with the title I find hard to pronounce... *Baile-gangaire*. It's a family drama, a terribly forceful one. A really scary one. A state of Ireland drama. It's also a state of the universe drama, which takes a perspective on humankind that I don't think you find in many writers in any country. You find it a bit in Beckett. The status of man as an earwig surviving while God looks on, tolerates, and sees what might and might not happen next. Now a writer who can give us that perspective is an extraordinary writer.

LINDA WINER (theatre critic, *Newsday*, New York): In *Whistle in the Dark*, I was certainly stunned by the fury of it at the beginning, the way it was staged — with the so-called 'thick' brother running down the stairs yelling for his socks... as it went

on I thought, 'Oh my God, this is *The Homecoming*.' It is so like Pinter's play, and at the public interview that Murphy gave this weekend at the Abbey, he was asked about the relationship between the play and *The Homecoming* — did he feel that



UNLIKELY PAIR: The Gigli Concert

Pinter was influenced by his play given that *Whistle in the Dark* came first? Murphy said 'I've certainly seen the relationship between the two plays but Mr. Pinter has never mentioned it.' (laughter) The plot is so similar, but in this case it's the brother and his wife who own the home and the brothers and the father who come into that

home and brutalise it — that homelessness in your own home feeling. But in watching it I also started thinking about Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* — another grand family drama in which, no matter what veneer might be there, when you dig deeper there is a ferocity and a brutality that is inescapable.

I enjoyed it tremendously, though I felt towards the end that he should end it already — I had that sense of too many speeches about what it all means that were not there in the beginning. In his talk he said he writes from the personal to the universal — and I thought,

"In The Gigli Concert you get a merging of Murphy's spiritual quest and the life of the imagination and it works beautifully — because the desire to sing an opera is such a rich metaphor for art or for any kind of transcendence."

No, it's the personal stuff that is universal. When you start trying to make plays about the universal, that's when it starts to become more common.

HELEN MEANY (acting arts editor, *The Irish Times*): Overall, I think the productions have been fantastic. *Whistle in the Dark* to me was a perfectly staged production of what I think is Murphy's best play. It was interesting to see Murphy's journey from plays physically rooted in a real place towards more metaphysical ideas. And sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. In *The Gigli Concert* you get a merging of his spiritual quest and the life of the imagination with realism and it works beautifully — because the desire to

sing an opera is such a rich metaphor for art or for any kind of transcendence. That for me was very powerful. But if you go to a play like *The Morning After Optimism* in which two worlds, an imagined world and a real world collide and collide badly — you are left with exaggeration and melodrama, and then you see the worst side of Murphy. I think that it's been interesting to see his strengths and his weaknesses.

JMcM: I had read *The Gigli Concert* before but this was the first time I'd seen it produced. And when I read it I got a tremendous sense of resonance that I didn't get from Ben Barnes' production... It's about a corrupt property developer in Dublin — it's set around 1980 — and he comes to this quack English therapist to sort out a midlife crisis, and they become friends. At the end the developer turns to this quack, shambling Englishman and says, Go home, they'll kill you here. On the page that made a huge amount of sense, but the production was a bit too cuddly. I thought the strength of the woman's role in this — the therapist's lover who only comes in a few times, played here by Catherine Walsh — came through tremendously clearly, as if she was a more clearly realised character than the men, and I don't think that can be right, somehow.

But I think it is a very interesting play, a strong play. With it I think Murphy has disposed of that very macho way of being a man, and having said he can't be like Dada in *Whistle in the Dark* or his vicious sons, Murphy's other plays are therefore about a kind of questing and searching for other sources of meaning whether it is in sex, music, art, intellectual journeying. As Helen says, sometimes it is metaphorically very successful and you feel it right in your heart, and sometimes you're think-

ing, Too many words! He's lost the thread. As an outsider it's great to see a season of plays by a living playwright, who nobody claims really is flawless. It's a real tussle with the stuff of modern life, and modern Irish life, and there is something great about that. I think it will enhance Murphy's reputation because of the scale of ambition and integrity in the work here.

BN: Do you think he reaches his resolutions a little too easily? He is such a dark writer — he sees into people's hearts and he sees the darkness there. He sees the violence of the family, and he sees the violence of the society. But you feel this yearning on his part — not just on the characters' part — to find some kind of peace. In one or two plays — I think *The Gigli Concert* is perhaps the best example of it — there's a sense of that search being slightly superimposed onto the material... He faces things out almost more than almost any writer living but he doesn't want to leave it there.

LW: Dare we say there might be a sentimental streak? Now that I have heard him speak — this need to find universality and come to some kind of resolution, it really does end up on the sentimental side.

HM: I think he relies on alcohol as this instrument of transcendence, and that has a built-in flaw as we all know. You wake up the next morning and you're exactly where you were, or possibly a little bit back. Seeing so many of them all together you realise how for him this is a way into the numinous world that he craves, but there is also the morning after.

KF: Moving on to other Irish plays and productions, we are going to lead off with Loughlin Deegan's play *The Queen and Peacock* which was performed in Draíocht Arts Centre as part of the Fringe Festival.



DOUBLE EXILE: *The Queen and Peacock*

LW: It's about outcasts among outcasts, about gay Irishmen in a pub in England — two layers of exile. There is some absolutely wonderful conversation throughout the first act. At first I thought, Oh God, there's a pub, it must be an Irish play, but then there was a wonderful amount of specificity in the characters. But in the second

GERALD O'GARROL

act I felt there was not enough payoff from the buildup. What I found really amusing and sort of touching was that there are all these secrets that come out — this transvestite is really a prostitute, the barman really does tie up men upstairs, everyone has had some relationship with the dying man who had AIDS — but the only real shocker was to find out that the only one we had thought was English was Irish! The anger and the rage is interesting for me — New York has so many gay plays, and we have been through 15 years of anger about AIDS, and now have gone onto many other topics. So in some ways

"The Queen and Peacock was beautifully directed by Jim Nolan for Red Kettle, and the strengths were in the characterisation and dialogue, which were very sensitive. It was full of beautiful performances and had a beautiful pace."

it was a throwback for me, but the situation was very specific.

HM: First of all, I think we should declare a moratorium on new Irish plays set in pubs. I really felt a sense of jadedness when the curtain went up — I thought of all the Murphy plays and Conor McPherson and Billy Roche and Ian Kilroy's play earlier this year... because there is something about a pub that is already a stage setting, it is a stage within a stage — it seems to me very obvious. But that said I thought this play was beautifully directed by Jim Nolan for Red Kettle, and the strengths were in the characterisation and dialogue, which were very sensitive. I found myself becoming very absorbed in the story; there was a

lot of exposition in the storytelling. It was full of beautiful performances and had a beautiful pace. But I still would feel that it was more conventional in its setting and more traditional than it needed to be... I think he was trying to take the convention of the confessional pub, the long day's journey into the pub, and try to do something with it, but I don't think he succeeded in pushing beyond that convention.

KF: Joyce is going to lead off on *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner*.

JMcM: This seemed to me a very good extended joke on the part of Roddy Doyle about the current state of race relations in Ireland. He seems to be saying two things: firstly he is sending up the main character in the play. We all know the story of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* — a guy thinks he's a white liberal and then his daughter brings home a black guy to dinner... The other level here, which I thought was quite witty: I thought he was sending up the fact that even though it is 2001, in some respects the situation in Ireland is not dissimilar to that in America in the 1950s when *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was written, i.e. people are still very much feeling their way to a multicultural and multiracial society.

So I thought there was a double level of satire in that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is now widely regarded as very amusing by anyone who knows anything about race relations, in the sense that the black guy played by Sidney Poitier is so perfect; it's really about white people, not about black people and their experience at all. The vigour of the dialogue, and the sheer spitting energy of it, and the idea of this man being totally proud of his raucous 20-something daughters who are all just sort

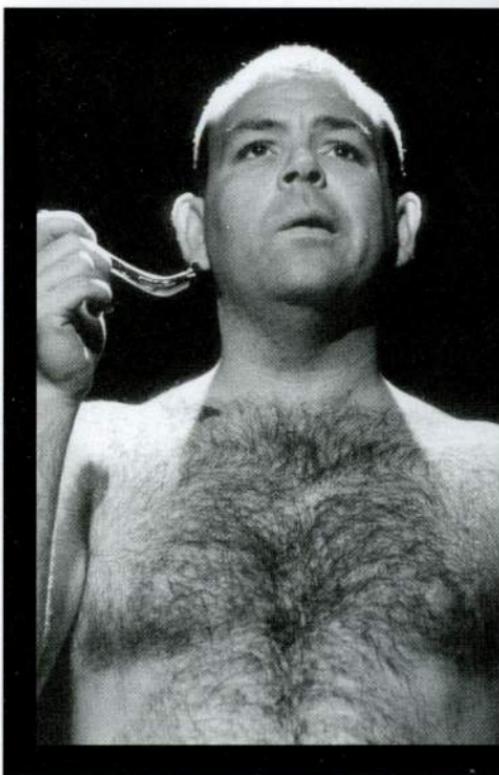
of swearing and cursing and having sex with various different men — but the one thing he can't stand is that one of them is going out with a Nigerian.

I can see why people might find it an inadequate response to racial violence and all the serious issues around race in Ireland at the moment, but I thought that as a sort of a *jeu d'esprit*, a joky contribution to the debate, it was extremely accomplished. The assurance of Doyle's dialogue, the accuracy in the way he hears that Dublin talk was brilliant. I found it very enjoyable.

LM: The fact it was so short, too — it didn't belabour its points, and there was nothing patronising about it at all, unlike the movie. When the father said he looks less like Eddie Murphy and more like Sidney Poitier, there was already an unreality set up. The fact that this is a homogeneous culture dealing with a specific refugee problem is something that is in itself a curiosity to me, given the diversity in New York, across America really. But I really thought there was a lot of irony in it. The structure is like so much that you see in Irish theatre — it's structured like a short story, people come out and say, 'And then I said', 'Then she said', so that it's really not a straightforward play at all — it's like story theatre, or reading a short story. It was very specifically 'Irish theatre' to me. I thought the performances were lovely, and there was so much love in that family.

JMcM: I valued it particularly because the situation in Scotland is actually quite bad about refugees and asylum seekers at the moment. But we don't have a Roddy Doyle; we don't have someone

with that moral authority and that assurance of voice to lift the thing with comedy directed at the right place — against the assumptions people have. That comment about him being more Sidney Poitier than Eddie Murphy is exactly where



WHAT, ME RACIST? Guess Who's Coming...

he is referring to the dominance of black culture in popular culture — we take that for granted but when it comes to a real African, there is this odd reaction. It left me wishing that there were any writer in Scotland who could handle these issues with that kind of moral grace. Even though it was a lightweight work he did-

n't let that sense of moral grace down.

KF: We will move on to the *Three Short Plays* at the Gate.

BN: There must be a book — in fact I am sure it has already been written, by Fintan O'Toole (*laughter*) — about why so much Irish drama nowadays consists of monologue, reminiscence, making sense of the individual and collective past, history. I think it's a fascinating subject in itself and it informs all three of these plays. The Neil Jordan play, *Wild Horses*... to quote another great Irishman, David Nowlan: it was a

"Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner left me wishing that there was someone in Scotland who could handle these issues with that kind of moral grace. Even though it was a lightweight work he didn't let that sense of moral grace down."

work in progress, and I think that's the fairest thing to say about it. It is about the disintegration of a marriage; it moves into a kind of lyricism and you don't get the sense that anything has really been explored, I'm afraid.

Come on Over, the McPherson, is also is a little disappointing given what a wonderful writer he actually is. Again — monologues: the Jesuit priest who has lost his faith, and the woman who loved him. Their relationship allows McPherson to write some of his favourite subjects — the loss of faith, the rejection of love, the waste of life, and so on. There is an acknowledgement of the mystery of things, particularly in the central image which is the discovery of a 400-year-old child, perfectly

preserved and evidence perhaps of a miracle, surrounded by flowers. I thought there was more to say about that and perhaps McPherson is the man to say it. But there was perhaps something inadequate in that play too. There was an almost deliberate reference to Beckett — if you see two people sitting on chairs talking, with sacks on their heads with eyes cut out, you think, I wonder where he got this... I wondered if it was meant to symbolise the difficulty of human contact, but it really didn't work and I longed to jump up on stage and whip off those stupid sacks.

I think the real success was *The Yalta Game*, Brian Friel's adaptation of a Chekhov short story. It's about a roué picking up a young wife in Yalta and having a long, deepening affair with her. Much is left out, but it brings out the story, and there is what I found to be a very Irish tilt to it, a Brian Friel tilt — it seemed to me to be very much about the imagination. The roué sits there watching Yalta and inventing stories about everyone around him, then he moves into the fantasy, into the imagination, into love. It's sort of about what is real and what isn't there, the sense that love is a kind of elusive, tantalising dream. But later in the play it's so real, it makes reality itself seem slightly unreal. Friel is very much the man to write about this, and I very much enjoyed it; it was wonderfully well played by Ciarán Hinds and Kelly Reilly.

HM: I would number them in the exactly opposite order. I found the Neil Jordan the most interesting by far, but I still thought it was a sketch rather than a fully developed piece. It had the germ of a very interesting philosophical idea about love which is, Is love an act of will; or a choice; or is it something that we have no control over,

an emotion that just overcomes us? The woman in the play just decides, having come in from a swim, that she no longer loves her partner, and he spends a lot of time trying to figure it out. There is the device of a tape of a healer she has gone to see and he becomes a sort of third party in the play; that is very interesting but the use of the tape is extremely underdeveloped.

The McPherson was very weak, unengaging, uninteresting, flat writing, and disappointing all around. The bags on their head were a gimmick to distract us from the fact that there was nothing going on.

The Friel was disappointing, despite the fact that it was very well played. A slight, small piece; it began well in that there was a strong sense of irony and humour — the two characters were sending themselves up as clichés — but then they started to take themselves seriously, and the story began to take itself seriously, and the whole thing was just awful melodrama and sentimentalism, like a Victorian novelette. I really didn't like that at all.

KF: We are going to move on now to the Fringe show *Butterflies*.

JMcM: This is a stage version of a story by the English writer Ian McEwan, about a horrible assault and murder of a nine-year-old girl by a guy who is a kind of social misfit. It's in the form of a monologue that lasts about an hour, during which you are led right into the heart of this guy's strange perception of the world which allows him to do this awful thing. It's brilliantly performed by Ned Dennehy, superbly done. I found it difficult to watch, and I think anyone would,

given the subject matter. I have had my problems with McEwan because I think his attraction with the black side of life can be downright pornographic, but I think here it succeeds on the sheer strength of the writing and the subtlety



POETIC: Catherine McCormack in Wild Horses

that he brings to his perception. What's really awful about it and painful is that McEwan manages to create the sense that no matter how awful this character's inner life is, he is part of the continuum of the normal human spectrum out to an extreme point. So it's very painful to watch because he is showing us a

recognisable portrait of someone who does an absolutely inhuman thing. It is extremely powerful.

LW: At the beginning I thought this is amusing, this is sort of Norman Bates by way of Beckett — he just sits there... it's a spectacular performance... as it went on I got more carried into the abyss of this man. It was very frighteningly easy to empathise with him. What I loved was that there was no sentimentality in it at all, and at the end of the week that was a relief, it was kind of cleansing — there was no bow put on this one at all.

"Wild Horses was a sketch rather than a fully developed piece. It had the germ of a very interesting philosophical idea about love which is, Is love an act of will; or a choice; or is it something that we have no control over, an emotion that just overcomes us?"

BN: I'd have to agree with what's been said and pay special tribute to a really brave performance by Ned Dennehy. He held us there completely. One thing I did wonder was could a man, even the loneliest, most cut-off of men, be quite so ignorant about his own sexuality... but I don't know — this is the dark reaches. I wouldn't say pornographic, I'd say morbid. I mean, it's distressing but the kind of thing we should see.

KF: Helen wanted to have a special word about *Epic* at City Arts Centre.

HM: I just wanted to celebrate this production as, I suppose, the essence of what Fringe theatre is, or could be doing. It's by

Declan Gorman; he has both written and directed it. It's based on the epic of the Táin which we are all reasonably familiar with, but I realised there were bits I had forgotten about. It's looking at foot and mouth disease and how it spread to the Cooley peninsula, and into this Gorman has put every aspect of contemporary Irish life, from child abuse, violence, political corruption, blackmail, the IRA, a woman gossip columnist who is blackmailing a senior politician... it's extremely overloaded, and far too long, and a bit didactic, but it's so well-staged and a wonderful use of theatre as a space for the potential of imagination

and for the mythic and the real to collide. It's very contemporary and very exciting.

KF: Moving on to international work, the show that really seemed to have many people buzzing was the Robert Wilson/Tom Waits/Kathleen Brennan *Woyzeck*.

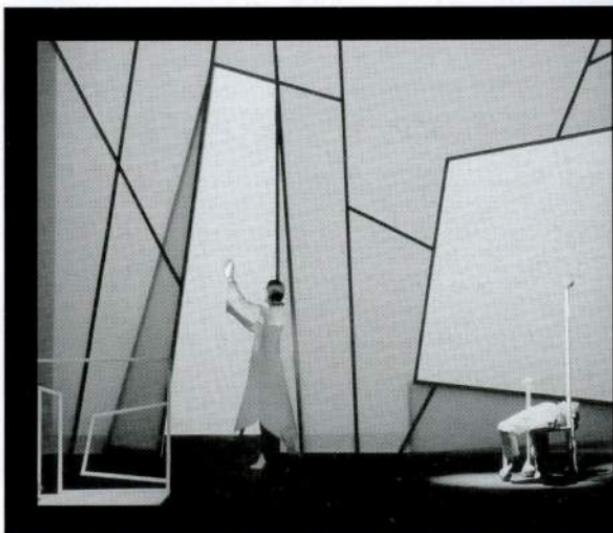
BN: I often wonder what it's like to be an actor in a Robert Wilson play. You must feel like plasticine, or maybe a bit of oil paint. He is a sculptor and doesn't really have any sense for people, it seems to me, and he doesn't have a sense for human truth. He has people swimming instead of walking, goose-stepping in weird ways... things look gorgeous, it's perfectly true. At the moment that the much-abused soldier Woyzeck, this gentle desperate man, is murdered — it is a brutal, downbeat, sad, little, trivial yet awful thing — and what does Wilson do? He brings this majestic black sun against a red background on this huge stage, and a knife that's about eight metres long; this stylised butchery occurs. My point about Büchner is that this is the first proletarian tragedy; it's downbeat, it's about little people and their sad affairs.

Büchner is trying to give them significance, but Wilson gives them the wrong kind of significance. He gives them irrelevant significance; he makes pictures and sculptures out of them. It is a triumph of style over content — and I hated it.

JMcM: I sort of empathise with what Benedict says, but I didn't hate it as much as him. I do think Büchner's play is a really big play. It can take this kind of thing. I felt like you, Benedict, that it wasn't really the tragedy of Woyzeck in the sense of a tragic journey of a little man who is a pushed about by all the powers that be, but who nonetheless has a personal tragedy as big and horrific as anything in Shakespeare. That is the greatness of Büchner's play, and this is not the production to see if you want to get a sense of that. However, I do think Wilson is an amazing artist of a certain kind of modernism of which it is valuable from time to time to be reminded — this assured and visually stunning use of symbolism and of visual theatre language and of wonderfully choreographed and schooled performance.

Often the actors seem like marionettes; I think Fintan O'Toole made that point in his review, which I very much agreed with. In that sense you are looking at people who are slightly dehumanised — it's the opposite of Tom Murphy. There is little sense of that breathing human soul, but I thought in the production he brought out something that I hadn't noticed very

much in Büchner before. There was a wonderful Brecht-Weill kind of feeling about some of the great songs by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan — which gave the edge of earthiness which has to do with it being a proletarian tragedy; this sense of the world grinding on and destroying people was well captured in some of the songs. What was that one — "God's Out to Lunch"? "God's Away on Business"? I thought that was a great song



VISUALLY SPECTACULAR: Woyzeck

that Brecht and Weill would have been proud to write.

That said I had two big problems with this production: fundamentally it was too long — it became very in love with its own visuals and own carry-on, and lost the thread of the story. The other thing was what Benedict was saying — it didn't pay full dues to the human tragedy. It was too pretty; these colours are extremely pretty and whatever you want to say about Büchner's play is it's not pretty. It would

be awful to think that someone would think that's what this play is all about. But it was a beautifully finished example of a certain type of theatre which has its limitations. I think Fintan said in his review that it's a kind of modernism that was modern about nine decades ago so God knows what it's doing now, but Wilson does it extremely well.

HM: I don't share the reverence for the play that you two have. I felt no loss of the Büchner play — it's one of those plays that people pay a lot of lip service to but isn't performed too much. Yes, there was a mis-

"Robert Wilson is an amazing artist of a certain kind of modernism of which it is valuable from time to time to be reminded — this assured and stunning use of symbolism and visual theatre language and of wonderfully choreographed and schooled performance."

match between the material and the style, but I think that it was a triumph of style, and for that I really enjoyed it. It was exhilarating and just great fun. To see that kind of coherence of design and direction, we don't see that often in Dublin.

LW: I haven't seen this production, but through the years in New York we have seen a lot of Robert Wilson. I wasn't at the 24-hour *Life and Death of Joseph Stalin* but I was at the 12-hour *Letter to Queen Victoria*. I think that your entire pulse changes when you are at something that you know is going to take that long. I actually like the Robert Wilson of those productions and of *The CIVIL WarS*, before he started doing other people's work, because of the total

lack of discursive content in his style.

KF: I enjoyed this production tremendously, and reviewed it very positively. I think the key to this production was the songs and the extraordinary performers from the Betty Nansen Theatre in Copenhagen, who were incredibly hot and passionate and could sing beautifully. They were what reached out to me. It's interesting to hear such a strong nay from Benedict — the response of the Dublin audience was so strongly yes. When I was there, there was a sense of excitement for its accomplishment at the level of design, performance, singing... it transported the audience in a way that I found very exciting.

BN: But one might have been transported in a certain way if one had seen *A Whistle in the Dark*, that grim Tom Murphy play, performed over six hours by ice skaters.

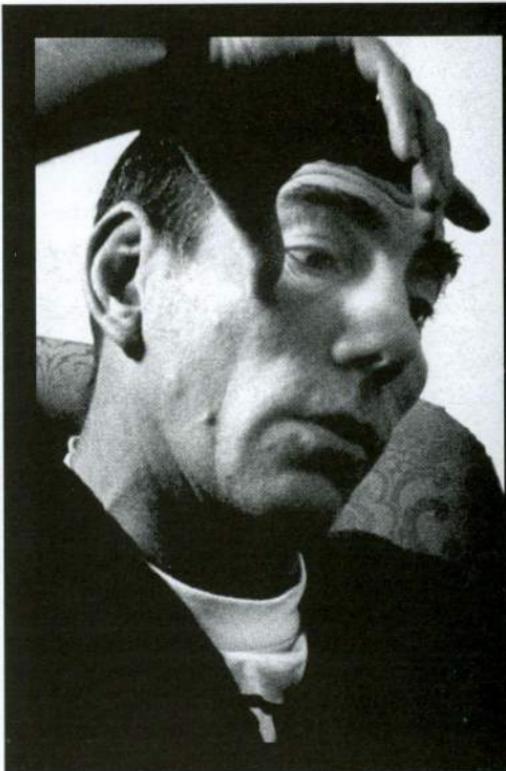
KF: There is a much larger debate there about content and form — Wilson is a director who takes material and does his certain thing with it — and if you like the thing, you like what he does. You could extend that debate to, say, the Blue Raincoat production of *Macbeth* that's opening tonight in the Tivoli Theatre, because Blue Raincoat have been criticised for doing Shakespeare, but not *really* doing Shakespeare. People have got quite up in arms about what they do, because if you're not really engaging with the text then why drag the text into it at all? There are a lot of themes there that could be drawn out. But we are going to move on now to talk about Peter Brook's production of *Le Costume*.

HM: We all had very high hopes for this. I think a lot of people were disappointed by

the scale. It's a very small and simple piece of storytelling about a husband and a wife. The husband discovers that his wife, to whom he is devoted, has taken a lover and he punishes her by keeping the lover's suit in the house. The suit stays with them while they have meals and go for walks; it becomes part of their marriage and part of their domestic routine. It's beautifully and simply staged — it has that kind of resonance of an old and archetypal story. The only possible problem was that it was so charming, beguiling, and winsome that we lost sight of the darkness of the story, and the denouement which is quite cruel and tragic. I presume that was deliberate, that tension — occasionally you realise, Oh, the suit is still there, and you have a moment of dread; you know something terrible is going to happen. But you are so charmed by the beautiful performances and the use of lighting and staging... perhaps it all doesn't have the impact that it should have. I liked the restraint of it, the way that Peter Brook effaced himself from it and didn't seem to put a stamp on it. I found it very moving.

JMcM: I saw it last year in Italy. There was a problem because the surtitles were on the blink then, but I thought it was very disappointing. I had this feeling like I had been sitting at a café table and a great artist had come down the street and sat down with me, and just doodled — a little picture of a coffee cup or something. You could see from the assurance and simplicity that there was a lifetime of experience of how to create a really simple sketch, but it wasn't really one of this great paintings. I felt it was actually in some ways objec-

tional — its fringy, jokey staging, people pretending to be buses, that sort of thing. That really gets on my nerves — it began to get on my nerves about 1975 before I was a theatre critic. And it's really on my nerves now. My feeling is, whatever that



POWERFUL PERFORMANCE: Pete Postelthwaite

was, it's over. It's become a terrible cliché. It's not what you expect from a leading figure in theatre. It hovered, as Brook's work sometimes does, between the mythic and the just plain patronising. It's like we Westerners are too complicated to have these mythic little stories but you can have them in Sophiatown. There was some-

thing about it, that kind of cuteness and sweetness; it just cloyed with me. I really didn't like it, and it's the first piece of Brook's I really didn't like.

BN: I saw the play originally when the Market Theatre of Johannesburg brought it to London. I can see Joyce's point but I don't think I'd go as far — if you are going to have a bus in Sophiatown, I don't know if it's so bad to have people pretending to be a bus. I don't think it's a sellout of 26 years of work. I thought there was some menace in the thing. It's about a woman killed with kindness; he appears to be

"There's an Angela Carter kind of feeling — the commentators, exotics, circus people, gypsy people, people who are not in the boring or thundering mainstream of life, but are at a kind of showbiz distance from it. I thought Scaramouche Jones captured that very well."

being incredibly nice to her, but he is actually destroying her. And when I saw it the second time, staged by Brook, I really felt the impact of that destruction. It's not one of his greats, but not negligible either.

KF: We'll move on to *Scaramouche Jones*, playing in the Beckett Centre.

BN: Pete Postelthwaite — it's great to see him on the stage. What a good actor he is, and he holds a story that otherwise might have been rather tiresome. The idea of a sad, knowing clown taking off his greasepaint and telling you his life story — oh God! But Justin Butcher's script is actually rather well-written at times. It kind of reminded me of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*,

you know, taking you through the century. I did think at one point that he is taking you through you *so many* key points of the century — you know, Mussolini, the Holocaust — I thought, Oh God, he's going to end up in Cuba during the missile crisis! When is it going to end? But in fact the writing has a quirkiness, like there's a wonderful moment in which he's in Addis Ababa where he's watching Haile Selassie being crowned and his pet cobra escapes and causes chaos in the cathedral... it's great fun, not particularly pretentious. The only point I was worried about was the Holocaust bit — don't ask me why but the character becomes a sort of gravedigger for victims during the Holocaust, and the inference is that clowning can help you through horrors and it's a sort of salve for evil, and I didn't buy that.

JMcM: I thought this was very vivid, really. Pete Postelthwaite is a very good actor, and I thought he sustained it very well. It's one of these monologues that leaves very strong images in your mind. Like Benedict, I was slightly doubtful both about the basic premise of the clown — the basic cliché there — and there is something facile about bringing people to an event like the Holocaust and somehow trying to try to subsume it into the story of what it means to be a clown. But I think it is in quite an interesting tradition — the phrase that comes to mind is "fifth business." I don't know if that means anything to anyone but, the Canadian writer Robertson Davies wrote a novel called *Fifth Business*, meaning the person who is not one of the four people who make up the two couples that make up the conventional drama — the kind of asexual character who stands on the outside of the reproductive drama of life. There's an

Angela Carter feeling: the commentators, exotics, circus people, gypsy people, people who are not in the boring or thundering mainstream of life, but are at some kind of showbiz distance from it. And I thought this play captured that very well. The production had a very striking set, a big set for a small monologue, but I thought it worked pretty well.

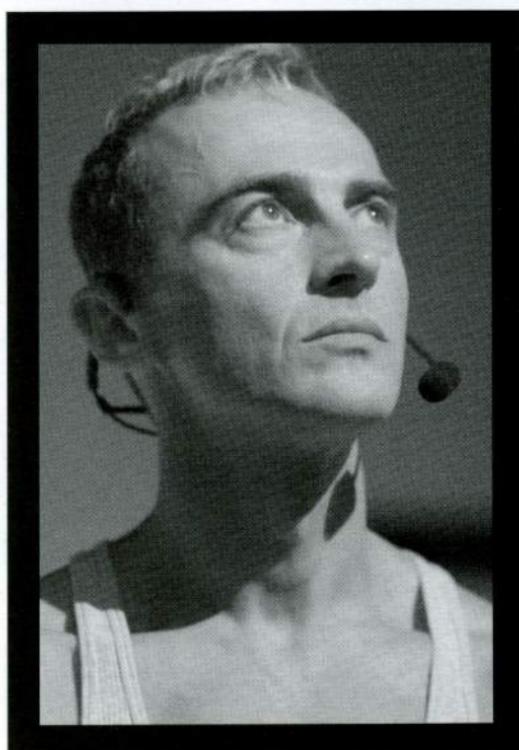
KF: Some of us saw a Fringe production called *The Quiet Bastard* in Temple Bar Gallery and Studio.

LW: When you enter the gallery there is an installation going on — reflections on Plexiglas, and the floor is sand. A delightful man in a raincoat comes in and talks about making films in his studio. What struck me was just the impact of Hollywood and films on Irish sensibility — I'm thinking of *Stones in his Pockets* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* — it made me think how many people are walking around making art about how they feel about the making of Hollywood movies.

KF: The artists are Anne Seagrave, who is English, and Oscar McLennan, who is Scottish. It was an interesting combination of an art piece and a performance piece in that the installation was there all week and twice a day McLennan walked in and performed in the installation.

JMcM: At the end there is a horrible reference to those *Road To* movies with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour in them; he has a nightmare image of one of them gone horribly wrong with everyone catching venereal diseases... I think that kind of obsessive reference back to Hollywood is certainly very typical of Scottish

writing of a certain generation — people under 45 — and I suppose it is strong in Ireland as well. I am not exactly sure what that is about, but it's about the pull of America for people who never felt easy with the dominant English literary tradition.



CEREBRAL: John Kelly in An Alphabet

American movies are very important in the formation of a lot of Scottish artists. If people are interested in that there is a wonderful little dialogue in a play called *The Steamie* which is about a group of women in a washhouse in Glasgow, where they discuss why they prefer American movies to British movies. And it just

really says it all about the various forms of cultural imperialism in these islands, and why the Scots, at one stage anyway, preferred American cultural imperialism to the British variety.

KF: I am going to tie in Scottish culture, American movies, and the Fringe Festival all in one mention! There is a lunchtime show playing in Bewley's throughout the Festivals called *The Head of Red O'Brien* in which a husband tortures his wife by repeating the plot of the movie *The Hunt for Red October* over and over again. The play's by Mark O'Halloran and features a

"The adaptation of Alphabet didn't make the leap for me from radio play to performed piece — it was very disappointing. But at the same time, I found it thought-provoking and it left me with a kind of sense of how paradoxical a cultural figure like John Cage is..."

wonderful performance by Ciaran McIntyre. I found it fascinating how available the cultural reference of American film was to the character — he's balding and he's quite obsessed with Sean Connery, the sexy balding Scotsman Hollywood hero. And this all manages to become in some ways a very moving story of a marriage gone wrong.

We are going to end, in a way, where we began, with the show that launched the Fringe this year, *Alphabet* by John Cage.

HM: I was very excited about the prospect of seeing a play by John Cage. This began life as a radio play and then the director of the John Cage Trust, Laura Kuhn, adapted it for the stage. Unfortunately the adapta-

tion didn't make the leap for me from radio play to performed piece — it was very disappointing. But at the same time, I found it thought-provoking and left me with a kind of sense of how paradoxical a cultural figure like John Cage is — he was so determined to incorporate chance and play into his work, but in fact created something that was controlling and closed and self-referential and sterile. It was quite anaemic and a cerebral exercise and one that had no heart — but left me with lots to chew on.

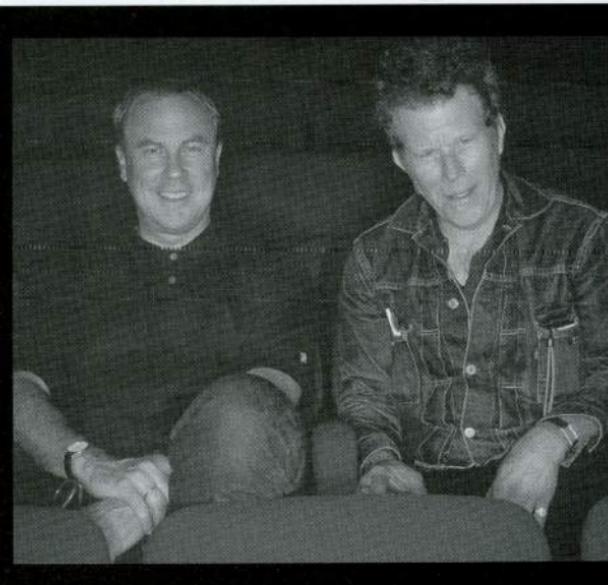
JMcM: I saw it in the Edinburgh Fringe, where it premiered. It's a kind of odd thing — you hear all these voices. The full title is *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp and Erik Satie: An Alphabet* — it's about these great voices of modernism, the deconstruction of language and of culture. It's a kind of tribute to the influence of those voices on the thinking of modernist writers in the 20th century. But for me — like the Robert Wilson really — it showed up the limitations of that whole movement because of its absolute allergy to meaning, which is quite important to most human beings, as we've seen with Tom Murphy. Most human beings would like to think that things mean something, even if it's only words that mean something.

I am told that if you look at the text of *An Alphabet* that there are all sorts of interesting patterns; you can see words kind of in criss-crosses... but I said to the person who told me that, What is the point of that if you can't see that in performance? And the person who told me that said, It's all about form. And I said, Well, great, but to me theatrical form is about something you can perceive as a member of the audience. So I suppose you are either interested in

these very cerebral exercises in form, or you're not. And I am not: I find them childish. There were loads of gloops and strange noises on the soundtrack, jungle noises and forest noises and then industrial noises — noises of various aspects of the 20th century and of nature, and I am afraid I was cross enough when I wrote my review to have said that they were the sound of the modernist movement disappearing up its own... I can't remember exactly what polite word I found for it. I was pretty irritated by it... One last thing, though: I don't think Merce Cunningham was on stage here, but in Edinburgh, it was almost worth going to see Cunningham, who was John Cage's partner and a great dancer and choreographer and great inheritor of his tradition. He's now a very old man, and in Edinburgh he was playing Satie, I think... he had some lovely moments; just by raising his hand he could make contact with the whole audience in the Royal Lyceum in a way that no one else could.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: I'd like to ask three questions about *Woyzeck* and then to say, if these three things are true than can this piece still be considered great? The first is that to work with a director like Robert Wilson must be quite a Faustian pact for an actor — he says, I'll take you around the world and you'll be feted wherever you go, but you won't

be allowed to have a creative thought. Second: everything about that event was organised to be a product, not an event. Wilson doesn't allow you in — literally you are watching a two-dimensional space in the sense that, if the right codes are being exhibited in the visual field of representation he's happy. Finally, the field of representation he is



AUTEURS: Robert Wilson and Tom Waits

inhabiting is the psychological terrain that Freud mapped out, but you never get a sense that what we see on stage has come through his own interior life — it's codes that pre-exist. So if those things are true, then is Wilson's work great? I've seen two of his pieces and both times I felt conned.

BN: He wants robots, I think; they would be more effective.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: They are the über-marionette that Craig was talking about.

LW: It's more like gallery art, I think. Slowly moving pictures — what is not great about that? It's a different kind of art; it's not drama but it's a different kind of art.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: It's performance art, is that what we're saying?

AUDIENCE QUESTION 2: Was it a conscious decision not to have surtitles for that show?

"What I got out of Woyzeck was the relationship between Büchner's play and these 20th-century theatre artists who played around with notions of distance, notably Brecht, and the use of that kind of hard-edged song to create a distance between theatre and audience."

FERGUS LINEHAN (Director, *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival): It's really a technical issue. In the Gaiety, if you want to surtitle, there is so much overhang on all the galleries that you have to surtitle all over the place or you've got to hang very low into the actual action. Given the design of this show you couldn't hang into it, and if you put surtitles throughout the auditorium it'd have looked like Christmas lights. So we had to make a decision to let the songs in English and a synopsis in the programme do the job; it wasn't a perfect solution but we thought it was the best one.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 3: The fact that the text was in Danish: Benedict, you said Robert Wilson didn't do a good service to

the text. But because it was in Danish was it that which was distancing you from the text? Personally I don't have the same kind of affinity to *Woyzeck* that maybe you do, and I liked the fact that I was distanced somewhat from what was happening. For me it was a beautiful, stylised piece of theatre. We don't get a lot of pieces of theatre like that over here.

BN: It was turned into a wholly aesthetic event with very little human content. I am aware that Wilson wants to do this — I am to a certain extent quarrelling with his intentions. They are just not intentions I enjoy. Even the songs put distance on it, and if you enjoy that you enjoy that. It's the actors I feel strongly for — a little room to manoeuvre! They had none.

HM: I think you are rather underestimating how much the songs carried. The songs often were somewhat sentimental, even schmaltzy for Tom Waits, so they carried a certain kind of emotional pull. To me it functioned the way a musical functions, in a way; it was almost quite manipulative at times. I thought that was compensating to an extent for the inaccessibility of the text.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 4: I find the notion of *Woyzeck* as a proletarian tragedy a load of crap, I have to say. It's one of the possibilities in it, and it's no accident that this generated two notions of modern theatre — it lead to naturalism and to a whole expressionist tradition. You talk about distancing — whatever you do with the play you have to take into account the play is in constant motion; it's radically indeterminate — distancing is what it's about. So the cabaret thing worked rather brilliantly in that it set up the possibilities that are in the

text; it showed up new possibilities of theatre. It wasn't simply the über-marionette of Craig; it's way beyond that.

KF: I am wondering what actors would think of performing this production. The point has been made that it's an incredibly constraining task that Wilson has given his actors; but isn't that its own challenge? We have this notion that acting is about revealing your inner soul, but perhaps as a technical challenge it might have an appeal.

JMcM: To take the three points that were made that were negative. The actors: Some actors would hate this and would feel it was too constraining. But if you are sufficiently at one with what the director is trying to do, if you share the vision — and I have no idea if Robert Wilson is any good at sharing his vision but I think he must be, from the quality of the performances he gets from some people — I think there must be an element of real satisfaction in doing it. I loved the Brecht/Weill aspect of the score. What I got out of it was the relationship between Büchner's play and these 20th-century theatre artists who really did play around with notions of distance, notably Brecht, and the use of that kind of hard-edged song to create a distance between theatre and audience. Not to make you not care but to make you think harder about what it was you were seeing, and if you like, the class relationships between the characters — because I do think it is a proletarian tragedy. I don't think that artists necessarily have to feel distanced from their work just because they are doing that style.

As to the point about a product not an event: yes, it can be seen like that. No doubt there are corporate sponsors who prefer Robert Wilson because it's easy to ignore his meaning and enjoy his images,

but I don't think that's all there is to Wilson. And two dimensional: well, so what. Theatre can be two-dimensional, four-dimensional. Sometimes looking at things in two dimensions can be revealing — Brecht is the great playwright of that, that sometimes making it into a flat picture can help you see things you can't otherwise see.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 5: On the side of acting, on the contrary, I found that the actors, though they were constrained, were very intense. I was sometimes frustrated because the music was too present; it was unnecessary because the actors were extremely powerful. Being constrained by such movements allowed them to intensify their emotions.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: It felt so reproduced it was like, Why perform it live?

LW: There is a tension of knowing that these are real people moving in these slow tableaux; that is part of the emotional content, if there is an emotional content. It is part of the experience — seeing the effort, and lack of effort — the zen thing. And if you saw that on film you'd never know if they just spliced someone in — they do that kind of magic all the time in film.

KF: Watching it I was wondering, If Wilson had actually seen the show in Dublin, would he have said the actors were emoting too much? That almost became part of the excitement of the show for me — perhaps Daddy was away and the kids were acting up a bit.

LW: Another thing about Wilson — this debate has been going on for so long. In 1976 he created the *CIVIL WarS* and it was the only nominee for the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and the Pulitzer board shot it

down, saying it's not a play. So he's been tortured a lot.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 6: The debate I think we need to address, as well, is the terminology of what Wilson's work is and what Merce Cunningham's work is... Wilson was very much influenced by contemporary, postmodern dance, particularly Cunningham, so when I went to see it... I agree with Joyce, yes, it was 20 minutes too long, and very cerebral, and some of it was two-dimensional — and it wasn't theatre, I think that's the key. It was an event; it was spectacle; it was part opera, part dance. I don't want to get into high academics here but it was deconstructing the body in a way; it was about alienation, which is what Brecht was about as well. The problem with the Theatre Festival is that Wilson doesn't belong in a "theatre festival"... I'm interested to see how people look at Gavin Friday's work... to present work like this in the context of a "theatre festival" creates a narrow, text-based forum, so when people go to see Wilson perhaps they are not prepared to use other measures in looking at the work.

KF: The Theatre Festival this year seems to accommodate an enormous range of work from pure dance to rock concerts to a Brecht/Weill cabaret.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 6: This is the point I am making. I like the fact that we are looking at the notion of performance and debating what performance is. I would agree with a lot of what the panel would say about Wilson's work — I had a fantastic night, a very sore arse after two and a half hours...

JMcM: Obviously no one wants to talk about anything else which is really interesting...

AUDIENCE QUESTION 6: It did challenge me on several levels. I was watching expressionist painting; I was watching alienation with the actors; I was watching Woyzeck the actor grappling with a different language. The important thing for an actor is the process of arriving at that point, the months and months of rehearsals and research... The debate which is interesting here is whether it's performance, theatre, spectacle, or what.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: What is it that you guys like about theatre? It's like you're princesses and peas! There are about 19 layers of these beds and there is a tiny little pea, and you go on as if it's about the worst thing you've ever seen...

BN: Bollocks! (*laughter*)

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: I have found that you have been very encouraging about a lot of aspects of things but overall you say, I didn't enjoy it.

JMcM: We all said we enjoyed *Whistle in the Dark*. That says more about you than about us. Why do you say we said that when we didn't?

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: I can go further into that, what you say you dislike about something is actually something you dislike about yourself.

JMcM: You say we don't like the shows because you don't like critics. We all loved most of the shows.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: I often find that critics are far too critical. There is often very little encouragement. What I want to hear off you — I would like to hear of a play that you've actually loved...

BN: A hundred plays! A thousand plays!

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: Give us one.

BN: Conor McPherson's *The Weir* — I don't know why I mention that, it wasn't a great play but it was wonderful... *Stones in his Pockets*... Billy Roche, a potentially great playwright, a little bit blocked at the moment but I hear he has a new play coming out. He's a great man and a great playwright — he could be the Irish Chekhov.

JMcM: I talked for about ten minutes at the beginning of the session about how much I loved *Whistle in the Dark*. That has the real energy of drama. The man has got a situation that is boiling with conflict. There is a view of masculinity that is deep in Irish culture, and in most other cultures, and there is a guy who is trying to break away from that view of masculinity partly through and with his relationship with his wife. It's about an absolute head-on clash between these two forces. It's brilliantly written — so dramatic — there were people sitting with their hands over their eyes because it was so intense. That is what theatre is about — you take the deepest conflicts inside the human soul and you act them out in what is at least physically a "safe" space. And people can come through that barrier of conflict and come out somewhere. Maybe Tom Murphy can sometimes put a neat little bow on the place where you come out, but I don't think he does that in *Whistle in the Dark*. It's a fantastic evening's theatre.

LW: The problem is that when you hear the word critic and you think it's a negative word, but it's also a positive word. It's about process and analysis, and I can't believe that you listened to all this talk about process and pictured a pea.

HM: I gave my spiel in praise of Declan Gorman; I liked *Whistle in the Dark*. I take your point perhaps that there is a danger we are sitting here analysing things, and we forgot to say the main thing, which is that there has been some great writing and some great performances. But we are here to look at something to see how it works, how it achieves the effects it wants to achieve. Yes, there might be a bit of hairsplitting but that doesn't necessarily imply a negative attitude — I think that is a bit of a leap.

LW: You're telling me that you don't do exactly the same thing when you come out of a theatre?

AUDIENCE QUESTION 7: Oh absolutely, I have seen some things and thought they were brilliant and I've thought others are useless. I was just qualifying what you thought of theatre, what you would love theatre to be rather than what it isn't.

BN: In a weird way the great thing about theatre is the peas — the fact that things go wrong, the possibility that it could go wrong, the fact that things are different every night. It's there and fallible — that's what's so wonderful about theatre, that's why it's alive. Funnily enough, I don't want perfect theatre.

JMcM: Well, we'd be out of a job then.

KF: Part of what was expressed about *Woyzeck* perhaps was the idea that it was too perfect, that there wasn't enough life in it, that it was a machine.

JMcM: The person who really does that is Andrew Lloyd Webber!

AUDIENCE QUESTION 8: What did you think about the Festivals as a whole?

JMcM: What I really like about the Dublin Theatre Festival is the balance between Irish and international work. In the Edinburgh Festival you can see Scottish work, particularly if you trawl for it on the Fringe, but on the whole what you see is an international festival that happens to be taking place in Edinburgh. Which is great; I would never say anything bad about the way that it's opened up possibilities for Scottish artists and exposed them to important work over the years.

But what is particularly interesting to me about the Dublin Festival is the sense of a big weight of Irish work and a big weight of international work coming together so we can have the kind of discussion we've had today. It speaks volumes about the tremendous Irish theatre tradition that it's possible to do that. This year it's been particularly interesting with the Murphy season — his searching mind and the way he really tries to deal with the stuff of late 20th century life, and all these things coming at it from all these international angles — I think it's a tremendously valuable festival for that.

BN: I don't want to annoy poor Joyce but I think it looks a lot better than the Edinburgh Festival actually. It just seems more exciting. The Edinburgh Festival has become huge and bloated and — I am really going to upset you now, Joyce — but if there is not a lot of Scots drama there it might be because Irish drama is more interesting at the present time.

LW: I spent the '70s in Chicago at the *Chicago Tribune*. The first new play I reviewed was David Mamet's first play. I watched something happen in Chicago that I think may be useful for you all to hear. For a long time in Chicago there was

a sense of we don't care what they think — "they" being New York. But then Mamet was discovered and Steppenwolf was discovered and New York declared Steppenwolf 'rock and roll theatre'... suddenly everyone felt like *they* had to do rock and roll theatre... and then everyone was moving on and waiting for what the next thing was going to be.

Eventually we had to come back and look at what we were doing, and reconnect to the sense of community, and find the voice and the energy that was in the work for ourselves. I don't know if that's what happened here — but certainly all the stories in New York for three years were, What do they put in the water there? Look at all this great Irish theatre! And then it sort of dribbled off, and now we have gone onto someone else being the flavour of the season. Here, I am feeling in all the really good ways some of what we had in Chicago in the '70s — new work, energy, and a sense of questing. It's very exciting.

HM: I feel like the Festival is in a transitional phase from being just a receiving festival of the plums on the international circuit. What's interesting is the question of definitions about performance that has emerged. Do we use the term theatre for all the works in the Festival or if not what do we call them? That strand is also in the idea of the Festival commissioning new work, new Irish work... as someone who lives here I would always like to see more international work, from South America, Asia, and so forth because that's what I feel the hunger for, but I can see the variety this year is actually very exciting, the three different strands coming together.

The critics' forum was presented in association with the eircom Dublin Theatre Festival, Critical Voices, and "Rattlebag."

21 DAYS ON THE FRINGE

This year's Dublin Fringe included some three dozen productions over three weeks. PETER CRAWLEY provides a critical overview.

THIS YEAR, THE DUBLIN FRINGE Festival taught us some redoubtable truths: words are the enemy; offices are soulless and childish places; bad sex is the only sex possible; Scottish people are all junkies. And Zen is the answer.

Before the Festival proper had hit the boards, the Fringe was already up and running in a shocked new world. Barely a fortnight after the destruction of the World Trade Centre, innocent content took on a much darker resonance. With the globe in shock, the media frantic, and TV execs digitally erasing the Towers from memory, a show entitled *Tiny Dynamite* was treading on eggshells in an explosively sensitive climate.

"A man is standing on the top of the Sears Tower," intones Steven Hoggett as Anthony. He tells a story crucial to the themes of this rather wonderful play, a co-production between UK companies Frantic Assembly and Paines Plough. The old urban myth about a sandwich falling from a skyscraper and gathering velocity until it cracks the pavement below, became a resurfacing motif for the difference between report and experience. At the heart of Abi Morgan's play was the old story of a love triangle, but told with deft sophistication. Fleshed out with subtle physical performances from Hoggett, Scott Graham, and Jasmine Hyde, unusually graceful use of multimedia and beautifully simple design from Julian Crouch, Vicky Featherstone's production managed to be both painstakingly stylish and effortlessly moving.

In the same week, new Irish company X-Bel-Air's

Giants Have Us In Their Books started out with playwright Jose Rivera's stylish magic realism, before reality encroached on their fantasies. Of four short plays, one involved Manhattanites afraid for their lives because of a spate of recent attacks. It didn't so much ring a bell as wrench an exposed nerve. Beyond the chilling context, director Roisin McBrinn's staging was clever and cartoonish, with Aoibheann O'Hara delivering an amusingly cheeky performance as the voracious feline in *Tiger in Central Park*. The next monologue, delivered by Dylan Tighe, directly concerned the Gulf War and was as devastating as the actor's delivery was subtle.

Monkeying around with historical figures seemed to be a Fringe preoccupation. While Erik Satie and Co. were made to perform for John Cage's collage in *An Alphabet*, the greatest betrayer in history took centre stage for Tony Barrow's *Iscarciot*. What director Patrick Sutton told his sole actor Charlie Hughes is anyone's guess. "You have to suffer for your art," is my best conjecture, because even if it was a flimsy whip — it was still a whip. The show started and ended with vigorous scenes of self-flagellation, book-ending a sinewy portrayal already rife with self-mortification. There was no doubting the intensity of Hughes' confessional performance as the red-handed culprit of Christianity. Doomed, in Barrow's play, to live through eternity like his name, Judas performs under the scrutiny of an impassive and vengeful God. Less arresting, however, was the sustained agony of the performance, as directed by Sutton.

When intensity never alters from a taut extreme it becomes monotonous. Regardless of passion or presence, it's easy for an audience to tune out. But moments of wit and clever allusion, together with imaginative use of butcher's paper and stage



TINY DYNAMITE

shock tactics, made it an experience that lingered in the psyche of anybody who's ever screwed anyone over.

Which brings us neatly to the workplace. During a severe laughter drought, Gúna Nua achieved the near impossible by creating a tear-streamingly funny comedy concerning petty figures actually worth caring about. The balance between pathetic characters and theatrical pathos is hard to manage, but three comic actors of the highest order created buffoons who retained your sympathy. Effortlessly realising the mind-bending tedium and Machiavellian manoeuvring of the contemporary office, David Parnell and Paul Meade's script was simply ingenious. "These thin canvas partitions have ears," Gerry McCann solemnly warns new recruit Darren McHugh, while David Pearse drifts through the deceit as unself-conscious and endearing as his novelty

tie. The plot was razor-sharp, the staging inventive (those aforementioned partitions formed a maze of passages, or folded back to reveal nightmarish toilet scenes) and the pacing faultless. Oh sure, there were problems — the only women in the workplace were off-stage pantomime grotesques, either bitchy secretaries or the nagging partners of these hen-pecked drones — and an over-dependence on contemporary references and pop music meant that without alterations it won't age well. But you forgave these shortcomings in a heartbeat. Asking such provocative questions as: is water the new tea; would you act like a dog to get a meagre promotion; and can men ever really be instrumental in the purchase of a bath towel, *Scenes From a Water Cooler* was an absolute delight.

Meanwhile, in Irma Grothius' version of office drama, things got even more childish. Grothius' new play, as produced by Calipo Theatre Company, met the challenge issued by veteran playwright Tom Murphy in a public interview during the Theatre Festival: to write about "the money." *Getting 2 Level 10* did exactly that, as direct as its text-message syntax. Like *Scenes From A Water Cooler*, this play featured references to Arthur Miller's diatribe against capitalism. For Gúna Nua *Death of a Salesman* was reproduced as a toilet seat nightmare. For Calipo's take on spiritual corrosion and false appearance, tribute came via a Willy Loman-esque claim to being "well-liked" from beleaguered Team Leader Simone Kirby. But if Grothius' representation was a step in the right direction from Gúna Nua's — women in the workplace! — its excavation of the childhoods of its 20-something characters felt a little too close to pop psychology. Beneath a scaffold structure mounted with television screens, the personnel start getting per-

sonal and tensions are attributed to childhood traumas. Video interviews with senior infant school pupils revealed an alarming dystopia in their expectations for the future (environmental destruction and taxes), before the four actors played out a comparatively blissful actuality.

In Grothius' office, kindness is a strategy, sex is a weapon, and happiness is a Scalectrix. Although the play didn't quite reach its target, energetic direction by Darren Thornton and slick video editing from Ian Murphy boosted it up a level.

Mark O'Halloran's play *The Head of Red O'Brien*, warmly performed by Ciaran McIntyre in Bewley's Café Theatre, was an exploration of all things mental: words and symbols, obsessions and abuse, order and disorder. Performing from a hospital bed, with a large plaster on his bald pate, McIntyre's Red told the story of the wound beneath. Obsessed with virulent baldie Sean Connery and the awesome wonder (as he sees it) of *The Hunt for Red October*, O'Brien begins foisting his obsessions on his partner, the bookish and suffering "Mary Motorhead." Under O'Halloran's direction, McIntyre animated a compelling and attractive character who fully deserved the amateur lobotomy he's got in store. An intelligent, funny, off-beat play, beautifully written and superbly performed.

Relationships based on knife attacks, too, seemed positively de rigueur at this year's Fringe. "I like to be stabbed," said Vicki Liddelle's Boy Rock Star, by way of foreplay. In Suspect Culture's disappointing production *Casanova*, the alchemist, spy, and lover came via Damien Hirst and Mike Leigh to exhibit a bleak view of anaesthetized urban life. Casanova darts between European cities compiling his "conquests" for a final gallery collection, desperately seeking "the one," his perfect woman. A play never seems so stale as

when it is just the wrong side of relevance. A fascination with bleak urban wastelands, stabbings, tranquillisers, and the reversal of gender power dynamics seemed less a universal or timeless concern and more a residual trend of the '90s. Another casualty in the crisis of masculinity, Casanova, once the hunter, becomes the hunted. "I didn't want to be with you. I wanted to have been with you," says an early encounter, announcing a repeated trope — here women are the sexual aggressors, while the Lothario is needy and clings to mementos of his toilet-based peccadilloes. Despite a stylish set design, constructed before our eyes by a vengeful Cabinet Maker, David Greig's play stumbles. In the floundering 21st century, dark irony, like Casanova, is showing its age.

Bemused audiences gathered at the Molly Malone Statue on Grafton Street to await the arrival of *Dr Scrontium's Mad Kahoogaphone and Homeless Medicine Show*. The Kahoogaphone was a cart assembled from broken, useless items such as a mutilated mannequin, shards of a broken guitar, and cracked circuit boards. It was, apparently, a machine ingeniously designed not to work. The problem was that after the fun and fear of chasing such a ramshackle wagon across busy streets and down darkened alleys, by the time we took our seats we were no longer so involved. The Salvation Army HQ on Abbey Street was an

alternative space to the Opera Guerrillas' desired outdoor alleyway. Its cramped room and poor acoustics didn't conceal awkward performances, or the flimsiness of George Higgs' story. The plot, concerning a territorial dispute between a wealthy crippled woman, the homeless Mortimer



HOMESICK

Crompton, and his imaginary friend the good Doctor, seemed an excuse to bridge from one toe-tapping ragtime musical number to another. Despite the accomplishment of Higgs as composer, what was most unsettling about his issue-skirting script was how little he had to say about homelessness. The hero of the piece lives rough by choice; he considers work beneath him and his philosophy seems to be that it's enough simply to exist. Like the Kahoogaphone machine itself, this play was intriguing and it promised a lot — but, ultimately, it didn't work.

For many new companies, the Fringe is a springboard into the professional arena. Untitled Assembly's inaugural production was Jean Genet's *The Maids*, and one

really has to wonder why. It's not that the performers weren't competent, nor that the direction wasn't sensitive; it was that the play is so staid you wonder how it could ever capture the imagination of a young company, or what resonance they found in Genet's play with their own contemporary experience. Although Victoria Monkhouse and Liz Quinn performed with the requisite mixture of eccentricity and desperation, Ross O'Corráin's production placed a self-conscious stress on semiotics rather than accessible detail. High-heel shoes became the dominant motif of role-play and oppression at the expense of characterisation. The cross-casting of Shane O'Neill as Madame seemed imbued with gender-conscious and dramaturgically-correct significance, but to non-semioticians it came across as a cheap trick. Academic interests on their own are rarely fertile grounds for riveting drama. An intriguing, distinctive debut, but one has greater hopes for their future choice of material.

Common Currency, by comparison, are Fringe veterans. Internationally inspired and striving to represent the concerns of young Europeans on the stage, their production of *Trainspotting* could have been subtitled "Just the High Points," with a heavy dollop of grim irony. One suspects the play was chosen for its bums-on-seats appeal, but stripped of all glamour, the only recognisable thing about this production was the title.

TRAINSPOTTING

Pared down to the bare essentials of Irvine Welsh's plot and performed in a sparse Project Cube littered with discarded sleeping bags and clothes, the production proved my Caledonian crack-den theory.

Edinburgh and Glasgow, with their beautiful Georgian edifices, fearsome cuisine, and impenetrable accents may not seem symbolic of every urban city, but between Suspect Culture and Common Currency's probing, it's high time to admit to our global problem. Whether it's the dizzy hit of the tranquilliser, the gum-smearing delivery of speed, or the stab of a syringe, urban tensions still revolve around the nature



of addiction, isolation and sickness. Louise Drumm's production avoided the film's heroin-chic to deliver a series of ponderous shooting-up scenes, its dark routine performed like a careful ritual, its depictions of sex and toilets both stomach-churning and gruesomely hysterical. With four actors sharing several characters between them, Fergal McElherron portrayed a compelling Mark Renton, Peter Daly adeptly distinguished his numerous roles, while Dermot Magennis's thuggish Franco would've scared the skag right out of your system.

Jane Austen's novella of correspondences, *Lady Susan*, formed the basis of a witty and exhilarating production from Inis Theatre. Following on from their debut production based on Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection *The World's Wife*, the company are making good on their claim to renegotiate non-theatrical sources for the stage. (Telephone directory, watch out!) In a masterful feat of adaptation, playful self-reference, and dramaturgical exploration, Austen's characters were at once accurate paradigms of the past and savvy representatives of the present.

Nowhere is this more captivating than when Carmel Stephens and Iseult Golden throw open their period dresses to reveal trousers, creating coat tails from the liberated material of Claudia Haas' costumes. In David Horan and Aoife Monks' vision, gender roles are wide open for investigation, Austen's homoerotic undercurrents are present and correct, and moral authority is unimpeachable. Linda Buckley's sound design was taut and amusing, furnishing absent characters with amusing leitmotifs and adding extra dimensions to vigorous physical comedy. Kevin Smith's lighting design was appropriately restrained and Eoin Stephens' writing desk design was subtle and effec-

tive. Although at times clever references threatened to become too clever — at one point the meta-theatrical scene introductions came dangerously close to intellectual arrogance — the production ultimately never lost affection for its subject. From its epistolary safety announcement to the bows and curtsies of its curtain call, the show remained a joy — yours faithfully, if not too sincerely.

Equivalents brought my Fringe experience this year to a close. In making two abstract paintings by Georgia O'Keefe into performance pieces, Temenos Project turned to Noh and Butoh for form, towering design for style, and Zen for justification. Martin Boroson's production re-created the ascetic canvas of *Winter Road*, 1 as an impressionistic struggle between Sharon Hogan's artist and Akira Matsui's mystical, transmogrifying coyote. "This coyote is not a coyote," Hogan explains to anyone who hasn't been paying attention. Jane Cox's delicate and powerful lighting flooded the white stage with brilliant dazzle or threw misty shadows onto the expanse of Kris Stone's icy set. Meanwhile Ellen Cranitch's flute and Wayne Sheehy's percussion created a tundra drift to make the theatre shiver. However aesthetically sumptuous, though, *Winter Road* was over-long and poorly paced, its Noh styling feeling more like an exotic inclusion rather than a keenly-realised experience. Far more satisfying was the post-Butoh dance of Naomi Mutoh enacting *Music – Pink and Blue* amid a fabric installation that made O'Keefe's canvas both a cocoon and a canopy. Freeing music and movement from the frozen brushstrokes, artistic statement was transformed beyond finding simple equivalence.

Peter Crawley writes for publications including The Irish Times and The Dubliner.

MEETING THE MASTER

As his production of *Le Costume* played in this year's eircom Dublin Theatre Festival, director **PETER BROOK** visited Dublin and conducted a number of public and private meetings. **ANNIE RYAN** describes her encounter with the man himself.

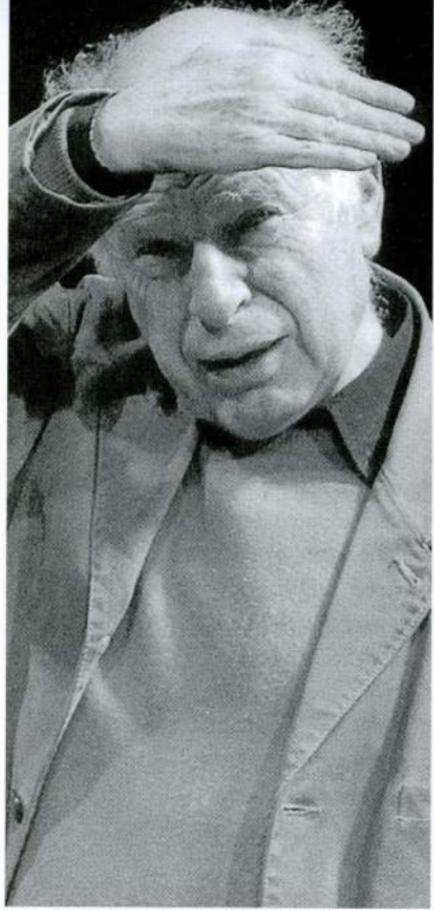
BROOK WAS LATE. A BIT OF A RELIEF TO THE REST OF US GATHERED in the Gaiety School of Acting to fulfil the request he makes when he travels to a new country: to meet with the young directors. We had that essential five minutes to say hello, grab a coffee, tell people you were sorry you missed their show, heard it was great, blah blah blah... and most importantly, try to imagine what Brook might say to us.

When five minutes stretched to ten, Louise Drumm joked that it would be "very Peter Brook" of him not to show up at all, and we would have to speak to each other! Ha ha! Imagine that! What a laugh that would be!

Of course, that must have been his intention. Not so much to stand us up, as to give us the chance to meet each other. It would take somebody like Peter Brook to

get us all in the same room, let alone to talk about the intimacies of our creativity. Particularly in a room that isn't a pub.

Besides Louise, who was about to open *Trainspotting*; there was Jason Byrne, fresh from rehearsals for *Macbeth*; Conall Morrison, whose production of *Whistle in the Dark* had just opened at the Abbey; Gavin Quinn, whose show *Deflowerfucked* might've opened already; Jimmy Fay, who was about to get stuck into *Blasted*; Noilin Kavanagh, who was working on a project with residents from Fatima Mansions; and



VISIONARY: Peter Brook

David Horan, who also had a show, *Lady Susan*, in the Fringe. There was Eric Weitz, a teacher and director at the Gaiety School; Gaiety School director Patrick Sutton, ecstatic after the success of his first play; and Enid Reid Whyte, who like Patrick was delighted to have shed her Arts Council hat for the morning.

It wasn't really a surprise to see Patrick there. After all, he provided the venue. And it was nice for Enid to get the chance to voice her own creativity for a change. Still, it was odd to have both a representative of our sole funding body and our sole

advisor to that funding body taking part in this meeting of makers. For what was supposed to be a group of young directors, we represented a far broader sweep of the theatre sector than Brook could possibly have known.

In any case, Brook finally appeared, with the co-director of *Le Costume*. She sat beside him and expressed herself in one of two modes: nodding with great French authority as if to say, "Not a bad wine considering you chose it," or snorting vague objections that he ignored. I'm sure she had something interesting to contribute, but all I remember of her was the feeling that she was maybe a little tired of the reverence with which people treat Brook. Bad luck, lady.

It was all remarkably unremarkable in a funny way. He didn't really say anything we didn't already know. We sat in a circle. Of course. Admittedly, not cross-legged on the floor, but then directors probably prefer chairs, no matter how uncomfortable. And I don't suppose the Gaiety School has poufs.

He smiled and looked at us with his pale blue Yoda eyes. And he asked us some question that was so obvious I can't even remember exactly what it was. It might have been something like, "Why do you make theatre?" Or, "What is the thing that drives you to make theatre?" I even think he put it in the negative as well, to the effect of, "What is the thing in theatre that you absolutely want to avoid?"

He spoke about that innate ability a director has that makes him or her a director: being able to watch an actor and say "Ah! That is it." Or, equally, "No, God, no! Please never do that again." And he asked us each to define what in theatre triggers that response for us.

We all paused to think of what we would say. Not that he would care, he'll probably never meet us again. It was the others, our colleagues, our rivals, who would remember and report these intimate answers. Not

to mention our funders. I thought, okay, do I answer this question with the same voice that writes my Arts Council proposals or do I expose the reality of my post-natal confusion and uncertainty?

So, one by one, each of us spoke about our own feeling of "ah!" Conall Morrison spoke first. He spoke beautifully and passionately in that great Northern way about looking for what deserves to be in a theatre. He set the ceiling high, which was appreciated by everyone, and everyone described

laugh with Jason who had recently invited Barba over to show us his extraordinary working practices. (I was there. He is gas. Maybe a genius, maybe a quack, who knows.)

For myself, I have to admit, dear reader, that I was in shit form. For years I had imagined myself meeting Peter Brook and dazzling him in my sparky American way. And there I was, a puke-stained and exhausted young mother trying to remember what it was like to be a theatre director.

I ended up introducing myself as a fraud, that I felt more like a failed actor than a director, and saying something about the experience of watching ballet, of all things.

very simply and with as much dignity as they could why they make theatre.

I wasn't taking notes so I only remember fragments of what people said. Jason spoke of his ongoing exploration with his company. Gavin talked about making work with the freedom of not worrying what people think. Patrick spoke of how excited he was to have made something at all.

Later I heard that Conall commented that everybody had shouted except Jimmy Fay, who instead of speaking about himself, asked Brook something about Grotowski. Clever boy. Brook explained that they had worked together very closely but their paths had to go separate ways when Grotowski decided to move more into seclusion, and Brook realized that the focus of his work is the experience of the audience. He also made a comment that delighted everyone, about all the people who run around giving workshops on Grotowski after having worked with him for five minutes 30 years ago, including, among others, Eugenio Barba. We all had a

I'm sure I should have put on a brave face and launched in to some artspeak that would've made our funders proud. But, hell, I'm not renowned for my diplomacy. I ended up introducing myself as a fraud, that I felt more like a failed actor than a director — hey, that's positive! — and saying something about the experience of watching ballet, of all things.

I think I was trying to describe that feeling an audience has when they witness a spectacular grand jeté and are lifted with the dancer — that sense of doing a jeté in your seat. And that I am somehow striving to find the theatrical equivalent of that — the indescribable thing inside of an actor that lifts, that jetés, that "ahs!", and we are transformed with them, "ah-ing" and jeté-ing in our seats.

Anyway, Brook said, "No, God, no!" — and spoke of how totally different actors are from dancers. He said it's not important for an actor to be physically gifted. He even went so far as to imply that training is essentially overrated and cannot help

somebody learn the essential inner mechanisms that make an actor a good one.

I wonder, do our funders agree? Our Arts Council proposal is full of the merits of training. I agree that training might let a mediocre actor get away with more — but I still think it gives a good actor better access to his or her talent. Surely as a director of an acting school, Patrick Sutton mightn't think training is a bad thing.

FUCK THE WRITER," SAID BROOK. That sent a little ripple around the circle. I guess that idea still shocks people. Of course that's nothing new to me. (And I don't mean that in the sense that I have a ring on my finger and a bouncing baby boy.) Theatre is a collaborative art form, Brook feels, and it is crazy that everything else is subject to change except the precious text. That's why he works with dead playwrights; living ones are more difficult. That is, dead playwrights who are out of copyright. For even worse than a living writer is a dead writer's agent.

He looks, he told us, for plays that lift us out of our mundane everyday world, and so often, contemporary plays don't have the same lift that the classical ones do.

Then, suddenly, he announced that just last night in his hotel room he read a play that surprised him by its brutality and power, *A Whistle in the Dark*. Everyone sat up, and we were all pointing to Conall, spitting, "It's him... he is..." Conall was so excited he had to take a little breath, and with his hand on his heart, he said, "I'm directing that play." It had the same marvelous quality as that TV production company soundbite with the kid saying, "I made this!" We were all so proud of Conall.

Then everyone talked about Tom Murphy and how much he deserves to be celebrated. Brook listened with interest to everyone speaking of their love of Murphy and the darkness and strength of his work.

When our hour was over, we went to lunch. In Eden! Hooray! They're going to feed us! Most of us went along ahead while Brook waited with our host, the Festival director Fergus Linehan, and his generous sponsor, a nice businessman who loves the theatre. Lunch must've been on him.

It was very funny seeing all these directors trying to seat each other at this long table. We agreed that Brook should sit in the middle, rather than at the head. It would be more democratic. More his style.

Fergus swept in with Brook and his moneymen and promptly rearranged the seating, placing himself at the head with Brook to his left, Conall next to Brook, the moneymen next to Conall. So he got nice photographs of the important people. And, I suppose he was right in a way. Conall is very impressive. And, what the hell, we got a free lunch. Who said there's no such thing?

Theatre is wonderfully hierarchical. There's the prodigy, the frustrated actress, the newcomer, the funder, the administrator, the moneymen, the genius, the has-been, the guru — all on their various rungs of the ladder of artistic importance. Even Peter Brook, with all of his sitting in circles and his insistence that he is not an artist — not even he can escape it. Maybe that's why his companion seemed so bored and annoyed. Then again, maybe she's just French. And even though the best gift Brook gave us was the opportunity to listen to each other describing the one thing we share — a passion for making theatre — we were still more interested in what he had to say.

Maybe that's why he's Peter Brook. He says the most obvious things in the world. His wisdom is in his stillness. He is the rock that the rest of us surround, babbling.

Annie Ryan is artistic director of Corn Exchange.

CITY ARTS CENTRE

In a controversial move that made headlines this autumn, the board of the CITY ARTS CENTRE shut its Moss Street facility and laid off the majority of its staff, in anticipation of a long-term phase of “re-envisioning” the Centre. But is this a smokescreen for selling off the building at a profit? What’s the future of City Arts, and what are the ramifications of the closure of its current building for the theatre sector? PATRICK BURLEIGH went looking for answers.



CLOSES ITS DOORS

FOR ALMOST THREE DECADES, THE CITY ARTS CENTRE (CAC) WAS THE torchbearer for community and educational theatre in Dublin's city centre. It provided a venue for theatre workshops, dance workshops, professional and non-professional performances, and at one time even boasted its own company,

Grapevine Theatre Co., in its early days on North Frederick Street. Augusto Boal workshopped there in 1998. The Fringe has had shows there every year since its conception. Leading independent companies like Galloglass, Calypso, Loose Canon, and Upstate have all utilized its one modest black box theatre.

But now, and for at least the next two years, the CAC will be absent from the landscape of Irish theatre, community or otherwise. In a controversial move to enter a "process of re-envisioning," in December the board of the CAC shut down nearly all of the Centre's facilities with less than two months notice to its users and staff.

The closure commenced on 29 November when the Centre closed down all but three of its in-house arts programmes and laid off three full-time and four part-time employees of its 12-member staff. The next day, founder Sandy Fitzgerald left his post as executive director after 28 years, having worked for the Centre since its opening as Grapevine Arts in 1973. By 31 December,

all performance and rehearsal spaces had closed for a period of at least 24 months. According to the CAC's eight-member board, headed by Niall Ó Baoill and including theatre practitioner Declan Gorman, these radical changes are the culmination of years of serious concern over the management and direction not only of the CAC, but more broadly of community arts in Dublin.

"We've set down a period of two years to research in unprecedented depth the dimensions of need [for community arts] that exist within the changing landscape of Dublin city," says Ó Baoill, a longtime arts worker and founder of Wet Paint youth arts organization. Convinced that CAC's programming lacked structure and coherence, the board decided to enter what it describes as "the most comprehensive and searching programme of research and development ever undertaken by an Irish arts organization." Declan McGonagle, former director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, has been appointed to head up this campaign on

the heels of Fitzgerald's departure.

The "changing landscape" that Ó Baoill refers to is not only metaphorical, and one of the board's central aims in this next phase is to address the many shortcomings of the current facility. Over the past few years City Arts Centre has been dwarfed by the surge of corporate buildings that now tower over the lower Liffey. "The place is like an island among a sea of banks," remarks Joe Carlin, a musician who is one of the recently-laid-off Centre employees. In a number of public debates and protests over the past couple of months, none of which have been attended by board members, Carlin and other users of the Centre have expressed concern that the board's decision is motivated by financial interest. They are afraid that, after an adjacent property was sold off for seven million pounds to McCormack Developers, the board has notions of selling the CAC facility for a similar sum — which would explain why the board acted without any consultation with the users or staff. The board, however, denies that any formal offers have been made on the site — but argues that the site as it exists is insufficient.

"The board came to the conclusion that it couldn't serve the policy and aspirations [of CAC] in that building for the next two decades," Gorman explains. "It was simply impossible due to the physical condition of the plant, the equipment, the internal architecture of the building, and above all, the changed physical landscape in the community. The building as it is currently structured will close and will not be used as an arts resource in its current design. It will not return to its prior function." Yet Gorman will not say what the function of the building will then be, or whether he even considers a building relevant to the purpose and responsibility of CAC in its next phase. As Gorman explains it, the

board is envisioning the future of CAC in the long term, and in that vision the Centre could work more as an active ideology of community arts than as an actual place. This ideology would take the form of outsourcing community arts programmes to schools and other facilities, as well as organizing events, workshops, performances and festivals.

But many staff and users believe that the physical Centre should stand its ground against the encroachment of banks and for-profit corporations in the Docklands neighborhood. They see only the short-term loss of a well-located facility and an insulting lack of communication by the board. "The board's decision-making has been dictatorial, top-down rather than bottom-up," says Monica Flynn, administrator of Disability Arts Ireland, based in CAC. "In the community arts sector there is an ethos of inclusion and decisions should be made beginning with users and staff. Boards need to be accountable to the people behind them."

On 6 October the board informed staff that they would be let go and users that they would be dispossessed, yet it made no effort to communicate its plans or reasons until 15 November. Until then, staff and users were awash in confusion, frustration, and misunderstanding. Now, while users continue to feel cheated by the lack of transparency in the board's decision-making, redundancy negotiations were reportedly generous enough to appease most staff, though exact figures were unavailable.

Gorman and Ó Baoill acknowledge that the board's move comes in the wake of years of internal crisis and mismanagement at CAC. In June of 2000, CAC management staff wrote a formal letter to the board in which they criticized Sandy Fitzgerald for what they described as his misuse of CAC funds and lack of account-

ability. In response, the board commissioned a management consulting firm, which produced a report calling for a drastic structural overhaul of the organisation. According to an October article in *The Phoenix*, the report proposed a reconfiguration of the Centre's management, which may explain Fitzgerald's resignation and McGonagle's arrival.

For Ó Baoill and Gorman, CAC's management problems are primarily the result of a dearth of regular funding and support: "The culture and arts sector, being so under-resourced, has been forced to utilize funding that is not specifically intended for

breadth of community arts, you get left behind in terms of policy and provision," says Ó Baoill. "And that's what's happened in the last five years. There's nobody who's been able to campaign intelligently around supporting and deepening the work that's going on. It hasn't even been defined and it definitely hasn't been supported in any intelligent way in the last five years."

The next two years will be spent pouring resources into "re-envisioning" the CAC as a community arts organization whose projects share a common denominator. Gorman points out that the essence

Staff and users believe that the Centre should stand its ground against the encroachment of banks and for-profit corporations in the Docklands neighborhood.

the needs of community arts, which does not provide for continuity or quality of practice," Ó Baoill laments. Because there is no organized framework for community arts in Dublin, no greater umbrella structure under which the disparate activities of CAC may coalesce, community arts projects are limited to what Ó Baoill terms "once-off or overly prescriptive types of funding." Though CAC is funded by the Arts Council, FAS, and Dublin Corporation, among other organisations, it receives barely enough to maintain a working staff. Individual projects are therefore funded independently by short-term partnerships, creating a hodge-podge of programmes with nothing to distinguish them collectively as community art.

"Unless there's something distinctive representing the legitimate needs and

of this new vision will be the reinstatement of a deliberate philosophy of community. "What we want to do is make very clear that the City Arts Centre is and always was a Centre which identifies itself first and foremost with the philosophical, political, and human dimensions of a community."

Which brings us back to the Centre's theatre. As Ó Baoill indicates, in the past five years community theatre at CAC has virtually vanished in place of independent theatre companies using the space as a rental venue. But 'twas not always thus. The early years of CAC's theatrical history are steeped in community and street theatre. Though the Grapevine Arts Centre on North Frederick did not have an on-site venue, their touring company was very

continued on page 88

A GOOD YEAR FOR WOMEN

2001 has seen a bumper crop of plays by women on the Irish stage. **CATHY LEENEY** reports.

SINCE FRANCES SHERIDAN, RICHARD BRINSLEY'S MAMMY, had her first West End success in 1763, Irish women have been writing plays. They are rarely mentioned in what passes for polite circles. You have to wonder "How useful is it to discuss 'grrl' playwrights as a category"? Maybe one of the reasons people think of them as a category is that otherwise they would be left out of the discussion altogether. But in this process of separating them out, are you consigning them to the ghetto of the forgotten, the "disappeared"? In that draughty breeze block tenement are holed up the lost women of Irish theatre.

Augusta Gregory's plays kept the Abbey solvent when that theatre's audience were titillated by the *bonnes bouches* of early 20th century Irish theatrical genius. Where now are those plays of hers? Throughout the 1930s Teresa Deevy's reputation as a playwright grew to the status of "household name"; she's since been written out of academic accounts and only recently has gained some deserved recognition. The process of being "disappeared" may be slow: it's been alarmingly

sure for Irish playwrights of the female persuasion.

2001 has been a good year for women writing plays in Ireland, and, more to the point, seeing them performed. Maybe before, lone women playwrights were too vulnerable to being overtaken by their respective male cohorts. It's dangerous out there alone — token women get bussed to the ghetto. If there's safety in numbers, then maybe the girls, collectively speaking, may be said to be achieving critical mass around now, and may be on the point of kissing that ghetto goodbye.

Theatre works so differently from literature where writers are concerned. It's tough for any playwright to get their work performed, never mind subsequently seen, recognised, appreciated, constructively criticised, acclaimed, savaged,

canonised, even published. All of that is a whole other bus ride. What is crucial is not to be ignored.

So, what difference will it make if more women are writing plays? More women playwrights mean more parts for women performers and greater variety of opportunity for actresses of different ages. Theatre in Ireland is pretty unique in its central cultural role of representing the national reality. This dates back to the early 20th century. It has its downsides, but it creates a possibility and a challenge: that theatre may be the place where this different Ireland, the one we experience now in different ways, is represented and opened up.

Galloping diversity has hit the Irish theatre like a small, fun earthquake, and yea, it is good. There's a lot going on, and it scarcely makes sense to speak about it all in the same terms. This applies as much to theatre generally as to women's work. There is a loss here too. It is in the fading out of a single grand narrative of Irish theatrical creativity, which affirms a graspable identity and a sense of commonality across other divides. There is comfort in this aran-cardigan-and-slippers-by-the-fire view, but then this consensus of excellence has a narrow base; its reassuring stability relies on exclusions: no popular entertainment, no non-text-based theatre, no issue plays, no cross-cultural messing about, and thus far, no writing by women.

The power of this gold-card club

should not be underestimated. Who wouldn't wish to be up there with the Friels, the Murphys, and the Kilroys? Admission to the club is not sought by members, it happens to them through symbolic actions and gestures. These include the playwrights' relationship with the stage of the National Theatre, recently described by Garry Hynes as one of the hottest stages in the world. The Abbey's record in producing plays by women is dismal enough. So, it's ironic that the Abbey stage has, I believe,



NEW VOICE: Eve and Adam

played its part in the current rush of theatre writing by women. Marina Carr is already poised for membership with the big names in Irish playwriting. Her high ambition grows out of a deep valuing of the role of the writer as artist. The staging of *By the Bog of Cats* at the Abbey in 1998 was an important "yes!" of possibility for Irish women playwrights. The huge daring and confidence of the work was fantastic, as was the sight, two years

later, of Carr's stygian *On Raftery's Hill* reducing the interval loquacity of a Gate Theatre audience to appalled silence.

Another symbolic marker is success abroad. Between Carr's U.S. and European productions, and the success of Marie Jones in London and New York, the precedents are there. If these successes are not rated as highly as those of men playwrights, that reveals the obstacles to recognition that women's work often faces. Jones' *Stones in His Pockets* is a case in point. The play is a brilliant celebration of theatricality. It appropriates all the energy created between performer and audience to challenge the power of globalised, packaged culture. Any play that can send an audience out into the street feeling enlivened and energised as *Stones* does is a masterpiece of theatricality, and is hugely valuable as such. To diminish it as not sufficiently "literary" is to find the play wanting in qualities it does not seek.

All lists are invidious, invariably incomplete and indubitably irritating. Here are some of the theatre events which have taken place over a fertile four months or so in 2001. Amongst what follows, the diversity speaks for itself.

On the naturalistic menu have been plays like Morna Regan's *Midden* and Lisa Tierney-Keogh's *Eve and Adam*. *Midden*, directed in its world premiere production for Rough Magic by Lynne Parker, is an impressively mature piece of family drama, set in present-day Derry, and with five great parts for women. It went to the Traverse for the Edinburgh Fringe, where it was a great success; and after playing several venues in Ireland and Northern Ireland, also visited London's Hampstead. The vivid performances seemed alive with the enjoyment of all five actresses.

The story revolves around Ruth's return to her native city having established a successful clothing business in the States with

her childhood friend Mab. She comes back to a house of women: her grandmother, mother, and younger sister. As Ruth and Mab plan the Derry launch of their latest collection, mother/daughter tensions are revealed, and Regan makes a convincing drama out of the insecurities that having very little money can create, and how daughters negotiate stereotypical expectations of mothers: of self-sacrifice and unconditional support.

The glamorous clothes that Ruth designs work as a metaphor onstage for the distance and alienation that hits when the younger generation's prosperity makes older people's struggles look petty. Behind the specifics is a strong sense of conflict between the daily routines of the kitchen, and a longer-term view of a family's changes through history. Parker's staging, at times, expressed the subtext of the life we saw onstage, the psychic interior of the house: rooms in darkness, hiding places, forced entries. These elements were never allowed to dominate the naturalistic impact of the design and performances, though. So, on this outing, the play looked more ordinary than it might, even while it is extraordinary in representing women's emotional and economic vulnerabilities, and daughters' issues of separation and connection with mothers.

Tierney-Keogh's *Eve and Adam*, premiered this summer at the Crypt, brings us into the capsule world of barely-20-somethings. The lives of Eve and Adam float above and sink below any sense of reality outside themselves and their relationships, fuelled by alcohol. Eve not only has no idea where she was last night, she has no idea where she is, full stop. She cannot take hold of her hurts and guilts to make them the beginning of change in herself. Forgetting is the aim, but the play refuses it, and we share the story of her humiliation and powerlessness. It's a dark

world, written with courage and brutal honesty. The mind-bendingly young and gifted Tierney-Keogh might splash out more, theatrically speaking, and test how rooms and real time confine what can happen onstage, while maintaining her tough and brilliant talent for living speech.

In recent years we have seen women playwrights working to fuse different forms of theatre, as in, say Liz Kuti's *Treehouses* (at the Peacock in 2000), and Marie Jones' latest, *Weddins, Weeins, and Wakes*, a big hit for the Lyric Theatre this autumn. Michelle Read presented a particularly interesting mingling of forms with *Play about My Dad*, a work-in-progress in which space and time are broken open. *Play About My Dad* is up-front autobiography, complete with family snaps and memorabilia, and it was presented, incomplete and open to development, this summer at Project's Cube. Read and director Tara Derrington succeeded in creating a buzzy, interactive event, neatly side-stepping the earnest pretentiousness that sometimes goes along with works-in-progress.

The real-life content of Read's piece ties her in to a strong performance art tradition with the likes of Ursula Martinez in her hilarious *A Family Outing*. Read was doing a lot more than telling us about her dad, though. By re-configuring the Cube into a three-dimensional performance area for images, actor, and soundtrack, *Play About My Dad* made the most of the paradox of the particular: Read's own story became a door into many spectators' individual pasts. For me, the show captured the emotional power of the image of your parents when they were young adults, an image that only rises into consciousness when its reality is lost forever. It catches the unknowability of your parents' past lives, and the balance of loss and remembrance was at the centre of the play. This collabora-



A FAMILY OF WOMEN: Midden

ration of ReadCo, Project, and the Arts Council's Mise-en-Scène programme deserves continued support and development, as it moves us from laughter to nostalgia, to sadness, and back to laughter.

SO, TO GENERALISE WOULD BE TO REDUCE. However, we are seeing lots of one-woman shows. Is this a surrender to budgets and practicalities? Probably, in part anyway. It's a kind of fast-food theatre reflecting isolation, loss of ritual, a mirror for the loneliness of the post-modern punter. Tall Tales' initiative this summer in commissioning six women performers to write short plays that they would perform themselves, called *Womenly Whims* and performed at the Dublin Writers' Museum, put an interesting gloss on the whole phenomenon. Of the three I saw, all directed by Maureen Collender, Mia Gallagher's *Normality* successfully created the voice and the world of the character, a young woman fighting addiction and obsessed

with rhythm. Gallagher created a tension with the audience that held, as did Billie Traynor in *Redser*. Deirdre Kinehan was highly entertaining in *Summer Fruits*, and this voice, along with Traynor's, was recognisably linked to work by Alan Bennett and Victoria Wood.

The one-person theatre snack demands clarity and skillful structuring so as to be theatre, rather than storytelling. When Tara Maria Lovett goes for the full theatrical feast in *The Suck*, which premiered this summer at Project in a production directed by David Horan, she achieves a most original, imaginative, fantastically weird, disturbing, and theatrical vision. The play works through a series of intense encounters between Rannoch, a young man obsessed with a dead heifer, and his mother, his friend Dino, and the priest Seamo. Images of masculinity, guilt and

victimhood are counterpointed with the associations between milk, mothering, pain, the mythic heifer of Irish legend, and the ruthless agricultural system at the heart of our economy and rural life, that reduces animals and people to numbers — reduces them to use value.

The Suck is an important play. Rannoch is damaged in the world of men: his abusive father, his careless community, his dishonest mother. He re-creates himself as an image of the female, an impossible image of tenderness that dooms him. The play demolishes the jaded clichés of masculinity on which so much of mainstream Irish theatre still trades. It is mythic and rooted and extraordinary.

It's often suggested that women's contribution as writers is bolstered substantially by other women holding powerful roles as managers of theatre com-

WOMENS' WORK

Plays and theatrical experiments created or co-created by women in the past two years in Ireland:

CAR SHOW by Corn Exchange, 2000 and 2001: eight short plays devised and directed by, among others, Annie Ryan, Caroline McSweeney, Deirdre Molloy, and Veronica Coburn

CHAIR by Operating Theatre (Roger Doyle and Olwen Fouéré), Peacock Theatre, 2001

A CLOSE SHAVE WITH THE DEVIL by Ena May, Focus Theatre, 2001

CONVICTIONS by Tinderbox Theatre Company, 2000: *Jury Room* by Nicola McCartney; *Court No. 2* by Marie Jones

COUCH by Síofra Campbell, Bewley's Café Theatre, 2000

DEFLOWERFUCKED by Aedín Cosgrove and Gavin Quinn, Pan Pan Theatre, 2001

DESCRIBE JOE by Ioanna Anderson, Greenlight Productions, 2000

DOG HOUSE by Gina Moxley, Draiocht Arts Centre, 2001

FODDER: TWO PLAYS BY ALICE BARRY (*Cat Melodeon* and *Pam Ella*), Noggin Theatre Company, 2001

GETTING 2 LEVEL 10 by Irma Grothius, Calipo Theatre Company, 2001

GIFT by Ursula Rani Sarma, Belltable Unfringed Festival, 2001

panies, producers, directors, and reviewers. But this can be a moveable feast. Some women gain a position of power and pull up the ladder after them; some are afraid of being seen by their male colleagues as being unfairly favourable to women's work; some are afraid of the label "feminist." Everyone understands these pressures, and how they have to be overcome. Theatre works on networks. If women have stuff to learn from men's success, and I feel we do, maybe the most important thing is men's effective networking and their generosity of support for fellow practitioners. Luckily for us, there are many such generous people working in Irish theatre who have gone out of their way to encourage and promote work by women. The more women playwrights there are the more there will be. It's not a competition; it's the life in the culture,

and the culture in life.

It's exciting to see so many new playwrights' work. It's exciting to see more devised and co-authored work, a form of creativity that may suit women better than the ivory tower. To try to sum up the work by these women under a single banner is impossible. Young women playwrights may feel they're explorers of unknown territories, but other women have been there before them. Let's say I'm Mick McCarthy and Irish women playwrights are my team; I'd say to them, keep looking for chances, don't be afraid of the opposition, keep 'em under pressure, consolidate, consolidate, consolidate.

Cathy Leeney lectures at the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin and recently edited *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women* for Carysfort Press.

JOCASTA by Leland Bardwell, dhá éan Theatre Company, 2001

LADY SUSAN, an adaptation of Jane Austen's novel, Inis Theatre, 2001

MARY MARY'S LAST DANCE by Púca Puppets (Helene Hugel and Niamh Lawlor), 2001

MOBY DAN by Veronica Coburn, Barabbas... the Company, 2001

PASSAGE by Deirdre Kinehan, Tall Tales Theatre Company in association with the Civic Theatre, 2001

THE QUEST OF THE GOOD PEOPLE and QUEST 2: THE GOOD PEOPLE TRY HARDER by Karen Louise Hebden and Stephen Edwards, after W.B. Yeats, Pavilion Theatre, 2000 and 2001

shesawhere by Neasa Hardiman and Deirdre Mulrooney, Project, 2001

THE STAR CHILD AND OTHER STORIES, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde stories by Mary

Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Storytellers Theatre Company, 2000 and 2001

STRANGE GLOVE, based on Genet's *The Maids*, dhá éan Theatre Company, 2000

TO BE QUEEN by Irma Grothius, Project, 2001

WATCHDOG and THE SHAPE (two short plays) by Tara Maria Lovett, Focus Theatre Lunchtime Series, 2000

WHY I HATE THE CIRCUS by Ioanna Anderson, Greenlight Productions in association with the Civic Theatre, 2001

WIRED TO THE MOON by Maeve Binchy, Fishamble Theatre Company, 2001

THE WORLD'S WIFE, based on poems by Carol Ann Duffy, Inis Theatre, 2001

Y2K FESTIVAL, Fishamble Theatre Company, 2000-2001: *Dreamframe* by Deirdre Hines, *Moonlight and Music* by Jennifer Johnston, and *Tea Set* by Gina Moxley

Shop of Dreams

BILLY ROCHE offers an excerpt from his latest play *On Such as We*, which opened this December at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin.



BILLY ROCHE: Oweney's barbershop lies in the heart of the little town. The shop and the rooms to let above it seem to be a sort of refuge for a host of lonely hearts — a tortured artist, a lonely hotel night porter, an orphan girl, an aging widower — who all fall under Oweney's loving spell. Oweney is in love with the beautiful Maeve who runs the boutique across the square, and to his surprise she loves him in return. This is not a match made in heaven, however. Oweney is temporarily separated from his wife and family, and Maeve is married to P.J., a local hoodlum. It is a dangerous occupation — falling in love around here. Here we come in towards the middle of a scene which allows us a little glimpse of how beautiful it could be for these two potential lovers — the fun, the tenderness, the terra firma they create for each other.

(Maeve looks at a photograph on the wall of Oweney's shop.)

MAEVE ...Your da was a fairly handsome man wasn't he? You must follow your mother do yeh?

OWENEY God blast yeh anyway.

(Maeve giggles as she tries on Oweney's white shop coat.)

MAEVE P.J. has no photographs of the old days at all — yeh know his Communion and Confirmation and all the rest of it. I mean what does that tell yeh? Somethin'! What do yeh think? (She presents herself.)

OWENEY A good lookin' barber.

MAEVE (tapping the chair and spinning it) Next.

(Oweney crosses to the chair. She covers him with a sheet and pretends to snip his hair with a scissors and brush him down, etc.)

MAEVE That's a grand class of a day now. Were yeh up at the match, yeah?

OWENEY Match?

MAEVE Yeah? No?

OWENEY Yeh what?

MAEVE Did yeh say yes or no? Was that yes yeh were or no yeh weren't? Shave?... Bum be bum be bum...

(She lathers him up and attempts to shave him with a cutthroat razor. She finds it awk-

ward to manoeuvre. He guides her onto his lap. She settles herself and proceeds.)

MAEVE Am I doin' it right?

OWENEY Oh yeah. This is exactly how I shaved little Tommy Day the other day here now... The face of yeh!

MAEVE Stay quiet will yeh.

OWENEY Huh?

(She tries to scrape away the hairs with her fingers and she blows on his face to see how she is doing. He takes her by the hand and, holding the razor at bay, he kisses her softly through the shaving foam. Pause)

MAEVE Mmn... That's enough of that I think.

(She rises.)

OWENEY You're not supposed to leave a man with half a beard.

MAEVE And you're not supposed to kiss the barber.

OWENEY I couldn't help it. I was under the influence.

MAEVE Of what?

OWENEY Eh... You.

MAEVE (tossing him a towel) What's in there?

OWENEY (wiping the foam from his face) My room.

MAEVE Oh!... Right... The Mohican, hah! (a photograph)

OWENEY Huh?... Oh yeah, young Corcoran. I did that yeh know.

MAEVE I know. I was in the crowd sure.

OWENEY Yeah, a big crowd gathered round the shop and everything. I was like Salvador Dali or someone! Probably get me lynched of course but... that's what he wanted.

MAEVE Young fellas, hah!

OWENEY Mmn... I never saw you out there.

MAEVE I was incognito.... (She looks at herself in the mirror.) I'd say she was fairly good lookin' when she was young yeh

know... Richie's wife? You can still see the ghost of it there somewhere — when yeh look close. (She shudders and turns away...) What kind of a haircut did you want when you were a young lad? Wild I suppose?

OWENEY Real neat, I was a bit of a mod, like yeh know. Dancin' to little Tommy Day and the boys. (He sings and dances.) I've Been Told When A Boy Meets A Girl. He Takes A Trip Around The World. Hey Hey Bop Chew Wha Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha Hey Hey Bop Chew Wha Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha... MAEVE (dancing about) Bop Bop Chew Wha Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha...

OWENEY Hey Hey Now Mama. That's What I Say.

MAEVE Bop Chew Wha Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha...

OWENEY They'd slow it right down then and you'd wrap yourself around some young one. The Answer To Everything or somethin'...

MAEVE Bop Chew Wha. Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha...

OWENEY (sings) Don't Ask Me. A Mountain Of Questions...

MAEVE And yeh took all your girls back here I suppose did yeh?

OWENEY One or two of them, yeah — when me Da wasn't lookin'. In fact this is where Pauline told me the bad news. Over there somewhere. (He sings.) If You Love Me. Really Love Me. As I Love You... (Sad pause)

MAEVE Why did yeh leave your family Oweeney?

OWENEY I didn't. Pauline put me out.

MAEVE Why, what did yeh do?

OWENEY Oh I don't know. Ramblin' and gamblin' and stayin' out late at night and all.

MAEVE Yeh still see them though, don't yeh?

play excerpt

OWENEY Oh yeah — all the time. Although my oldest girl Sharon is still not talkin' to me. She turns away or crosses the street whenever she sees me comin' now. Which is a bit awkward because the young lad wants me to spend Christmas Day with them, like yeh know, and Pauline said that might be alright but Sharon insists she won't stay there if I come so.... I don't really know what to do.

MAEVE I asked PJ. one time if he'd like to have children someday and he just shook his head... Do you wear glasses Oweeney?

OWENEY For readin', yeah. How about you?

MAEVE Who wants to know?

OWENEY (chuckles) I'd like to see you with glasses now. Nothin' else, just glasses.

(She laughs, puts on Oweeney's glasses and struts.)

MAEVE Bop Chew Wha Bop Bop Bop Chew Wha...

(Pause)

OWENEY Pauline's seein' someone else now yeh know. I saw the two of them crossin' the square the other day there, holdin' hands. Although she says it's just platonic but... I don't know. All of a sudden she's a bit of a mystery to me again.

MAEVE I used to think PJ.'s silence meant he was mysterious but I'm not so sure any more now... I hate that house, Oweeney. It's like livin' in a fortress I swear — alarms and cameras and all the rest of it. He says there's a limit to the time I can keep the shop too, that if I don't make a go of it fairly soon he's goin' to take it back from me. He thinks that'll stop me but it won't. Cause I want to do somethin' Oweeney, yeh know. I want to be someone — in my own right!

Yeh know? Not just attached to someone else all the time. I know that probably makes me sound like a bit of a bitch and all but I don't care... Mind you I'll probably only be gettin' on my feet when he'll want to move again. Cause he never stays put. When he's here he wants to be there. When he's there he wants to be somewhere else. And he wants to knock everything down — the house where he was born in case somebody sees it, the old hotel for spite, the whole neighbourhood if necessary. Anything but stand still. Sure we had a lovely little orchard at the back of the house and he tore it down to build a poolroom. And he don't even play pool like!.... I mean I don't really know anyone any more Oweeney, yeh know. I mean I've no real friends or anything. And I'm not sayin' it's all PJ.'s fault or anythin'. It's not. It's mine. I mean I'm probably not whatdoyoucallit... I don't know... likeable or somethin'!

OWENEY Of course you're likeable... Well I like yeh anyway.

MAEVE Yeah but do yeh though Oweeney or do yeh just like what yeh see, like?

OWENEY Oh no I hate what I see.... Ah... Hah? (He pretends to spit, etc.)

MAEVE (going to him) Do yeh know what I mean though Oweeney?

OWENEY Yeah I know what yeh mean but the grass is wet.

MAEVE What?

(She pretends to slap him. He takes her in his arms and draws her to him and she snuggles into him.)

MAEVE Oh you...

OWENEY Oh you yeh mean!
(They kiss.)

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New Directions

PETER CRAWLEY charts comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

CIARA NÍ SHÚILLEABHÁIN (pictured) is leaving her position as administrator of Druid Theatre Company to become festival manager of the Cork Mid-summer Festival. The company is reviewing its management structure before advertising any positions... **HELEN PATTERSON** is the new administrator of Daghda Dance Company... **CERSTIN GUNDLACH** has taken up the new post of marketing and development officer with Fishamble Theatre Company.

PAT TALBOT (pictured) has left his position as production manager of the Gate Theatre to become the new artistic director of the Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork. **JAMES McCONNELL**, previously the Gate Theatre's technical manager, is now that theatre's production manager. His duties as technician are to be subsumed in his new role, aided by appointment of **VAL KEOGH** in the newly created position of production co-ordinator.

KAREN LOUISE HEBDEN has resigned as director of the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire. The Arts Council's former drama officer, **PHELIM DONLON**, will manage the venue until the board makes a new appointment.



KATHY McARDLE has resigned as artistic director of Project Arts Centre. The position will be advertised in January...

FINTAN O'TOOLE is the new chief theatre critic of *The Irish Times*... **JUDY FRIEL** has left her position as literary manager of the Abbey Theatre. **RICHARD WAKELY** is leaving his position as the Abbey's managing director in April to pursue international arts production, representation and consultancy. His position and the newly-created job of marketing director have been advertised...

Yew Tree Theatre Company recently hired **ORLA SCANNELL** as company administrator... **LOUISE ROSSINGTON** is the new administrator for Big Telly, and **BERNIE MCGILL** is now their funds/development manager... The Lyric Theatre's new administrator is **MIKE BLAIR**. The theatre has advertised for an administrative assistant, education officer, marketing manager, and marketing officer.

SITUATIONS VACANT: ISLAND THEATRE COMPANY has advertised for an administrator; this is a new position... **THE IRISH COLLEGE, PARIS**, which will open this autumn, has advertised for a director.

opinions & overviews

AG CLAI NA MUICE DUBHÉ (AT THE BLACK PIG'S DYKE)

by Vincent Woods

An Taibhdhearc, Galway
17-25 July 2001; reviewed 24 July
BY JEANNINE WOODS

INIÚCHADH CORRAITHEACH AR EILIMINTÍ miotaseolafochta agus deasghnáthacha an tseicteachais agus an fhoiréigin, is aistriúchán é *Ag Clai na Muice Duibhe* de *At the Black Pig's Dyke* le Vincent Woods, é léirithe i d'Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe mar chuid de Fhéile Ealaíne na Gaillimhe na bliana seo, maraon leis an gceádléiriú ionráite den dráma sa Druid Theatre i nGaillimh i 1991, tá an saothar seo léirithe ag Maeliosa Stafford.

Oscláíonn an dráma le grúpa cleamairí ag teacht ar choirp Lizzie Boles agus a hinón Sarah. Cuirtear an dráma os ár gcomhair i bhfoirm sraith iardhearcanna, ag insint scéal Lizzie, Caitliceach óg agus Jack, fear Protastúnach, a bhriseann geis an phobail trí titim i ngrá lena chéile. Éalaíonn an lánúin trasna na teorainn go Fear Manach, ach níl aon éalú ón treibheachas nó ón bhfoiréigean seicteach, a thagann chun buaice le dúnmharaithe an triúir priomhphearsana.

Agus iad mar lármóitíf sa dráma, tá ceol, damhsa agus geáitsí na gcleamairí ar na heilimintí is taibhsí de. Mar eiseamhláir de shean-nósanna a mhaireann i measc an phobail, tá ról ilfheidhmiúil ag na cleamairí atá mar ranrnpháirtíthe agus mar reachtairí aroa, iad mar shiombail fosta ar dháthaobhachas na miotaseolaíochta agus an dheasghnáthachais. Tríd síos sa saothar, gluaiseann an chleamairéach idir bheith mar fhoinsé seánbhunaithe siamsa a nascann an pobal agus fórsa drochthuarach, bagartha. Oibríonn fearais chinn na gcleamairí, cuid dá bhfeisteas traidisíonta, mar mhascanna ar féidir

seicteachas brúidiúil a imirt ar a gcomharsana faoina glúdach.

Comhlánaíonn dearadh Monica Frawley, dearadh dúsitheach soilse Eamonn Fox agus cultacha samhláiocha Orfhlaith Stafford a chéile chun léiriú a thabhairt ar dhébhriocht na cleamaireachta. Trí usáid soilsithe agus ceoil, gluaiseann spás an státse idir bheith mar shuiomh grinn agus siamsa go spás lán de sceimhle ina nimritear ainghníomhartha. Cuireann an lomchodarsnacht leis an uafás a bhrathimid roimh na heachtraí a thiteann amach.

Tá príomhphearsana an dráma curtha i láthair go cumachtach ag roinnt de na haisteoirí is iomráití i ndrámaíocht na Gaeilge. Múscláíonn Lizzie (Bríd Ní Neachtain) agus Sarah (Audrey Ní Fhearghail) comhbhbá mar mhná misniúla ag iarraidh dul in airde ar an fhuath sheicteach, an fhuath céanna a chránn agus a mharaíonn iad ar deireadh thiar. Cuireann Macdara ó Fátharta brúidiúlacht Frank Byrne, poblachtánach a mhaitear a bheith freagrach as dúnmarú Jack, i láthair go fuarchúiseach ó thus. Tugann Pádraic ó Tuairisc léiriú den scoth ar Tom na Gaoise, an t-amadán a bhfuil a bhladhmann seafóideach mar ábhar grinn agus mar thráchtairéach ar ghaolta pobail agus daonna ar aon.

Múscláíonn an saothar ceisteanna faoi chiorcalachas an fhoiréigin sheictigh agus faoi chumas an mhiotaí luachanna agus gníomhartha an phobail a dheachtú. Cuirtear béim ar an gcíordadh sin agus ábhar is struchtúr an dráma a bheith fite fuaite le chéile go cumasach. Tuigimíod, trí na hiardhearcanna, gurb iad eachtraí san am atá that is cúis le céadfhís thragóideach an dráma, eachtraí a bhaineann le glúnta marbha, nach mó. Druideann an saothar ón nadúrachas, ag leagadh béim ar an bpróiseas

cruthaitheach ag bun an mhiotais agus na staire.

Tá aistriúchán saineolaíoch déanta ag Séamas Ó Scolaí ar an dráma, é líonta le nathanna saibhreacha Gaeilge ar bhealach a chinntionn go bhfanann an léiriú Gaeilge gar d'en bhunleagan. De thoradh ar sin, tá na laigeachtaí céanna le brath anseo is atá sa leagan Béarla. Is mórsheimplíú ar na deighiltí i gCúige Uladh an

taireacht oideach ag an dráma gur gá athmhúnlú a dhéanamh ar mhiotais agus ar an stair ar mhaith le hathmhuintearas. Ina léiriú ar na fadhbanna agus an réiteach a mholann sé, teipeann ar an saothar dul i gkleic le deacrachartaí casta na coimhlinte.

Is dócha gur iarracht atá sa dráma seo druidim ó léirithe náisiúnacha traidisiúnta ar stair na hÉireann, a bhíodh go mór



STRAW BOYS: At the Black Pig's Dyke

léiriú diobh mar chinn a eascraíonn as pobal (go háirthe an pobal náisiúnach, atá curtha i láthair mar phríomhghníomhairí sa choimhlint nimhneach) atá mar phríosúnaigh ag miotas agus ag an am atá thart. In ainneoin an dúshláin a thugann sé do 'fhírcí' stairiúla agus iad a bheith inghlactha gan ceistiú, tá teach-

chun cinn i ndrámaíocht na tíre seo le fada an lá. Ar deireadh thiart, áfach, ní dhéanann sé ach dearccanna ceannasacha iar-náisiúnacha a scáthánú. Déanann Ag Cláí na Muice Duibhe iniúchadh ar teorannacha idir agus i measc pobal. Mar sin is cúis foróine é gur beag na teorannacha atá trasnaithe aige féin i dtaobh a léamh ar an

gcoimhlint sheicteach nō ar mheán na drámaíochta mar mhodh léirithe uirthi, é ag fanacht laistigh de pheirspictíochtaí coinbhínseanta.

AN EMOTIVE EXPLORATION OF THE mythological and ritual underpinnings of sectarian violence, *Ag Cláí na Muice Duibhe*, staged in the Taibhdhearc Theatre as part of this year's Galway Arts Festival, is a translation of Vincent Woods' *At the Black Pig's Dyke*. As with the original production, which was famously premiered at Druid in Galway in 1991, this version is directed by Maeliosa Stafford.

The work opens with a group of mummers finding the bodies of Lizzie Boles and her daughter Sarah, and unfolds as a series of extended flashbacks which tell the story of Lizzie, a young Catholic, and Jack, a Protestant, who break community taboos by falling in love. The couple elope across the border to Fermanagh, but cannot escape the pervasive and violent tribalism which culminates in the murders of all three main characters.

The music, dancing, and carnivalesque antics of the mummers, who serve as a central motif throughout the piece, provide elements of spectacle. As a manifestation of traditional customs still practiced by the community, the mummers act both as participants in and narrators of the drama in which they symbolise the dual aspects of myth and ritual. Mumming shifts from being an ancient form of entertainment which brings the community together to a sinister, threatening force. The mummers' pointed straw headdresses, part of their traditional costume, mutate into masks, under cover of which acts of brutal sectarianism are committed against their neighbours.

Monica Frawley's set design, Eamonn Fox's evocative lighting, and the imagi-

native costumes of Orfhlaithe Stafford complement one another in portraying the ambivalent nature of the mumming tradition. Through changes in lighting and music, the stage space shifts from a site of comedy and entertainment to one of menace and foreboding where atrocities are carried out. The stark contrast reinforces our sense of horror at what takes place.

The main characters are powerfully played by some of the most renowned actors in Irish language theatre. Lizzie (Bríd Ní Neachtain) and Sarah (Audrey Ní Fhearghail) engender empathy and compassion as women seeking to transcend the sectarian bitterness which surrounds them. Macdara Ó Fátharta chillingly portrays the barbarity of Frank Byrne, a republican implicated in Jack's murder. Pádraic Ó Tuairisc gives a superb performance as Tom na Gaoise, the fool whose nonsensical ramblings are both comical and incisive in their commentary on human and community relations.

The play raises questions about the cyclical nature of sectarian violence and the role of myth in shaping community actions and values. These concerns are highlighted by an interweaving of form and content. The flashback sequences identify the causes of the present tragedy as particular interpretations of and reactions to past events, which concern dead generations for the most part. The drama's shifts from naturalism emphasise the processes of invention inherent in myth and history.

The play is expertly translated by Séamus Ó Scolaí, displaying rich, idiomatic language which relates closely to the original. As such, this Irish language production shares the difficulties of its original counterpart. The portrayal of divisions in Ulster as the product of a community

(and particularly the nationalist community, represented as the primary agents of sectarian violence) imprisoned by the past is highly simplistic and problematic. In spite of its challenging of historical "truths" which are unquestioningly accepted by the community, the drama is nonetheless didactic in positing the need for the reinvention of myth and historical perspectives in the interests of reconciliation. Both in its representations and prescriptions, the work fails to address the multiple and complex difficulties of the conflict.

This play can be seen as an attempted shift from traditionally nationalist representations of Irish history which have long dominated in Irish theatre. However, the alternative offered here is contained firmly within dominant post-nationalist perspectives. *Ag Clai na Muice Duibhe* is primarily a questioning of boundaries and borders within and between communities. It is therefore ironic that its own border crossings, in terms both of its reading of sectarian conflict in Ireland and of drama as a means of its representation, are strictly circumscribed by conventional perspectives.

Jeannine Woods lectures in the Department of English at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

BLITHE SPIRIT by Noël Coward

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

5 July – 1 September 2001;

reviewed 23 July

BY PETER CRAWLEY

THERE'S MORE THAN ONE GHOST haunting this production.

While the spirit of nostalgia may be blithe at times, the long-expired targets of dated satire can turn quite beastly. During

one of the worst years in the blitz of World War II, with his city under attack and his friends dying, Noël Coward wrote a comedy about death. To add to the subversion he took pot shots at contemporary bugbears such as the media, satirised the trap of marriage, and ended the play by allowing his hero to escape from two wives and, implicitly, from the stifling bonds of heterosexual union. Alan Stanford's production of this mannered comedy may recognise the subversive undertones lurking below Coward's sedate repartee, but ultimately it skims along the silver lining and forsakes the dark cloud of *Blithe Spirit*'s content. Aggrieved phantoms, though, can still rattle some chains.

In the Condomines' reserved and thoroughly modern barn conversion, the starched Charles and his second wife Ruth expect the arrival of their friends and one novel inclusion. Madame Arcati, an eccentric mystic, has been invited to dinner so that Charles can plunder a few details ("jargon, principally") for his next novel about an impostor medium. It just so happens, however, that Charles's deceased first wife may have some after-life in her yet. Conjured up by a séance, Elvira starts re-seducing her widower while wreaking all manner of poltergeist palaver.

Clearly speaking their barbed lines and not bumping into Bruno Schwengel's Art Deco furniture, Risteárd Cooper and Justine Mitchell make an attractively uncreased couple on a gorgeously sharp set. "I love you, love," Cooper's Charles intones, as angular as his fireplace and as warm as his geometric painting. Such attention to character detail is high among the production's strengths. Adding another comic dimension to the humorous interplay, director Alan Stanford extends Coward's aloof witticisms

opinions & overviews

into physical gags. When alone, the Condomines already stand with frosty deportment. In social company with Dr and Mrs Bradman, the players suddenly snap even more rigid. In general, these absurd affectations of the British upper classes provide most of the show's mirth. Often though, there's an uneasy sense of audience empathy with their haughty prejudices.

Escapist entertainment has always been played out in the carefree environs of those much, much richer than you or me. Royalty, the nobility, or plain old millionaires provide a refuge from the mundane terrors of our comparatively proletarian lives. Generally their values are not quite our own, but we understand their conventions. When Charles coyly reveals the shameful secret of their dismissed maid — "The reason was getting increasingly obvious" — the laughter is that of the tourist in such a household, not of the resident. But when Susan Fitzgerald's Madame Arcati arrives, meek and benign, with a rolling cadence in her shrill voice to match her eccentricity, identification becomes more problematic. Indians don't make good psychic controls, she tells the gathering, because they are "frightfully lazy and naturally unintelligible." The line gets quite a laugh, and it's hard to excuse it as simple satire. For this reviewer, the phantoms of an abandoned class have just gone bump in the night.

By the time the inadvertently summoned spirit of Elvira flits onstage, (Fiona O'Shaughnessy gliding on ballet shoes, from head to toe in netherworld grey) the proceedings become more animated. Torn between two lovers, Charles becomes something of a trans-national bigamist as O'Shaughnessy's flighty Elvira and Mitchell's tightly fretful Ruth compete for



HAPPY MEDIUM: *Blithe Spirit*

his attentions and affections. And then it all goes slapstick. Misunderstandings in the dialogue between absent spirits and material figures provide most of the chuckles, but beyond the text, the production simply adds a steady stream of mugging. With mouth down-turned and eyebrows arched, Cooper throws knowing looks towards the audience, as when, for example, Elvira's hand drifts towards his crotch, or he farcically mimics to a record-

ed piano... How very droll.

Amid this contemporary clowning, satirical arrows shoot out at Coward's passé antagonisms. The writer lampoons Irving Berlin (Daphne, a dead child, likes a tune she can hum), BBC musical programmes (Elvira died laughing at one), and the standard of the 1940s media ("Is there anything interesting in *The Times*?" "Don't be silly Charles."). Coward's ornate wit has certainly not tarnished and posterity may soften potential obsolescence, but only octogenarians or historians of popular culture would be tempted to roll in the aisles.

This might not be so contentious were it not for an awkwardness that pervades the stage. Amid the ingenuity of Schwengl's supernaturally manipulated set, O'Shaughnessy's lithe spirit hops, skips, and dances through her every scene, at times demurely, but often aimlessly (as when she panics over a fatal car accident of her engineering). With no choreographer credited, one wonders if she was simply encouraged to gracefully "move about a bit." Lacking precision, the character's ethereality flounders and her Betty-Boop-meets-Grace-Kelly portrayal becomes quite grating. Mitchell's suffering Ruth is more sympathetic and believably commandeering, while Fitzgerald's Madame Arcati provides the bulk of comic relief at the expense of being sympathetic. On the night of viewing, Arcati's indignant exit, upon learning of how cynically she had been exploited by the Condomines, was met with a fond cheer from the audience.

Like an encounter with a playful apparition, there were moments of intriguing spectacle and wonder, but with Coward's loaded jokes and largely ignored subtext, the production ended up with ectoplasm on its face.

THE CARNIVAL KING by Ian Kilroy

Fishamble Theatre Company

Bank of Ireland Theatre, NUI Galway and
on tour; Reviewed 27 July 2001

BY IAN WIECZOREK

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BILLY ROCHE'S Wexford and Martin McDonagh's Leenane, in a small town near John B. Keane's eponymous field, lies the notional geographic and cultural territory of Ian Kilroy's *The Carnival King*. Kilroy's first work for the theatre, it premiered as part of a notably depleted drama programme at this year's Galway Arts Festival in a production by Dublin's Fishamble. Kilroy has eschewed the excesses of the Rural Gothic tradition, but his evocation of Rural Town with a Dark Secret still rings familiar to the ears. The *Deliverance*-style Cajun music at the start leaves us in no doubt as to our location: the now-familiar terrain of Darkest Irish Hicksville.

The play's narrative unfolds in the claustrophobic environs of a lounge bar. Publican Christy Ruane believes that his sister Kate's brutal murder the previous year was at the hands of her husband, the rough and taciturn Cathal Lynch. However, due to lack of evidence and the perceived ineptitude of the local Garda sergeant, Lynch continues about his business unhindered, fuelling Ruane's burning desire for revenge. Along with his partner-in-crime Phillis Derrane, Ruane decides to take matters into his own hands by eliciting a murder confession from Lynch that will finally earn the justice he seeks.

With the naïve assistance of Ruane's young assistant barman Francis Devine, events come to a head during the town's annual Carnival. With Ruane elected as Carnival King, and a good bit of drink taken, the plan is put into effect and a kan-



KANGAROO COURT: Gerard Byrne and Eamonn Hunt in *The Carnival King*

garoo court is convened at which Lynch is summarily judged and sentenced to death by hanging. However matters spiral out of control as hate and revenge come to the fore, confessions are forgotten, and actions spiral to a dramatic if ambiguous first act climax. The second act starts in the uncertainty of the previous night's capers and no sign of Lynch or his body, and finally introduces the buffoonish sergeant Justin Courtney, whom Ruane presents with Lynch's taped confession, which he believes will bring his sister's case to a successful close.

One of the main problems with *The Carnival King* is its unevenness. The elemental themes of murder and revenge, presented through archetypal characters, suggests more than a passing nod towards deep-rooted folkloric tradition. Even the characters' names are invested with significance — the religious Devine, the law-upholding Justin Courtney, and of course victim Lynch. However the sec-

ond half of the play unexpectedly dissolves into a rather jolly whodunnit as the audience is led from one unlikely revelation to the next, replete with twists and reversals, in the search for a cathartic resolution.

There are also stylistic inconsistencies, and Kilroy seems uncertain as to how far to flesh out his characters. We are given intriguing flashes of characterisation and motivation, particularly in the case of Francis Devine, the most potentially interesting of the play's characters, only to see them remain unresolved. The question hangs: are we watching a Carnival pageant with traditional archetypes or are we dealing with real people and the complexities and trivialities of the human condition? Unfortunately in this case the unsatisfactory answer lies somewhere in between.

This uncertainty has also permeated Fishamble's production, under the direction of Jim Culleton. From the brooding,

COLM HOGAN

ominous opening, through the limited character development and narrative mise en scène and the anarchic mayhem of the kangaroo court, it finally loses itself in an embarrassing morass of implausible stage-Irishness and disjunction. By the final curtain any sense of atmosphere or drama has been thoroughly wrung out of the proceedings, and a final ghostly twist becomes almost laughable. Without firm anchorage, the cast have a thankless task as characterisation remains elusive, and the resultant lack of conviction is hardly surprising.

The Carnival King's initial premise is an interesting one, and the darker aspects of the first act would suggest that there is a rich seam to be mined. However, Kilroy has attempted too broad a canvas with no clear sense of his intentions, and as a result finds itself in a dramatic no man's land: a play about carnival that unfortunately ends up as pantomime.

Ian Wieczorek is a Mayo-based writer and critic.

DEATH AND THE PLOUGHMAN

**by Johannes von Saaz,
translated by Michael West**

Comédie de Reims
in association with Project
6-21 July 2001; reviewed 21 July

BY PETER CRAWLEY

DEATH IS ALWAYS LURKING IN THE SHADOWS. We know it's there, but we can scarcely perceive it. Unseen yet sensed, known yet unknowable, the great leveller is fearsome, unaccountable and unreasonable.

In response to the threat of that void, cultural history the world over has given death a form (if rarely a face), and, for artistic interrogation, dragged it squinting into the spotlight. With *Death and the*

Ploughman we are shown, apparently, the first personification of Death in western European literature. Six hundred years ago the bereaved Bohemian courtier Johannes Von Saaz put Death himself on trial. This summer the French theatre La Comédie de Reims in conjunction with Dublin's Project put him on the stand once more.

The themes and effect of *Death and the Ploughman* are perfectly frozen into its set. An enormous arch stretches from the heavens above, rolling seamlessly onto the earth below, curving in a way that skews proportion and disarms interpretation. Illuminated with slivers of light from the sides, the expanse is dominated by a small void — a square hole, roughly centre, that lures the focus and plunges it into the black unknown. This image impresses itself upon the senses before the intellect gets a chance to kick in, and transports the audience to a realm outside that of either heaven or earth. We begin with a stage but move far beyond the theatre.

Aggrieved and desolate, Owen Roe as the Ploughman (reading in for Gerard McSorley, who took ill) remonstrates against the arbitrary and unjust reaper who has stolen his young wife at childbirth. Intoning a softly lamenting argument that neither shifts target nor abates in tone, the Ploughman is motivated more by emotion than reason. Stirred by such slander, Death (Lalor Roddy) answers the Ploughman's summons and the two engage in what is effectively a legal argument that swings ponderously back and forth like a pendulum. A series of speeches rather than a dialogue, it has the thoughtful lyricism and uninterrupted assertions that would fit a carefully ornate correspondence. That it is not natural is, of course, partly the point. That the encounter doesn't really develop, inform,

opinions & overviews

nor enlighten is somehow irrelevant. It merely happens.

And Christian Schiaretti's direction allows it happen in such a misty, transcendental way that the audience drifts along. Think ferryman over the river Styx... but cooler.



STROPY REAPER: Lalor Roddy as Death

Beginning high on the set, piercing through the darkness with his gaunt visage, Roddy's apparition gradually descends to the level of the mortal — and as the argument persists, so do his responses. Death starts out polite, man-

nored, erudite and, it seems, a little sensitive about his bad rap. The Ploughman is solemn, earnest, and boring as hell. Beneath the decorous speech the exchanges, at times, become tantamount to childish name-calling: "O brazen assassin!" remonstrates the Ploughman, "O evil incarnate!" he continues, even, curiously, wishing death upon Death. "Truly, you are an intelligent ass," counters a stroppy reaper.

By turns reasonable, consoling and exasperated, Death is armed with all the music of the text. Whether Roddy carefully imparts descriptions of human sorrow, describes the benevolent indifference of the reaper's scythe, or sardonically holds mankind up to ridicule, it is a joy to listen to him. Despite the grievance that set the play in motion, Death is portrayed as a darkly attractive character, bolstered by his ironic immortality and the power of his actions. The charming rogue is well served by Roddy whose body portrays a spectre at once weary and sprightly, crouching over the void with refined menace.

Indeed, what is truly bracing about von Saaz's text as translated by Michael West is not that death has been given shape, but that he is given the best lines, the more sympathetic characterisation, and the upper hand in almost every instance. For the writer, translator, and actor, perhaps it was a case of: if you can't beat him, enjoy him.

The curious pull between the legal trappings of the debate and the spirituality of its meditation makes this piece both contemporary and antiquated. Legal compensation is still the resort of a human vanity that won't take fate lying down — balance is possible if you kick up a fuss. Unswerving spirituality, however, seems not as comforting a res-

olution in an increasingly secularised modern world.

It's easy to suggest parallels between pre-Reformation Bohemia and contemporary Ireland, but harder to support them. Where the questions asked about the church by Bohemian religious reformer John Huss (burned as a heretic, but not before he had inspired a legion of followers) were geared towards a communal alternative, contemporary Ireland seems to be shrugging off the grasp of church for more individual, materialist alternatives. It is enchanting that Christian Schiaretti invests the production with the lilt of a hymn, the headiness of incense, and the form of a prayer. That it comes off more as guided meditation than faith-restoring consolation is, perhaps, a sign of the times.

EDUCATING RITA by Willy Russell

The Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

5 – 28 July 2001; reviewed 7 July

BY NICK McGINLEY

WILLY RUSSELL'S CLASSIC CROWD-PLEASER returned this summer as an in-house production at the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire. Like most stage plays that have been successfully filmed, it is difficult to wrestle an independent life for it back on the stage. This is especially the case for Irish audiences, as much of that 1983 film was shot in and around Trinity College, Dublin. I did wonder how I was going to banish Michael Caine and Julie Walters from my mind, but once Barry McGovern and Maxine Fone had taken the stage all was well, and pleasingly different.

Rita is a brash, Liverpudlian hairdresser who is hell-bent on self-improvement. She enrolls herself for tutorials on English literature at a local university, where she is assigned Frank,

"a self-pitying piss artist" as her lecturer. Frank is a failed poet, who goes through the motions to fund his drinking, but discovers in Rita a renewed interest in, well, getting out of bed. In escaping the vicious circles of her working class background, she discovers that her newly acquired educated status brings just as many traps. Rita possesses the zealot's enthusiasm for learning, deceiving herself that once she "knows it all," she will be happy, whereas Frank is resigned to the fact that despite his impressive erudition, he knows nothing.

Although this is a thinly disguised variation on *Pygmalion*, *Educating Rita* is a nicely written love story, even if ultimately chaste. Some of the one-liners have aged since its 1980 debut, but they still effectively tickle the funny bone. McGovern lumbers around with the requisite world-weariness, only to have a boyish spring-in-the-step rediscovered with the arrival of Rita. Maxine Fone harnesses the fog-horn coquettishness of Rita to the dual tasks of challenging and charming both Frank and the audience. Thankfully, as Fone is a Liverpool native, this is not a case of perfecting the accent and forgetting about the performance, as she excels with a hyper-energetic portrayal of a determined housewife.

Clichés do, however, abound in Russell's text, especially with the offstage characterisations of Rita's reliably brutish husband and her pretentious new college flatmate. Indeed, Frank is a walking cliché, but an eminently forgiveable one, as I have met many, many Franks in a few universities I've been to. Overall, we are presented with nicely-judged performances from both McGovern and Fone in this engaging two-hander. My only quibble is that much more effort is given to servicing the gags than



WHO'S TEACHING WHO? Barry McGovern and Maxine Fone in *Educating Rita*

to creating a believable vulnerability in both characters. No throat-lumps were fashioned here and an emotional punch is missed that is competently glossed over by comic timing.

The set from Karen Weavers provides us with exactly what we would fantasise an old-fashioned lecturer's room would be like, even if we would be deceiving ourselves (but then again, it is only theatre) and it is expertly lit by Eamon Fox. The high point of this particular performance for me was undoubtedly when a particularly boisterous audience member joined in: Rita returns from her swanky London summer school with a present for a disgruntled Frank, to which the shouted suggestion was "a hang sandwich." It got the biggest laugh of the

night — but like I say, with good timing, you can get away with anything. This was perfectly undemanding entertainment for summer evenings in pleasant surroundings.

Nick McGinley studied drama at TCD, film production at DIT, is a freelance script editor, and writes for RTÉ Online and Aertel.

**GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER DO
(ANWOTE MIR) by Brian Friel**

Schlosserei,
Cologne City Theatre, Germany
Reviewed 2 July 2001 BY HAROLD FISH

IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING WORLD today, Brian Friel is best known through the 30 or so German-language produc-

tions of *Molly Sweeney* that have been realised in the last five to six years. A radio version of *Faith Healer*, as well, received extensive recent broadcasts. But overall there is no obvious pattern to Friel productions in Germany; no single theatre seems to want to specialise in or focus upon his work. Productions tend to be one-offs like this German-language premiere of his most recent full-length play, *Give Me Your Answer Do*, originally produced at the Abbey in 1997.

I attended the production on a torrid summer night and was struck by the heterogeneity of the audience — a wonderful mix of ages and apparently of class as well. And the audience's response to the production was overwhelming. Their applause was so loud and sustained that the actors seemed clearly thrilled and moved.

The story that so excited this audience is certainly a dark one — that of a writer, Tom, who having had little success in recent years, is considering a lucrative deal to sell his complete archive to a Texas university. His wife, Daisy, might have been a fine concert pianist but is now "into the drink." When the university's representative arrives at Tom and Daisy's West of Ireland home to look at the archive, two missing works are rediscovered — what Tom calls "pornographic" novels written at the time his daughter Bridget went into a mental hospital. The play hinges on the unanswered question concerning the timing of these questionable books. (To this viewer, that one of the plays is named for the daughter and the proximity of the time of writing to her being committed certainly hints at incest.) The audience is kept in the dark throughout even though it seems that all the characters know the answer, and possibly those to some of

the other questions that hang over each of them; but everyone is unwilling, or unable, to discuss anything.

The Schlosserei, the experimental stage of the Cologne City Theatre, is situated under the main auditorium, in a cellar with two very prominent and awkward structural pillars about a yard from the front row. The set was made up primarily of a large wooden slatted floor area with the sides out beyond the pillars containing many rotting pieces of wood, creating an impression of creeping decay. Empty bottles were plentiful both on the floor and on the large windowsill that was the "backdrop" of the set.

The crucial opening scene with Tom (Jochen Tovote) visiting Bridget (Gunda Aurich) in hospital is played with Tom against one of the pillars and Bridget against the other about 15 yards away — the physical distance reflecting the "mental" distance between father and daughter. At the same time it was possible to see, in the gloom of the central section of the stage but out of scene, Tom's wife Daisy (Birgit Walter) sitting drunkenly. I found this simultaneously both too explicit and too simple. If there was a weakness in Volker Schmalöer's direction it was in the portrayal of Daisy, which had her lolling and lurching from the very start with little development and only the occasional not-so-subtle, knowing look, particularly when the delicate issue of Bridget arose.

Another oversimplification was in the depiction of Daisy's father Jack Donovan (Ralf Harster) who is presented as a decadent Fred Astaire, complete with cane and straw hat. The crucial scene when Jack is revealed to have stolen a wallet was, however, played with delicacy and pathos, Jack's kleptomania being one of the few "secrets" that actually surfaces during the play. Bruno Winzen, who

opinions & overviews

played the Texas archivist, was the weak link in the cast, often inaudible and too quick with unsubtle movement. Elfi Garden as Daisy's mother Maggie Donovan, however, was impeccable in her movement and voice control; she left the audience in no doubt that she was the only character who knew what lay behind the silences.

While I found significant weaknesses in the production, they did not seem to bother the audience, who were gripped throughout and whose response was unprecedented in my experience of German theatre. Given their enthusiasm perhaps, hopefully, we might seem more of Friel's work in the extremely active German-speaking theatre world.

Harold Fish, former director of the British Council in Ireland, now lives in Bonn.

KVETCH by Steven Berkoff

Kilkenny Arts Festival

9-19 August 2001; reviewed 11 August

BY KAREN FRICKER

THERE ARE FEW THINGS AS SATISFYING as a good rant, and as ranters go, there are few better than Steven Berkoff. At their best the London playwright's works feel like an exhilarating venting of collective societal spleen — good, dirty, necessary fun. Amazingly, Berkoff's 1986 play *Kvetch* had never had a professional Irish production before this summer, when director Conall Morrison and an excellent cast gave it a full-welly outing for the Kilkenny Arts Festival.

The play was originally set in Los Angeles, where it was first performed, and was subsequently revised with English place names and turns of phrase for its first London outing in 1991. Here, in turn, it's been adapted for an Irish setting,

and slots in perfectly to an Ireland increasingly plagued by contemporary urban woes: overcrowding, traffic, work-place pressures, racism, crime, disease — oh, we all know the litany. And it drives us fucking nuts, right? Well, how purging it feels to take a trip to Berkoff-land, where the characters get to do and say all the hateful, destructive things we've all thought ourselves as we've sat on that delayed train, endured that interminable shop queue, were deafened by that umpteenth mobile phone text message bleep...

The conceit of the play is that the characters speak their inner monologues directly to the audience as they play out recognisable, banal scenes of domestic discomfort. What Berkoff is staging is the neurosis underneath normality; Morrison brilliantly establishes the theme with a shameless metatheatrical prank before the action "really" starts. The house lights dim but nothing happens, for an increasingly uncomfortable amount of time, until an audience member starts to give out loudly, and eventually storms the stage. Turns out, of course, it's one of the actors, Philip Judge (amusingly wearing a t-shirt with the production's logo on it, a cartoon version of the Munch *Scream*), performing Berkoff's introduction to the play, an obsessive listing of urban fears.

Then the story kicks in: Businessman Hal (Seán Kearns) brings his colleague Frank (Peter Hanly) home for dinner; Hal's wife Donna (Karen Ardif) frets madly over the meal, while Donna's mother (Nuala Hayes) fires out nonsequiters and deadly farts. Dramaturgically, the play's rhythm is all over the place and really shouldn't work: the first dinner scene is so distended it could be a play in and of itself. But the company just perform the hell out of it, and their energy



HEY! WATCH WHERE YOU PUT YER...: Judge, Hanly, and Kearns in Kvetch

is infectious: it's right around the time that Hanly, delivering Frank's aria of anxiety about having his new friends over to his house, walks straight into the orchestra pit, that the audience realise that whooping and heckling are more than appropriate here, they're downright called for.

Morrison has cast well: the actors all have superb physical and vocal control and good comic timing. Great humour, especially, is mined from Kearns' improbable grace: a big man, he nonetheless moves beautifully, and is given full reign to pirouette and jeté across the stage.

But this kind of broad comedy is hard to sustain over the duration of a full-length play; what really holds the attention is the way that the actors are clearly working from a starting place of emotional truth even as they exaggerate those emotions into the stratosphere. There's something downright moving about Ardiff's self-destructive self-loathing as Donna; your heart goes out to her as she discloses how miserable she is in her mar-

riage. And so for all the improbability of the late-play plot twist, you're oddly happy for her as she finds extramarital solace with the greasy salesman George (Judge again); and you root as well for Frank and Hal as they fight their way through denial into each others' arms.

Sinéad O'Hanlon's set of gray walls with loads of pop-out windows and cubbyholes fills the large stage of the Watergate Theatre well, and Ben Ormerod's lighting, too, creates wonderfully specific areas for stage action. Everyone is on top form here, and it's only a shame that the production ran for just a brief two weeks in Kilkenny.

LIVING SPACE

ReadCo

Dublin Youth Theatre

June 26-30 2001; reviewed June 26

BY NICK McGINLEY

THE AUDIENCE CONGREGATE OUTSIDE the Georgian building that houses Dublin Youth Theatre and are brought out to the

opinions & overviews

back garden to meet the team. The director, writer, and actors come out and mingle a little with the audience. The director announces that patience must be exercised as this is merely a rehearsal of selected scenes from the play, which the programme tells us is *Guest/House* by the Living Space company. Hold on... wasn't this supposed to be a piece called *Living Space* by ReadCo? Oh, never mind, must've misread the press release.

The Living Space collective confide that they've been living here for a month to build up the necessary rapport and trust needed for this show, which treats themes of co-habitation — very committed of them! We later find out that this has been particularly tough on Kevin, the writer, because he misses his girlfriend. She's allowed to come round for the odd meal, but she certainly can't overnight. Bit extreme, isn't it? Glancing at the programme again, one sees that Stella directed a 36-hour version of Dante's *Inferno* while at Trinity. Could've been over consecutive nights, but there's something fishy going on here.

A main tenet of the company, we're told, is openness, and thus everyone expresses exactly how they're feeling at any given minute, and of course the audience are invited to eavesdrop. We are told that different scenes are going to be rehearsed in different rooms and are encouraged to drop in on any that take our fancy. We discover for example that Michelle (Read) is having a big problem with Natalie (Stringer)'s new "Christadelphian" beliefs. It's at this point that pretty much everyone will cop on that they're being had — that what we're seeing isn't a communal experiment by Living Space at all, but an experimental piss-take on communal theatre by ReadCo. The fact that some of the actors involved

are fairly high-profile, however, disappointingly let others of us in on the joke too soon ("Kevin" is comedian Kevin Gildea, for example, and "Brendan" (Dempsey) recently appeared in the film *About Adam*.



The idea of performance commencing as soon as an audience enter any part of the theatre space is an old one, now more used in student productions than professional. The novel thing about this experiment is the blurring of the lines between performance and reality, with the audience treated, by way of the company's central conceit, to the private frustrations and lusts of the cast. This is a nice idea, the potential of which, however, is never quite realised. The performances are universally excellent, with frequently hilarious results. My only disappointment is that the line-blurring device is never used for anything bar comedy. If they'd staged a vicious row between an actor and director, it could have been a cruel — but worthwhile — trick to pull.

The nice little swipes at the self-absorbed "luvvie-darlingness" of theatre

folk are terrific. Specifically, Stella Feehily, as the director who enforces a PC strait-jacket on every discussion, creates a great character. I'm always a bit wary of plays about putting on a play, or films about making a film, as they often end up as points-scoring opportunities against old enemies. However, in this case, Pom Boyd's script is far too good-natured and indeed, wonderfully surreal to be accused of that. With an improvised piece, it's difficult to know whom exactly to credit, but as it all hangs together engagingly, director Christopher White must be commended.

The "play within the play" is suitably entertaining, with a young couple, played by the "actors" Brendan and Karen being harassed by the mad landlady (Read) who has the habit of exposing her breasts while serving dinner. The landlady's paraplegic lover, John, played by the "actress" Natalie, makes the most ill-equipped waiter and bus-boy since Manuel. Indeed, this "play" is close to what *Fawlty Towers* would have turned out like if the rest of Monty Python had stuck around. Predictably, the narrative substance of the "play-within" is relatively thin on the ground, as much of the performance is actually the bits in between. But it would have been fun to be assaulted with lots of these non-chronological little scenes and try to figure out a workable order — it might have provided a legitimate way for the audience to properly interact with these crafty performers.

The impression given was that this had been a big experiment for ReadCo, and it is fervently hoped that they will continue with the madness at this or some other "bijou residence" in Dublin in the future. This time around I felt strongly that we could have done with more of both the

"play" and the anarchic behind-the-scenes stuff... but to leave wanting more is not a bad complaint.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

by William Shakespeare,

with additional text by Charles Lamb

Natural Shocks Theatre Company

The Civic Theatre, Tallaght

18-28 July 2001; reviewed July 23

and

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

by William Shakespeare

Island Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed September 22 at the

Civic Theatre, Tallaght

BY MAURICE DUNPHY

FAST, FURIOUS, GENDER-BENT SHAKESPEARE, and all played for laughs, was the order of the day this summer, as productions of two of the classic comedies were staged by Irish companies. Donnacadh O'Briain directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Natural Shocks Theatre Company — a new enterprise — while Terry Devlin staged *The Taming of the Shrew* for Limerick's more established Island Theatre Company. Both approached performance for the sheer fun of it, and both toyed with gender role-reversal. Each displayed various degrees of seriousness in their attempts at role presentation, with much cross-dressing and doubling-up of characters. There, however, the similarities end, and we have two very different approaches to the work.

O'Briain's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, aptly subtitled *Six Characters in Search of an Audience*, employed a diverse range of theatrical styles spanning commedia, slapstick, and Brechtian epic theatre, all of which blurred the lines between actor and audience. He successfully wove the prose narrative of

opinions & overviews

Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* into the production, and the Bard's wackiest play came alive in an energetic and hilarious production that dared to be different.

The audience surrounded the tiny acting space, waiting for darkness to fall but, to everyone's surprise, the play opened with the *Pyramus and Thisbe* rehearsal scene. How did we get to this point in the text? Did someone forget to douse the lights? The audience watched each other across the space and soon it became obvious that this production would continually subvert theatre convention, emphasising particularly the presence of its audience. On with the play, and Quince's actors encountered artistic difficulties: their rehearsal petered out, the actors fell asleep, and entered the dream-world of the play.

Within this dream-world, they change costumes, gender, and become multiple characters, always in full view. This audacious, seamless shifting of the theatre frame, coupled with Lamb's prose narrative, enables a smooth, efficient shift to Hermia and Lysander's elopement scene. Establishing early on that this was the norm enabled the cast to stalk the auditorium at will. Freedom of movement presented them with a powerful weapon, particularly for Puck, whose omnipresence haunted both actors and audience.



SOMETHING NEW: Breen and Quirke in *Taming of the Shrew*

Subversion continued throughout as the interwoven dialogue and prose effectively embodied the play's waking-dream/nightmare-world. One moment the characters were in front, the next beside, and subsequently behind us and, despite the necessary hard work for the audience, our rewards were enormous.

The ensemble cast of six men played all of the roles between them, both male and female, never attempting to feminise their characters but playing them as hyper-masculine dames. Stephen Cavanagh, Damien Devaney, John Delaney, Sean Duggan, Daire O'Flaherty, and Shane Carr were uniformly excellent and any attempt at singling-out for special praise would be unfair, not to mention impossible. The variety of pace and modulation,

both in voice and movement, was a treat in their onslaught upon the unsuspecting, yet willing, audience. When not involved in the action, and always in full view, they too become audience members, watching the action and awaiting their next entrance with glee. There were no secrets here as everything happened all around us. Enveloped in this nightmare-dream, where disorientation of the audience is central to the production style, we were dizzied by its sheer exuberance.

Most of the play took place in white fluorescent light, which was only cut in the second half for the actual playing out of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The simple and effective "stage" lights then appeared for the first time. Here the comedy soared to its highest as Quince's play cranked itself into even wackier action, as a deficient warrior, a loopy princess, and a speaking wall ground their way towards the wildly over-extended double-suicide scene, played as full-on commedia/slapstick. Although Shakespeare's text was played basically as written, the arena space successfully established the audience as wedding guests. The actors were now essentially the drunken uncles and, as at any self-respecting Irish wedding, they proceeded to embarrass everybody. A ploy that might easily have backfired was milked to perfection, played to all sides, and realised every possibility of the space.

Chisato Yoshimi's set and costume design were both ultra simple and highly effective. The sparse arena setting contained a mere pair of rostra, and the actors used both the square performance space and the whole auditorium. The costumes were spare and interchangeable — primarily simple, double-sided bibs and jerkins — and minimal props prevailed. The eerie dream-nightmare music, composed and excellently performed live by Samuel

Jackson, perfectly caught the mood, but we might have been treated to a lot more of it. O'Briain's direction was razor-sharp, imaginative, and hugely exciting, harnessing his cast's enormous energy and utilising the tiny space and auditorium to the max. It is unfortunate, though, that some of the best moments were denied to three of four sides of the audience. This irreverent, frolicsome and innovative approach to Shakespeare is something we usually dream of, as it eschews the usual



HEY GIRLIE! Midsummer Night's Dream

bland and hamstrung approach. Great theatre and convulsive laughter win out in the end.

Just as Natural Shocks double-up their all-male cast, Island used a similar method in *The Taming of the Shrew*, where male actors played the female characters and vice-versa. However, in their

opinions & overviews

attempts at reversing gender roles they go for "serious" cross-dressing, and while the tone is similar to *Natural Shocks'*, it never reached the same heights or achieved the same impact.

Baptista knows well that his volatile, shrewish and unhappy daughter, despite her great independence, will never find a husband, yet Myles Breen's Katherine minced and twittered like an unemployable "drag-demon" and ignored her complex, contradictory character traits. For a handsome dowry, the cunning Petruchio decides to woo and eventually tame her. Although Petruchio wears his bravado like a badge of honour, Tara Quirke missed this point completely, and strutted about with forward-thrust pelvis, growling as though in great pain. Quirke's growling might well be intended to compensate for Breen's twittering, but it's difficult to be sure and it certainly didn't work, particularly in the infamous wooing scene which was reduced to a barking match.

This non-definition of character traits and mutual attraction that, ultimately, brings them together reduced Katherine's capitulation to a nonentity. Having witnessed their progression in apparently opposite directions, by the time Katherine made her "dutiful wife" speech we never knew where it came from and, unfortunately, cared even less. The decision here to resort to cross-dressing was questionable, with no obvious or apparent reason. The men's manipulation of their women, purely for the sake of power through enforced conformity, remained unexplored. While this is understandably difficult from a contemporary perspective, caricaturing the characters offered nothing either remotely comic nor insightfully interpretative. Only Liam O'Brien, as Bianca, never fell into the stereotype-trap and effectively executed the sub-plot of

her affairs. Having established the apparently simple, virtuous little sister throughout, her fall from grace was all the more powerful when her risqué characteristics emerged.

The rest of the cast, Louis Lovett, Gene Rooney, Lyn Fullerton, Niamh O'Shaughnessy, Mairead Devlin, Karen Egan, and Liz Schwarz, tried gallantly to make some sense of the proceedings but it was a hopeless task, even for this highly capable and hard-working group of actors. While they tried their damnedest to cope, Terry Devlin's ill-conceived and confused interpretation lacked any apparent direction. Despite the excessive motoring about, the drama was effectively stilted.

The staging presented further problems. While all of Shakespeare's plays offer enormous potential for group-tableaux and well-paced movement, here we got neither. Static lines of actors, seemingly stuck to the floor, regularly lurched into choreography-defying sprints across the stage, bereft of any dramatic or theatrical meaning. When the actors moved, it seemed, it was purely for the sake of not standing still. Pace, integral to the unfolding of any drama, and particularly farce, is here confused with traffic control. Only once in the entire production did we get to see a whole group tableau that utilised most of the actors and a simple piece of set.

Dolores Lyne's highly symbolic set consisted of a row of tall, cylindrical pillars on one side, and on the other side their opposite represented in concaved reliefs. The backdrop of collaged overlapping panels contrasts effectively with the crack-grained marble floor. The backdrop also accommodated an unseen, hinged panel near its top and an entrance-cum-doorway at floor level. This colourful and impressive surround was furnished only by a chaise lounge. However, the produc-

tion never fully utilised the set's hidden features, which remained a secret until late in the play. The chaiselounge, despite its constant repositioning, is hardly put to any great effect, save for the aforementioned tableau. Jacquie Fitzpatrick's costumes also amounted to a collage, blending (or blurring) "roaring 20's" frills and suits. While the costumes worked well together, for much of the play they barely stood out against the coloured backdrop, leaving one to wonder if designer and costumier were really working together.

Comparisons with *Dream* are inevitable, and where Natural Shocks make excellent use of their meagre resources, the more opulent production values of Island never assisted any kind of experimentation. Where Shocks never attempted serious feminisation, used simple costumes, and dispensed with the conventional entrance-exits, Island dragged themselves down and restricted themselves with elaborate costumes, and allowed the stage to determine the pace (or lack of it) of the action. Despite its politically-incorrect and misogynistic theme, *The Shrew* is still one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies, but this production does little to help us understand or challenge its appeal.

Maurice Dunphy is a community arts worker with Tallaght Partnership.

THE OLD LADY SAYS NO!

by Denis Johnston

The National Youth Theatre

The Samuel Beckett Theatre

30 August – 1 September 2001; reviewed

31 August BY SUSAN CONLEY

THERE WAS A LOT TO CELEBRATE WITH the National Youth Theatre's production of *The Old Lady Says No!* It marked play-



THEATRICAL: *The Old Lady Says No!*

wright Denis Johnston's centenary; the show itself was a part of a series of events celebrating the National Association of Youth Drama's 21st birthday; but most of all, the production was a tribute to the sheer fun of putting on a show — and fun not only for the players involved, but also for their friends, families, and for cynical and jaded theatre critics. The kind of total commitment on display here is of the sort that that cynical and jaded theatre practitioners of more advanced ages would do well to take a look at — to remind them why they got mixed up in this business in the first place.

Brimming with energy, the 35 youngsters from all over Ireland, as directed by John White, performed their hearts out, moving through Johnston's sometimes satirical, sometimes eerie, sometimes overwrought dreamscape with such high energy that one was almost fooled into thinking that the play is wieldy and momentous — when it really isn't.

The title itself is extraordinarily petu-

opinions & overviews

lant, and Nicholas Grene, in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, exposes its dubious provenance: the story is that Johnston changed the play's initial title to its present name, after it was rejected by the Abbey in 1928 with the now-titular phrase dashed off on the cover. (Its fraudulence is compounded by the fact that it was actually Yeats, and not Lady Gregory, who rejected it, in which case the title should have been *The Middle-Aged Man Says No!*) What Johnston originally wrote as *Shadowdance* became what we know it to be today — an attempt to modernise Irish theatre, and take it out of the proverbial cottage once and for all. Johnston's expressionistic, modernist play has more in common with Strindberg than O'Casey and has true moments of innovation and wit, but plays its one note one too many times.

What begins as a hokey, melodramatic ode to the romance of Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran is actually a "play within a play"; the initially super-heightened period piece shifts into a hallucinogenic tour of '20s Dublin when the actor playing Emmet, having been hit too enthusiastically on the head by one of the actors playing a British guard, collapses and then revives believing himself to be an Irish patriot, instead of an actor playing an Irish patriot. Propelled roughly 125 years into the future, The Speaker/Emmet has the opportunity to become a symbol of outmoded, idealised revolutionary thinking as he struggles to get back to Rathfarnham and to Curran, his lover. The conceit is uneven; while there are many scenes that work wonderfully well, and are relevant to Ireland in 2001, the text as a whole fails to gel as an event beyond its (for its time) innovative, cinematic structure; while its willingness to deconstruct traditional theatrical form was daring for his time, today it comes

across as over-indulgent.

But it is a perfect vehicle for young performers: the need for numerous characters allowed the actors to double up, giving the majority a chance to play several roles; the variety of texture enabled everyone to shine at one time or another, according to their strengths; and while the fragmentation of text and scene was somewhat trying for an audience member, it provided a variety and excitement that was tangible for the cast. The discipline required in terms of movement, choragic vocal unity, and the lack of a traditional narrative spine served to stretch the actors — and they were well able for the task. Director White's ambition surely deserves some kind of award, not merely in the quality of performance he culled, but in the mind-boggling logistics that must have been required to organise three dozen young actors from across the country.

As much fun as the action onstage was the action in the audience. Not only were there proud parents, but siblings and schoolmates in the house as well. The feeling of support was simply wonderful, and the young actors deserved every ounce of good-will that was aimed at them.

THE ORIGINAL NIGHT

OF FRANCIS FAHY

by Colm Corless, Trish Fitzpatrick,
and Philip Sweeney

The Francis Fahy Society, Kinvara
26-29 September 2001

Reviewed on 26 Sept.
at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY JUNE FAVRE, FIONNUALA GALLAGHER,
DAVID GREENE, LAURA MULCAHY,
LUCIA NICOLETTI, AND GERI SLEVIN

FRANCIS FAHY (1854-1935), BORN IN Kinvara, Co Galway, was a schoolteacher

and Fenian sympathizer who emigrated to London to work as a civil servant, developing a reputation on the side as a popular Irish songwriter ("Galway Bay," "The Queen of Connemara," etc.). In 1883, at the suggestion of his parish priest, he founded the Southwark Irish Literary Club, which became the Irish Literary Society (1892), an organization fundamental to the Irish Literary Revival. With his friend D. J. O'Donoghue, Fahy wrote biographies of Irish writers in London for *The Daily Telegraph*, building a publicity machine for literary nationalism. When other Irish writers returned to Dublin and active politics, Fahy, married with children, remained in London. He was an extraordinary ordinary man.

Flash-forward to the present day: Over the last two years, three Kinvara writers met at Arus na Gael in Dominick Street, Galway to turn a 43-page reminiscence by Fahy into a drama about the Irish language, national stereotypes, immigrant identity, and the political force of art. This sounds a tall order: a chronicle about a not very heroic life and with quite heavy themes. However, under the direction of Max Hafler, the play proved entertaining — if uneven. Money was raised from ministries for the Irish language and the Gaeltacht, from descendants of Fahy, from banks and hotels, and from all three TDs for the region. Thus the producers were able to employ some excellent Galway actors, including Fred McCloskey and Fiona Kelly, each of whom took several roles, and to permit Petra Bhreathnach to design historically evocative costumes. For a community arts project — three authors in one village writing about a village hero — this play provides unexpected entertainment.

At the end of Act One, a stunned Fran-

cis watches a London cabaret of Irish actors parodying Irish people, and a John Bull caricature beats a cartoon Paddy (*à la* "Punch and Judy"). The lights went up and the audience did not know whether to laugh or gasp, but they were thrilled. Even at the play's end, a good number rose to give the show a standing ovation.

The play as a whole is as much cabaret as bio-drama. Some scenes are realistic, and so are some costumes; other scenes run the gamut from the carnivalesque, to ensemble dance work, burlesque parody of historical figures, romantic songs by Fahy himself sung in chorus, an hilarious music-hall act of dancing potatoes, and some damp melodrama with old Ma and Da moving into Fahy's London digs. Sean Hanrahan as Francis Fahy (aged 17 to 45) is the only character developed with any depth in realistic terms, but this is not necessarily a problem.

The first scene prepares the audience for later breaks in realism. In a split second a town appears on market day in Kinvara. Young Francis is selling tickets to his first play, the proceeds to go to Fenian prisoners. As he talks with various townspeople, the bustle suddenly stops, all the actors freeze except those who are talking, and the crowd action resumes once the dialogue concludes. The effect is cheerful and stylish.

Action set in the British Museum Reading Room effectively conjures up a huge and unsociable London. Readers, standing about with their noses in books, turn away from each other while Francis sits at a desk alone. Books are opened and closed in a synchronized fashion, over the sound of a ticking clock, building into a charming crescendo as all shut their books a final time, and the clock stops. The actors leave the stage, all except Francis, lonely in London.

opinions & overviews

While a number of individual scenes are thus well-conceived and fast-moving, other scenes have the heavy work of exposition on their hands. They tell the story of Francis getting disappointed with teaching in Kinvara, passing his Civil Service exam, trying to learn Irish while being discouraged by his Irish-speaking father, going off to London and getting a job in a shipping office. At the advice of his touchy-feely parish priest, Francis starts a social club based on literary lectures, enters into the acquaintance of Irish writers in London — including Shaw, Wilde, Yeats, and Lady Gregory; endures the descent of his parents onto his London boarding house; takes on more and more work in organising Irish classes and musical evenings; gives support to the Home Rule movement; sees with sadness his co-workers like D.J. O'Donoghue and D.P. Moran return to Dublin; and wonders, in the end, after his parents have died, what he has achieved in life. A good deal, he finally tells the audience: he paved the way for the Literary Revival, and he forged a new identity for the Irish community in London — more Irish there than back in Kinvara. The story is historically well-informed, but there is a lot of story to tell. There were certainly too many scenes in Act Two — the play did not get better as it went on.

With some vigorous cutting, however, it could have a future. A politically challenging play, *The Original Night of Francis Fahy* openly raised issues of identity in an intelligent way, and could have a profitable future with emigrant audiences in London, New York, Sydney, or Boston.

The writers are students in the MA in Drama and Theatre Studies programme at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD by J. M. Synge

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

5 July – 11 August 2001; reviewed 20 July and 10 August BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

NIALL HENRY'S RICH AND REWARDING production of *The Playboy of the Western World* by J. M. Synge was staged in traverse formation in the Peacock. Jamie Vartan's set encompassed the entire auditorium, and the audience was placed within Michael James Flaherty's shebeen, where the action of the drama is set. This decision meant that a second viewing of the play, from a place on the opposite side of the main playing area, was necessary in order to fully enjoy it and evaluate it.

In this production, Henry continues the interlocutory relationship with dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke which has borne fruit in Blue Raincoat Theatre Company's versions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. The critical tension involved in looking again at the dramaturgy of a theatre classic produces a vigorous exposition, not only of Synge's dramatic narrative, but of his cultural project. The production rubs against some of the received conventions of playing *The Playboy*: The Widow Quin is younger than Pegeen Mike, Shawn Keogh is physically more impressive than Christy Mahon, and Christy is played fully in keeping with his father's dismissive account of him. In Vartan's dark design, the shebeen and its people are at risk from the encroaching puritanical gaze of the often quoted Father Reilly.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge stages a world where Catholic Ireland was not yet inevitable as a social model. Brendan Ellis' commanding presence and flowing red mane accentuates the transgressive potential of Michael James. This rural patriarch will perform a

pagan wedding when put to it, and papal permission to marry does not enable Shawn Keogh to impose his will — and Father Reilly's social vision — on Olwen Fouéré's disciplined, independent Pegeen Mike. Cathy Belton's powerful Widow Quin, for all her gory deeds and unruly desires, still shares more in common with her neighbours than will ever divide her from them.

Henry's production exposes the fault lines within the society of this time and place, and raises questions as to what might have happened had the Irish peasantry not been co-opted to the projects of Catholic nationalism. In defiance of nationalism's accounts of Ireland as a location of stability and a common home, *The Playboy of the Western World* stages dispossession and wandering as central cultural experiences in its fictional world. Longing is everywhere confounded by the dictates of land, religion, and respectability. Shawn Keogh is desperate for Pegeen, but will be ruled by, and would have her submit to, Father Reilly. Pegeen desires Christy when local celebrity makes it certain that his actual poverty may be overlooked, and he will be permitted to assume the comfortable role of son-in-law to Michael James. She rejects him when his story of parricide proves false, even though he has by then been installed as a local sporting hero on the strength of actual achievement. The Widow Quin's ostentatious lust for Christy is always vulnerable to her interest in acquiring land rights and livestock. Mikel Murfi is Christy as clown. Physical agility and earthy colour coding mark him out from Ciarán McCauley's Shawn Keogh, stifled in dark suit and ponderous, would-be gravitas. Christy's performances of exoticism are coaxed out of him by others who see in him what they lack: a

life-force and a commitment to live by it, to "go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day."

Henry's production pursues this oppo-



COURTIN': Fouéré and Murfi in *Playboy*

sition rigorously. Where the script calls for four local girls to pay court to the man that killed Christy's father at the beginning of Act Two, Clarke and Henry remove the girls and have Murfi, solo, perform Christy performing his gracious acceptance of their gifts. It is a scene in which Murfi restrains the professional

exuberance of the clown to expose a central concern of the production: that the self is constructed and performed with the gaze of others in mind. Discipline and focus define the performances in this production, down to the relatively minor roles of Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell, played by Michael Hayes and Conan Sweeney respectively, who are thoughtful and engaged and commit fully to the production's nod toward Beckett in their dialogue at the opening of Act Three. Joseph M. Kelly's Old Mahon is Christy's intelligent and vigorous antagonist. His gleeful submission to a new role as Christy's servant at the end of the action underscores Synge's suggestion that the self will always be a performance but, in Christy's case, it will now be a performance authored more fully to Christy's own satisfaction.

This production of an undoubtedly classic of Irish theatre more than justifies the National Theatre's continuing engagement with companies and artists making theatre beyond its walls, and drawing on alternative sources of aesthetic practices and values. It should be revived as soon as possible.

Victor Merriman is senior lecturer in Drama at the Conservatory of Music and Drama, Dublin Institute of Technology.

**THE PROMISE OF SEX:
TWO PLAYS BY HOWARD BARKER**
(*Women Beware Women* and *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*)
Íomha Ildánach in association with
Lurking Truth; Project, Dublin
27 July – 11 August 2001; reviewed on 1
and 7 Aug. BY SUSAN CONLEY

IS HOWARD BARKER A SEXIST PIG?
In the two plays by the British playwright

and director chosen by Irish theatre company Íomha Ildánach for production this summer, women are routinely at best objectified and humiliated, and at worst raped, beaten, and humiliated; overpowered by brute masculine force; betrayed by members of their own sex; and in a very specific instance, required to stand before our very present gaze completely naked (but for stay-up hose).

Is Howard Barker a staunch feminist? By showing us such behaviour and circumstance, he's not showing us anything we don't already know, but he is showing it to us live and in person, in an impersonal, distanced fashion that removes the information from our mundane experience and places it, quite firmly, centre stage. Barker manages to interrogate the patriarchal system, the system in which we are all complicit, the rather one-sided power structure that we've been languishing under for, oh, thousands of years, and while he's not political enough — or mad enough — to propose alternatives, his confrontational use of truth brings these issues to life and creates a provocative, rather than merely provoking, discourse.

Of this summer's two productions, these issues are more clearly seen and appreciated in *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*; as directed by the playwright himself, we get the full whack of Barker's aesthetic. In *Women Beware Women*, however, the meat of the argument is harder to access, as John O'Brien's less-than-able production hampers the play's already complex and difficult theatrical conceit. In both, we witness men and especially women at their most perverse, complex, and contradictory — allowing a three-dimensional view which, in the case of female characters, is highly unusual.

Ultimately, Barker manages to unite



YOU ASKING? The cast of Howard Barker's *Women Beware Women*

language and the body into an uneasy, unconventional, and sometimes frightening brand of storytelling that is as much to do with style as it is with substance, and forces his audience to view the world with his unblinking, rapt gaze.

Women Beware Women is John Middleton's late-1600s play about sex, deception, and power in Florentine society. Originally a three-acter, Barker took the piece, condensed it into one act, and then extrapolates on the themes set forth in a completely new second act. Act One introduces us to a cast of characters with varying degrees of corrupt morality: Leantio, a lowly factor (Ben Palmer) marries the beautiful Bianca (Louise Kiely), who attracts the eye of the Duke of Florence (Gerry O'Brien); the Duke's sister Livia (Iseult Golden) agrees to use her feminine wiles to orchestrate the beautiful

lady's transfer into his lordly arms; this has political and emotional repercussions for everyone. Act Two, as written by Barker, fleshes out several of the first act's less-central characters, and infuses the rather cardboard-cutout exposition of the first act with a sinister, slimy, suspect sexiness that culminates in Livia's orchestration of Bianca's rape on her ducal wedding day. In doing so Barker successfully brings the rather mundane original ideas to a darker level.

Oh, but that first act. It seemed an incredible length to go to set up the opportunity for Barker's inventive coda... but it may simply have been the woeful staging of that initial 90 minutes that caused one to wonder if this exercise was really worth it. O'Brien's direction opened no doors into the Jacobean text — it was dully executed, in many cases



TRY THIS ON FOR SIZE: The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo

enforcing substance when style would more than suffice; and then tossing about bits of style for little or no reason. It was in the blocking that the production really fell down: the combination of a rambling set which made it necessary for the actors to bound up and down an alarmingly raked ramp to a raised platform, and a general lack of physical awareness on the part of the actors created an atmosphere of marching and "leppin' about" rather than of graceful movement that Barker's text would seem to call for.

And yet the second act improved so drastically as to feel like a completely dif-

ferent production. Suddenly, the actors were delivering their lines with panache and personality, rather than an apparently almost-manic need to get the words out. There was an addition of presence and an attention to pace, and, thankfully, an appreciation of Barker's dark humour that completely changed the experience. What was a creaky period piece shot into a contemporary stratosphere.

We got some insight into the uniqueness of Barker's vision with *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, a veritable master class in the issues and techniques that have become his hallmark. One was immediately struck by

style — not simply the style of his writing, which is a sometimes heady, sometimes impenetrable feast of verbiage, of poetry and scatology — but the style of his blocking, of the way he directs actors to move across the stage. For he above many others is as invested in the human body as a means to communicate as much as — if not more than — the human voice.

The tale is one of courtship with a view to marriage, but this is surely one of the least conventional matrimonial tales ever told. A young blind girl of seventeen, Tenna (Antoinette Walsh), is awaiting her bridegroom (David Ian Rabey) — not in the flush of shyness and girlish anticipation, but with an apparent heartlessness that speaks more of control than of romantic abandon. In choosing to wed herself to a decrepit old man, she imagines that the power will be all hers. Though also blind, Isonzo proves to be a more than able adversary, and soon has stripped her of her illusions — and her wedding gown — all via language, through words that wound, manipulate, deceive, and disarm. Tenna continually builds herself up, only to be torn down by her future husband's cruel honesty, and while the ultimate image is possibly that of her triumph, it's hard to know if anybody really won this battle.

It's hard to know because Barker left his audience to their own devices. Despite the rather heavy-handed blindness metaphor (as in "love is..."), the utter lack of sentimentality in play and production was striking. The precision of the lighting, the movement of the actors, the grating sound cues — all served to leach the premise of courtship of any of its hearts and flowers, and we had before us, stark, bare, and bitter cold, the dance of expectation, manipulation and resentment that we'd all like to convince ourselves doesn't

exist in human relationships. At times, the beauty of Barker's stage pictures interfered with the text: the precision with which Walsh and Rabey negotiated the stage, moved with and against each other, and played blind so convincingly sometimes reduced the words to a murmur as their bodies carved through space in ways that are rarely seen on Irish stages.

So, which is it? Swine or supporter? Misogynist — or misanthrope? Barker's men aren't exactly covered in glory either. Perhaps what is so effective and startling about Barker is that he refuses to work in binary oppositions: Women are neither madonnas nor whores, but a bit of both. Men are neither passive nor aggressive... but a bit of both. By dispensing with notions of either/or, and utilising the model of both/and, Barker forces us, God forbid, to make up our own minds. Therefore, he is also a bit of both: working within established forms of gender-based discourse, he creates a world where the corruption of power and the commodification of the body is in the woman's hands, too; in his landscape, men cry like women, and women oppress like men. Both fall victim to the shifted paradigm, and neither come out the champion. That both sexes continually shift in status and stance, and continually taste both victory and defeat, gets closer to "real life" than most "kitchen sink" settings.

RICHARD III by William Shakespeare

Theatreworks

The Samuel Beckett Theatre,
Trinity College, Dublin

3 – 22 September 2001; reviewed

7 September BY DEREK WEST

FOR THE FIFTH SUCCESSIVE YEAR
Theatreworks have brought an ambitious
production to the Samuel Beckett Centre

— this September it was *Richard III*, a play that has never been given a professional production in this country.

The historical accuracy of Shakespeare's play has been queried: was Richard such a villain? Was he so severely deformed? Wasn't he a good administrator, using force and acumen to establish stability among warring factions? At this distance — both geographical and temporal — these questions are marginal. The context in which the play is presented is that of 2001. The interest lies in how the play impacts on and interacts with contemporary life. There is also the unavoidable cinematic context: Olivier's tour de force, Ian McKellan's exploration of the fascistic elements, and Al Pacino's indulgent but deeply curious search for Richard.

This canon places an onus on the director to develop a reading of the text. Here director Michael Caven reworks the familiar, rather than seeking to break new ground. He focuses on unbridled ambition. The world of this *Richard III* is populated with ruthless self-seekers and in the unseemly scrabble he comes out on top of the dung heap. He is a cynical megalomaniac who casts aside any feeling — personal, filial or fraternal — which impedes his bloody progress. It's a hog's world where the hounds are snapping at his heels, but he has the measure of them — almost to the bitter end. The emotional conscience of the play rests with the women — mothers, widows, wives — but even they are tainted with bitterness and bile. Seen in this way the play can become a hyperbolic metaphor for the world we bustle in: greed — be it political or personal — sweeps all before it.

It is apparent from this production and that of Frank McGuinness' *Mutabilitie* in 2000 that Caven has a strong affinity with

the playing space. By fully exploiting the height, depth and breadth of the Samuel Beckett Theatre he captures the scale if not the splendour of the text. The opening moments are full of sweeping movement and glorious, bombastic music, as England enjoys a brief "summer" respite from strife to celebrate the coronation of Edward. Raised voices, trumpet, and kettle-drum combine in a surge of energy that bodes well. There is room to run on the Beckett floor, so entrances and exits are accelerated. We are immediately engaged by the drive and exuberance of the action.

Caven scours the depths, too. A grille, cranked open by a menacing rattling engine, leads to the bowels of the Tower, a bourne from which none of Richard's victims will return. On the heights, Queen Margaret, bewitched and embittered by her bereavements, hovers over the action. On the same raised platform, Richard parades his peep show of piety while canvassing the populace for his nomination to the throne. The eye is constantly enthralled.

Caven has indeed created a ruthless cockpit of machination, where the winner never takes his eye off the ball, where dirty tricks and manipulations abound, where to be innocent or trusting is to leave you prey to the boarish fangs of the upwardly mobile.

But, despite some minor tinkering with the text, Caven's interpretation is conventional. Richard declares himself early on "determined to prove a villain" and so he does through the set pieces (dispatching his brother Clarence's soul to heaven via the Tower; the grotesque wooing and winning of the widowed Lady Anne — no matter that she calls him a "lump of foul deformity"; gaining the voice of the people; disowning his "simple gull," Buckingham, when he comes to collect his

dues). He is relentlessly self-serving and self-seeking: "Richard loves Richard."

If not groundbreaking, this still makes fascinating viewing, especially as Denis Conway's performance as Richard is sim-



HE'S BAD: Denis Conway as *Richard III*

ply superb. He dominates the whole evening, to the extent that when Richard is absent from the action, the temperature chills palpably. Conway's is a total performance. He is in a class of his own. He moulds his body to become that "elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog." He lives up to all the epithets of disgust at defor-

mity which are hurled at him. He lunges, lurches, limps, and leers. He hurls himself onto the throne in a grotesque parody of human form. His shaven head carries a shadow of darkness, redolent of the skin-head. He tenses his lower jaw into a toothy snarl that is utterly menacing. But it is in his vivid contact with the audience, eyes fiercely raking the spectators, drawing us into complicity with his machinations that he is utterly triumphant. We are seduced by the magnitude of his amoral egotism. We are drawn to share his cynical view of the dupes who populate his world and who serve as footstools to the throne. He can manipulate and distort at will. This play celebrates the art of the actor. It is a platform for exuberant playing and Conway seizes the day with alacrity.

Caven has found fine feminine foils to Richard. Fedelma Cullen plays Margaret with impressive intensity and depth. Her stock in trade — the piercing stare and a soaring vocal range — are given full play here. Caitríona Ní Mhurchú (Elizabeth) provides an emotionally charged and articulate reading of the grieving queen; Elaine Symons as Lady Anne is so light and diminutive it is scarcely possible that such a tiny body should contain such forceful vehemence as she rounds on Richard.

But beyond these strengths there is a sense that Caven in some ways loses sight of where the production can go. We are dazzled often, but we are also forced back into an uneasy patronage — making allowances for inadequate acting and technical mediocrity. Caven has opted for a full-scale *Richard III*, but he simply does not have the personnel to carry it through.

To take one vital instance: in the key role of Buckingham, Paul Walker is lost. He has an adequate physical presence,

opinions & overviews

but he is clearly ill at ease with the verse-speaking required for the part. His programme CV does not indicate any previous experience of Shakespeare and, frankly, it shows. He is not Buckingham.

Caven skips the potential menace of the various functionaries who carry out Richard's dirty deeds. He opts for bog-standard rude mechanicals. They do not seem to have been conceived or directed in any meaningful way. One of them persists in a coarse acting stance, which would not be out of place in *Blackadder*.

Some of the problems must be laid at the feet of the costume designer, Sinead Cuthbert. She has opted for tradition — a hotch-potch of frocks, long boots, leather jerkins, swords, and daggers. They add nothing dynamic to the production. They place Richard in some kind of pre-Tudor theme park. The set fares better. Ferdia Murphy has created dark recesses for dark deeds; Ray Duffy's lighting design, augmented with candles, is potentially atmospheric, but presents too much monotonous grey wash across the action.

Clearly any production of *Richard III* will be haunted by images from Olivier and Pacino, and Theatreworks here have steered clear of pastiche. But in this day and age, there has to be more mental vigour in the inventiveness. As the canon of productions grows, so too must the finesse in subsequent interpretations. If this production is spacious it is also visually vacuous and intellectually staid, rescued only by Conway's marvellous performance.

Derek West has recently edited a report, "The Arts in Our Schools" for the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. He has taught Drama and English and writes regularly on theatre.

SHOPPING AND FUCKING

by Mark Ravenhill

Prime Cut Productions

Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast, 2-13 Oct. 2001, and on tour; reviewed on 10 Oct.

BY UNA KEALY

PRIME CUT'S CHOICE TO PRODUCE Mark Ravenhill's play of most notorious name and reputation was a brave one, and one which they pulled off quite well. Speaking of pulling off...there was a bit of that and a lot more besides, and Prime Cut didn't flinch from bringing the soulless world of commercial sex to the stage. The play was a timely choice for a city whose streets have, since 1994, exploded not with bombs but with the illuminated shop fronts of the high street giants; and where the pubs, clubs, theatres, even entire docks have undergone sleek makeovers in their attempts to become as sexy as their desired clientele. Belfast is commercially on the up, and those who visit it wanting to partake of the activities suggested in Ravenhill's title would probably not leave disappointed. However, the play's notoriety comes not only from its name but also from its graphic sense of modern life as dislocated and soulless. The apparent concern of some of the city's media as to whether Belfast's theatregoing public were ready for a play of this intensity seemed justified: at the performance I attended four people left and another was reduced to tears by the end of the evening.

The rapidity of the play's pace as it jumps from one short scene to the next, jump-cutting through time and place, stresses the soap opera-sized concentration span of the modern viewer and serves to mirror the disturbing effect of the play's content through its structure. Ravenhill's characters are not "charac-

ters" in any rounded sense; they are rather extreme examples of mankind's confusion at being forsaken in a world where meaning and communication are increasingly difficult and obscure. Their clipped, elliptical language expresses only the bare bones of meaning, empty of all feeling so that even the words "I love you" become a shivering, stripped kind of love — more of a debt than an emotion.

The modern insistence on instant gratification delivers everything from food to philosophy in bland, individually-wrapped portions, and it is only when Ravenhill's characters get down to the baseline of language and string together obscenities that they manage to come near any kind of meaningful expression of their feelings. When Lulu rages at Robbie for giving away 300 E tablets, she shouts at him: "Fucking fucker, arsehole. Fuck/Pillowbiter. Shitstabber." The inarticulacy of the obscenity finds an emotional truth that the vacancy of modern self-help jargon has smothered.

The play tells the story of Mark, Lulu, and Robbie — friends/lovers who stumble between chemically enhanced nights of clubbing and shagging, and the uncompromising reality of making money to fund their excesses. Lulu applies for work on a shopping channel, but is asked instead to sell drugs. Robbie takes on that task, but gets high and botches the job, incurring the wrath of Brian (the shopping channel agent), who threatens the pair with torture if they don't reimburse him the street value of the drugs within a week. They manage the task by setting up an impressive array of phone sex lines from their house. In the meantime Mark (an ex-junkie and emotional ashtray) has gone off to "find himself" but instead finds Gary, a rent boy whose tragedy is his terrible addiction to



FREE TRADE: Shopping and Fucking

his own abuse. Brian, in a fit of admiration for Lulu and Robbie's work ethic, returns the earnings, Robbie and Mark graphically re-enact Gary's rape fantasy but refrain from brutalising him despite his desperation for them to do so; and the play ends with Robbie, Mark, and Lulu friends again, sitting on their sofa sharing microwave meals.

Ravenhill paints a grim picture of a postmodern culture in which people have to get high to get happy; humiliate themselves to get work; debase themselves to get paid; and meaning or morality, where it can be found, exists only in pre-packaged, Disney-coated capsules. This makes for an intense and potentially upsetting theatrical experience for the unsuspecting — hence the walkouts and the tears. Crit-

opinions & overviews

ical opinion is divided on whether the play offers any morsel of hope as antidote to this isolated, valueless, crepuscular world. Whether you think it does or not depends on whether you agree that the closing image is strong enough to counteract, even in a small way, the other graphic images of dislocation that have preceded it.

That hope didn't seem to come through in the original Royal Court production, but in Prime Cut's production it did; one of the reasons was director Jackie Doyle's decision to make Gary, played by Packy Lee, a wee lad from Belfast. Lee's performance had an emotional force that painfully and pitifully exposed his character's terrible addiction to violence, pain, and abuse but also managed to express a determination not to be crushed by the horror and brutality that informed his life. He conveyed a sense of innocence that was not totally lost, and a sense of humour that managed to hold back the darkness of the world of the play.

Prime Cut's production standards were, as usual, professional and slick — down to the publicity material, designed as credit cards. Stuart Marshall's set was more functional than imaginative, and was

somewhat encumbered by its naturalism; plastic would also have seemed a more appropriate material for the milieu of the play than wood. There were some nice touches, like sliding panels and an in-built TV set playing rapidly edited clips of sleazy adverts and game shows to cover scene changes; but particularly in the first act, some of those set shifts were so sluggish that even TV couldn't keep the pace up. Doyle's direction was a little static at times: the characters sat about a great deal on chairs, beds, and cushions, their physical fixity belying their status as drifters whose life had no anchor points. She could have used more movement to express the character's fidgety fear of silence and stillness. The music used in the production wasn't loud or extreme enough to give a really powerful sense of a world driven intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to the edge of an abyss. The play cries out for a dedicated sound designer, and none was credited. On the whole the production didn't quite have the "edge" it needed.

Una Kealy is researching a PhD on playwright George Fitzmaurice at the University of Ulster in Coleraine.



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continued from page 43

active in Dublin throughout the late '70s and early '80s. When Grapevine became City Arts Centre in 1988, officially opening its Moss Street doors in '89, it brought with it the enthusiasm for fringe and community drama that characterised its earlier work. The theatre venue opened in 1990 and CAC's first full season was produced in 1992.

The development of CAC's theatre activity from 1992 to the present illuminates the problems that CAC has faced over the past few years in Dublin's metamorphic cultural environment. During CAC's first in-house theatre season in 1992, there were 38 productions with approximately 400 performances, eight of which were community theatre groups. In 1994, the number of productions was still in the 30s. In 1996, CAC became a focal venue for the emerging Fringe Festival, though the overall number of shows had dropped to 16. By 1999, the CAC was losing its importance as a Fringe venue and there were only 10 productions throughout that year. The CAC venue has produced only six shows, a couple of acting school showcases, and a few workshops in the past year.

The marked decline of CAC's theatrical activity in recent years is widely attributed to the proliferation of other small-to-mid-size venues in Dublin, combined with the insufficiency of the CAC space for many professional companies. When it first opened, the CAC filled a void in the Dublin theatre scene by providing younger independent companies with a legitimate performance and rehearsal space. Until the mid '90s, there were few spaces available to such companies, so CAC absorbed the overflow while encouraging its growth. As Gorman explains, "City Arts Centre had always styled itself as a community arts centre in a situation

where there were not adequate resources to promote community or fringe arts."

However, with the rise of venues including the Crypt, Andrews Lane Studio, the new Project, SFX City Theatre, and the New Theatre, resources for up-and-coming non-mainstream theatre were blossoming by the late '90s. Furthermore, the CAC theatre was infamous for its awkwardness and limited technical resources. When more spacious and well-appointed venues were available, whose rates were not significantly more than CAC's, it became impractical for companies to work there.

"The few times I've used [CAC] the facilities aren't as good as the rates they're asking," says Theresia Guschlbauer, artistic director of Galloglass, whose production of Lorca's *Yerma* toured to CAC in 1999. "That's probably why people have gone away and used other places. The space was very small, with no privacy and no soundproofing, and lighting was very limited."

Despite the conflict between users and the board over the abrupt closure, both sides indicate that the CAC's current facility for drama and other arts must improve. If all goes as planned under the newfound guidance of Declan McGonagle, with a solution to the physical problems of the existing space or the location of a new facility will come a renewed sense of purpose in the Centre's development of community arts and theatre in Dublin. Though the new Project and other venues have taken up the torch, there still exists a gap between resources for professional theatre and resources for community or amateur groups. Bridging this gap could be where the future of City Arts Centre lies in Dublin theatre.

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