

# irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

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Will **Andrew's**  
**Lane** be missed?

Examining **religious**  
**faith** onstage

What does a  
**dramaturg** do?



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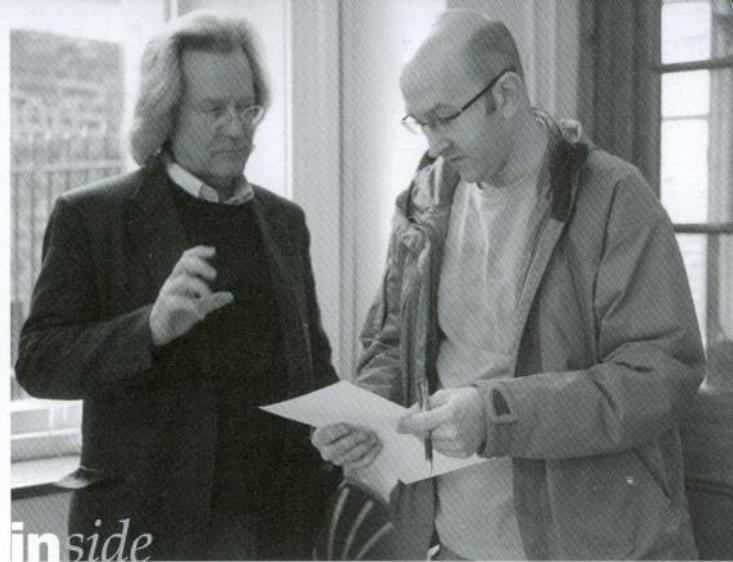
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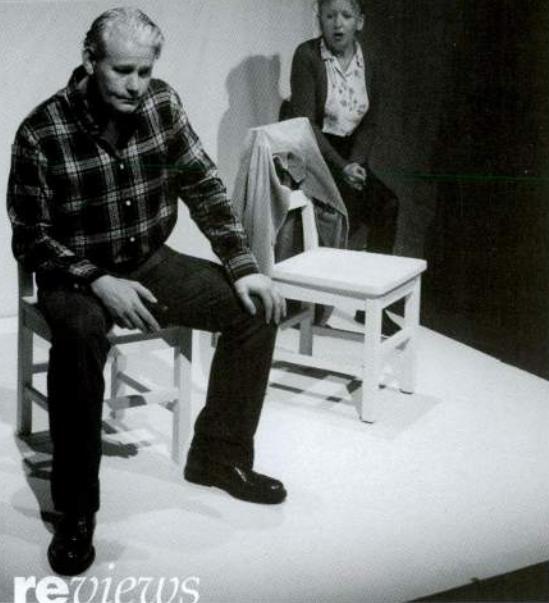
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### EDITOR

HELEN MEANY

### ART DIRECTOR

SUSAN CONLEY

### GENERAL MANAGER

TANYA DEAN

---

### NEWS & WEB EDITOR

PETER CRAWLEY

### REVIEWS & BOOKS EDITOR

PATRICK LONERGAN

---

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### IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE

### ADDRESS

74 Dame Street, Dublin 2

### E-MAIL

admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie



# Travelling players

WHILE PAN PAN THEATRE COMPANY was bringing a Chinese take on *The Playboy Of the Western World* to Dublin audiences at the end of last year, theatre-goers in Beijing were watching local performers in Beckett's *Catastrophe* (featured on the cover of this issue) and *Come and Go*, directed by Sarah Jane Scaife. Her visits to China, Malaysia and Singapore, conducting workshops and performances, exemplify the current upsurge in cultural exchange, with international theatre artists presenting new readings and interpretations of Irish work, both classic and contemporary. The newly established Irish Society for Theatre Research will be attempting to keep track of these developments and, encouragingly, aims to include practitioners in its network, alongside academics and Irish Theatre Studies specialists. (Sara

For some companies, the luxury of having a dramaturg's input might seem a remote possibility, however desirable.

Keating reports, Page 47.)

Elsewhere in this issue, we're venturing into the rehearsal room with director Annabelle Comyn to observe the sensitive process of coaxing a production into life. (Page 42.) And, in an essay drawing on his own experience (Page 18), Jocelyn Clarke reflects on the often-misunderstood contribution of the dramaturg, an established member of a theatre company's

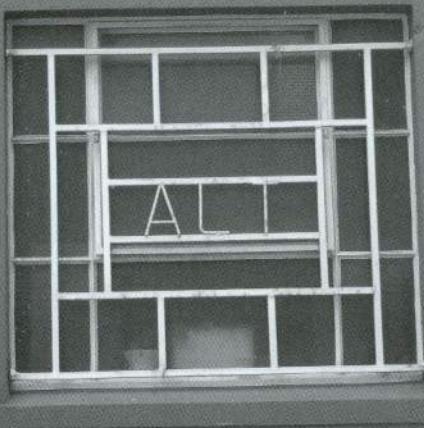
team in many other European countries and the U.S., but notably absent in Ireland. Admittedly, for companies that might have difficulty stretching to an adequate rehearsal period, the luxury of having a dramaturg's input might seem a very remote possibility, however desirable.

Comments on this, or on anything else in the issue are welcome, to be sent to admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie. (Please note change of address.) 



what's news?

WHAT'S NEWS?



WHAT'S NEWS?  
4

# The End of the Lane

**D**URING ONE NIGHT OF HEAVY RAIN LAST DECEMBER the roof of Andrew's Lane Theatre leaked again, ruining a grand piano onstage. For Pat Moylan, the theatre's owner and Artistic Director for the last eighteen years, it was the final straw. "I thought, it can't keep going on," she told *ITM*. Her decision to sell the city centre venue is, she says, "eighty per cent financial".

With the cost of re-roofing the building estimated to be €300,000 and further necessary repairs and refurbishment expected to drive the cost to about €1 million, the investment was more than Moylan was willing to bear. Having already increased the mortgage on the premises for the building's upkeep, Moylan says she had come to the end of the line. "I've been in this building twenty years now. I was here two years before the theatre opened. So I think maybe it's time for me to move on, regardless of how painful it is."

The removal of Andrew's Lane from the landscape of Irish theatre seems inevitable. As we went to press, the building was on sale as a commercial property through Douglas Newman Good, being offered to property developers without any attached conditions for use. It is expected to fetch €7.5million. (Any proposed development of the premises, as a car park, say, would be subject to planning permission.)

Andrew's Lane occupies an unusual position in Irish theatre. It is a privately owned commercial theatre with its own production company (Lane Productions, which Moylan directs with co-founder Breda Cashe), but which has also developed strong links with independent theatre companies and has long served as a regular Dublin Fringe Festival venue. Bedrock, Calypso, Fishamble, Passion Machine, Rough Magic, and Gúna

Nua have all premiered works at the theatre, while the premises has often been made available to companies for rehearsals, auditions and play readings, without charge.

In 2005 it received a capital grant from the Arts Council of €10,000, a figure that was raised to €65,000 the following year. "I do think theatre should be subsidised," says Moylan. "But I don't think there's any obligation on the Arts Council to fund theatres like mine, when I'm the one deciding this is what I want to do."

Asked whether she felt any continuing responsibility to assist independent companies, Moylan replied, "Well, I don't think that can be put on my shoulders, just because our doors were open. Maybe Willie White will open his doors."

#### **LONGER RUNS AT PROJECT**

In a separate development, however, the Artistic Director of Project Arts Centre says that the venue he directs – which is already over-subscribed – is seeking to accommodate fewer productions and to allocate them longer runs. "I am not going to be able to respond to the demand for space if it comes my way," White says. "There might be two fewer productions [at Project] a year. It may seem insignificant, but for us there will be a huge impact. With companies making such investments in productions, a two or three-week run is self-defeating."

White recognises, though, that the closure of Andrew's Lane, following the loss of The Crypt, The Mint and City Arts Centre will lead to a severe deficit in available performing spaces in the city centre. (Smock Alley's main performance space is not due to come on stream until 2009, and it remains to be seen what impact the re-opened, miniature New Theatre will have.) Accommodating more companies at Project for shorter runs, is not the answer: "I don't want to disguise the fact that there is a problem," White says.

#### ALTERNATIVE DUBLIN VENUES

David Parnell might agree. The director of Gúna Nua and chair of the recently formed Association of Theatre Directors recently initiated a campaign – not to save Andrew's Lane, but "to keep options open for theatre companies in Dublin". Parnell, whose theatrical career began as an actor in Andrew's Lane, and whose company has more recently worked with that theatre as a producing partner, refrains from sentimentality.

"We're not necessarily attached to the building itself," he says, suggesting that Dublin needs a bigger venue, of between 300 and 400 seats, where successful shows might recoup their



WHITE



PARNELL

investment. "Andrew's Lane has fitted that bill very nicely until now," he says. "I don't think it's a question of the bricks and mortar of that building, but how its imminent demise highlights the lack of affordable alternatives [for companies] to produce their work in Dublin city centre."

Moylan recognises that many production companies will miss Andrew's Lane when the theatre lowers its shutters for the last time this summer (it is programmed until July). "Lane Productions are going to be top of that list," she says.

The company that originally turned John Breen's *Alone It Stands* into an international success, and has since produced large-scale commercial theatre such as *I, Keano*, will continue its business in Dublin.

"I suppose [Lane Productions] doesn't actually need the theatre building to generate ideas," concedes Moylan. "But to cultivate them, it might. We can't have that anymore and that's the

really sad part of it. We will want to take chances on smaller shows. I want to continue to produce new work. Plays like [Robert Massey's] *Deadline* that started off in the studio, moved downstairs, got wonderful reviews and launched an unknown writer. That's what I'm all about. That's what I love doing."

Once freed from the financial burden of the venue – and likely to be much richer once the building has been sold, her mortgage paid off and staff redundancies settled – Moylan will consider her future plans. "I want to produce another movie," she says. (Of *Stones in His Pockets*, perhaps?) "Now I can go on a holiday. I've never been able to sign up for a night course."

The decision, reached in consultation with her co-director, Cashe, the chair of Andrew's Lane advisory board, Peter Sheridan, and her husband, has not been without pain. But Moylan, as a canny producer, can recognise the humour in the situation. "If I had got just a quarter of this publicity for any of my shows," she recently told an RTÉ News crew, "I wouldn't be closing now."

## Acting in the best interests?

At a certain point in their training, every student in Trinity College Dublin's Bachelor in Acting Studies (BAS) learns the value of an outcry.

The Roy Hart method of vocal training finds creative potential in almost every uproar. Except, perhaps, this one: the sustained howl of protest when the decision to axe the programme was leaked to the media early this year.

The clamour of disapproval, which rang through the ranks of theatre professionals and reached a din of commentary and frowning editorials, seemed pitched towards reversing the decision made by Trinity's School of Drama, Film and Music. If anything, it seems to have frozen it. Since early January, when the story broke, the School has clammed up behind the wall of its Communications Department. According to one source from within the college, against the outcry, "the position became more entrenched within the college... While this war is being conducted in public, there's nothing we can do in private."

Two questions seem to have been absent from the debate surrounding the termination of the course: firstly, whether the acting programme, long underfunded, academically isolated and (for the past few years) increasingly embattled, should have ever existed in the context of a university. Secondly, whether the course as it exists - in a vastly different climate generated by the recent restructuring of the university - is worth saving?

Since the acting programme began in Trinity, originally as a two-year diploma in the early 1990s, before



**PHAEDRA**, staged by TCD's acting students this month

transforming, in 1996, into a three-year degree course (the Bachelor in Theatre Studies, as it was then called), there had always been questions about its location. Were actors best served within a university model, where the emphasis is on intellectual development and academic research, or was a conservatory model more appropriate, where the emphasis is on technical training and constant improvement?

#### FUNDING PROBLEMS

When the Government introduced free third-level education, paying student fees to universities through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the conservatory method became a moot point. As early as 2000, however,

the School of Drama recognised a major funding problem. That year an international team of experts reviewed the department and concluded that the acting course was not properly funded, while other courses, such as the BA in Drama and Theatre Studies, were suffering as the BAS drained available resources.

Having set the fee for acting students at €7,300 each (on a course with unusually low student numbers and unusually high contact hours) the HEA's funding level was always considered too low. (British equivalents have been costed at St£9,000 by a 2004 Price Waterhouse Coopers study, although the average income per student for a British acting course is

St£14,000.)

With the BAS thought to lose a quarter of a million euro per year, the School of Drama halted its intake in 2002 – as *ITM* reported that year – and the programme seemed to be in jeopardy. Expecting an enormous outcry and a favourable response from the HEA to an appeal for increased student fees, the School of Drama received neither. In 2003, the course trundled on.

To compound matters, Trinity College, like most Irish universities, is adapting to a radically altered climate both within the college and for third-level institutions in general. In keeping with a broad restructuring of Trinity, last year the School of Drama (headed by Prof. Brian Singleton) was absorbed into the School of Drama, Film and Music, a simple amalgamation with less conspicuous but more radical consequences. Within a new system of management, new responsibilities have fallen to the heads of each school, in this case, Prof. Kevin Rockett. For the first time in TCD's history, each school must manage its own budget and balance its books. (Each school has also become more powerful, their executives empowered to make all school decisions.) Under the new system, as *ITM* understands it, courses cannot be allowed to incur debt.

If this makes the position of the acting programme seem untenable, it was dealt an even more crippling blow

when the HEA decided last March to cease funding "terminal degrees" (i.e. degrees without the possibility of progressing to a Masters or PhD level; degrees such as the BAS). A fourth year was hurriedly devised for the acting programme and approved by the college, but the drain on the School's resources became still more significant. The writing has been on the wall for some time in other words; but recently the print became much bigger.

#### **FUTURE OF ACTOR TRAINING**

The broader question is now not so much about the future of this course – the School's decision to drop it is unlikely to be reversed – but rather what is the future of actor training. As *ITM* went to press, Trinity College had established a forum to consider all the available models of such training, how it might be structured and funded, and, more pertinently, where it might be located. The forum, to be chaired by Prof. Nicholas Grene, will consist of a dozen members, most of them theatre professionals, and hopes to report its recommendations by early summer.

The university model may come to be considered a nobly sustained and highly successful experiment, but which ultimately failed nonetheless. A conservatory model, accredited by the university but located elsewhere and funded privately (an approach demonstrated everywhere from RADA to the forthcoming Gaiety School of

Acting/DCU degree) may now appear the only sustainable option. This is a matter for the forum. Whatever the outcome though, actor training, once unheard of in this country and now vociferously defended by theatre professionals, is unlikely to slip silently away.

## High stakes for Queen's

If the organisers of the Belfast Festival at Queen's were bluffing, no one called them on it. The festival – which celebrated its forty-fourth anniversary last year and then announced that, without additional funding, there would not be a forty-fifth – has now received a lifeline of St£150,000 from the (UK) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DECAL) to guarantee a festival in 2007.

The result of a series of crisis talks conducted at the highest level between the University and the Government Department, and which noticeably bypassed the Northern Ireland Arts Council, the grant follows a concerted campaign to save the festival waged in the pages of the *Belfast Telegraph*.

Although the festival gained its most successful box-office returns ever last year, the accumulated deficit facing the organisation in 2006 was estimated to be between St£150,000 and St£200,000. The festival's finances had suffered heavily from the NI Arts Council's decision to reduce public funding to the organisation by thirty-

two per cent over the last three years. Unwilling to be seen to be using student fees "to prop up the festival" (as one Queen's spokesman put it), the University was no longer prepared to cover the shortfall without the assistance of its "other key partners", which include Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Events Body and DECAL.

Although the festival has been haemorrhaging money for years, this ultimatum was not issued until Queen's had honoured a previously determined three-year plan. Originally carrying a deadline of January 31st, the decision over the fate of the festival was ultimately postponed when talks between the NI Arts Minister, Maria Eagle, and the Vice-Chancellor of Queen's, Prof. Peter Gregson, gave cause for encouragement.

According to a festival spokesperson, speaking while negotiations were still underway, the move was no bluff: "I can guarantee you that if Queen's isn't happy with the financial package that is put forward in the next few weeks, then there will not be a festival next year and the whole future of the festival will be in jeopardy."

### CONDITIONS ATTACHED

The lifeline they have since received does not come without attachments, however. One of the conditions of DECAL's assistance – which has been processed through the NI Arts Council,



THE HISTORY BOYS at last year's festival; Below: Queen's University Belfast



and is additional to its budget – is that the festival establish a tangible working partnership with equal responsibilities and carve out a business plan for the next three years. These, essentially, are the very conditions the festival has been campaigning for. Key to these arrangements will be the attraction of a new commercial sponsor following the phasing out of previous partner Diageo.

Securing the future of the festival carries a symbolic currency for Northern Irish arts too, particularly given the confusion surrounding the Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast last year. The OBG closed in February 2006 when the NI Arts Council withdrew its funding, then reopened four months later when the Council took over its management itself.

With the lowest per capita arts funding for any region of the UK, said a Queen's spokesman, "a lot of people are looking at our battle as a battle for the arts in Northern Ireland per se. I'm confident that we'll get a solution for now ... fifty/fifty for the future."

## opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks key diary dates for the coming months.

Cahoots NI presents **CÚCHULAIN: THE HOUND OF ULSTER** by Zoë Seaton and Paul Bosco McEneaney, touring from 2 March – 7 April, from Riverside Theatre, Coleraine, finishing at Tower Street Theatre, Belfast.

Gúna Nua and Civic Theatre present **TROUSERS** by Paul Meade and David Parnell, touring from 28 February – 12 May, to Andrews Lane Theatre, Dublin; Backstage Theatre, Longford; Siamsa Tíre Theatre, Tralee; Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford; Garage Theatre, Monaghan; and Town Hall Theatre, Galway.

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast presents **TO BE SURE, OR, HOW TO COUNT CHICKENS WHEN THEY COME HOME TO ROOST** by Tim Loane from 3 – 31 March.

Rough Magic's production of Friedrich von Schiller's **DON CARLOS** in a new version by Mike Poulton runs at Project Arts Centre from 12 – 31 March.

**KICKING A DEAD HORSE** by

Sam Shepard premieres at the Peacock Theatre from 12 March – 14 April.

**SALOMÉ** by Oscar Wilde runs at the Gate Theatre from 15 March – 7 April.

Downstage Productions presents **THE GOOD THIEF** by Conor McPherson at Andrew's Lane Theatre from 19 – 24 March

The national tour of **LIFEBOAT** by Nicola McCartney, presented by Cork Opera House in association with Janus Theatre Company ends at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway from 19 – 20 March and Civic Theatre, Tallaght from 22 – 23 March.

Bruiser Theatre Company presents **THE CANTERBURY TALES**, written by Geoffrey Chaucer and adapted by Martin Riley, on tour from 20 March – 22 April at Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast; ending at Waterfront Hall Studio, Belfast.

Everyman Palace Theatre's tour of Conor McPherson's **DUBLIN CAROL** ends at the Belltable Arts Centre,



Darren Healy and Mary Murry in **NOAH AND THE TOWER FLOWER**

Limerick from 21–24 March.

The New Theatre presents **THE TAILOR AND ANSTY** by Eric Cross (adapted by P.J. O'Connor) in Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown from 22–24 March.

An Grianán Theatre, Letterkenny presents Brian Friel's **MAKING HISTORY** at the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine from 26–28 March.

Crooked House presents **4 NEW PLAYS FOR YOUNG ACTORS: DEOXYRIBONUCLEIC ACID** by Dennis Kelly, **A BRIDGE TO THE STARS** by Henning Mankell (adapted by John Retallack), **RED SKY** by Bryony Lavery and **A YEAR AND A**

**DAY** by Christina Reid at the Riverbank Arts Centre from 27–31 March and at the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork from 2–3 May.

From 21–31 March, Calypso Productions' **TALKING TO TERRORISTS** by Robin Soans plays at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, then tours to the Mill Theatre, Dundrum.

**DOES SHE TAKE SUGAR?** by Jean Butler runs at Project Arts Centre from 10–14 April.

Painted Filly Theatre presents **100 MINUTES 2007** at Project Arts Centre from 10–14 April.

**THE CAVALCADERS** by Billy Roche runs at the Abbey Theatre

from 10 April – 19 May.

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The New Works present **TILT** by Ailis Ní Ríain in the Granary Theatre, Cork from 16 – 21 April.

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Arambe Productions presents **THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST** by Ama Ata Aidoo at Project Arts Centre from 16 – 21 April.

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Visible Fictions presents **JASON & THE ARGONAUTS** from 18 – 23 April at the Half Moon Theatre, Cork.

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Rough Magic presents **ATTEMPTS ON HER LIFE** by Martin Crimp at Project Arts Centre from 18 April – 5 May

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Stephen Sondheim's **SWEENEY TODD** runs at the Gate Theatre from 18 April – 7 July.

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From 24 – 28 April, City Theatre's production of **FRANK PIG SAYS HELLO** by Pat McCabe, plays at Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown.

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**SAVED** by Edward Bond plays at the Peacock Theatre from 27 April – 26 May.

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Lane Productions' **I, KEANO** by Arthur Mathews, Michael Nugent and Paul Woodfull will be on tour until 12 May, to INEC @ Gleneagle, Killarney; Leisureland, Galway; Cork Opera House; Waterfront Hall,

Belfast; Millennium Forum, Derry; University Concert Hall, Limerick.

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Fishamble presents **NOAH AND THE TOWER FLOWER** by Sean McLoughlin at the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun from 14 – 28 April.

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From 17 – 19 May, Tall Tales Theatre Company in association with Ten42 Productions presents **WALLFLOWERING** by Peta Murray in Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown.

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**PICK 'N' MIX THEATRE** runs in the Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast from 18 – 20 May, with contributions from Tinderbox, Prime Cut, Cahoots NI, Bruiser, Replay, Kabosh, and Big Telly Productions.

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**THE CRUCIBLE** by Arthur Miller plays at the Abbey Theatre from 26 May – 7 July.

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Wexford Festival Opera runs at Johnstown Castle from 21 May – June 17, with Kurt Weill's **DER SILBERSEE**, Dvorak's **RUSALKA**, and a double-bill of Busoni's **ARLECHINO** and Stravinsky's **PULCINELLA**.

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Castleward Opera presents **UN BALLO IN MASCHERA** by Verdi and an **OPERA GALA** on alternate nights from 2 – 24 June in Castleward, Strangford, Co Down.

## **entrances & exits**

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre.

### **ANGELA McCLOSKEY**

has stepped down as acting Executive Director at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. **MICHAEL DISKIN** (pictured) previously Manager of the Town Hall and Black Box Theatres in Galway for over ten years, has filled the position. Town Hall Theatre is currently seeking a replacement Manager.

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Pavilion Theatre has appointed its new Theatre Director, **MARTIN MURPHY** (pictured) whose previous experience includes working as Artistic Director of TEAM Educational Theatre Company until 2004.

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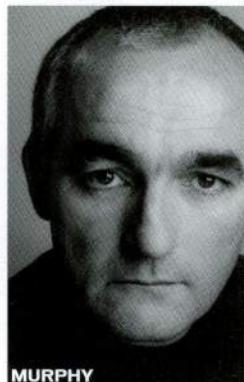
**WILLIAM GALINSKY** has joined Cork Midsummer Festival as the new Artistic Director, replacing **ALI ROBERTSON**.

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**SEAMUS CRIMMINS** is return-



DISKIN



MURPHY

ing to RTÉ, from where he was on secondment, after four years as Arts Policy Director of the Arts Council.

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**DIEGO FASCIATI** has stepped down as the Arts Council's International Arts Development Manager to take up the position of Executive Producer with Rough Magic Theatre Company.

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**RANDALL SHANNON** has stepped down as interim Chief Executive of Opera Theatre Company.

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**BERNARD CLARKSON** has

joined the company as the new Chief Executive, having previously worked as General Manager for Diversions Dance Company in Wales.

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Kinsale Arts Week in Cork has appointed **DEBORAH DIGNAM** as the new Festival Director.

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Red Kettle Theatre Company has appointed **JOAN DALTON** as the new Executive Producer, in a move from her previous position as Director of Children's Programmes within the company.

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Irish Theatre Institute has appointed **LIZ POWELL** as editor of the fourth edition of its *Irish Theatre Handbook*. She will be contacting the sector for information in the coming weeks. Email: handbook@irishtheatreinstitute.ie; tel: 01-6704906

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**GEMMA DUKE** has joined the Abbey Theatre as the new Press Officer, having previously worked as Marketing Assistant for the Dublin Theatre Festival.

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**MAEVE BUTLER** has stepped down as Administrator with Barnstorm Theatre Company, and is replaced by **FRANCES O' CONNOR** who worked previously as Administrator with the Cork International Choral Festival.

Irish Theatre Institute, in association with Foras na Gaeilge have appointed **ANNA BALE** as Irish Language Editor and **PÁDRAIG Ó SIADHAILE** as Consulting Editor for the new Irish Language Playography. Anna has worked for the past number of years in the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore & the National Folklore Collection, and Pádraig is Associate Professor of Irish Studies at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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#### SITUATIONS VACANT

**THE HAWK'S WELL THEATRE** is seeking a new Artistic Director/Chief Executive Officer.

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**CORK MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL** seeks to appoint an Acting Festival Manager from March 2007 – July 2007.

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**NORTH TIPPERARY COUNTY COUNCIL'S ARTS OFFICE** wishes to recruit a part-time Festival Coordinator to assist in the promotion and development of the county's festivals.

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**SMASHING TIMES THEATRE COMPANY** is currently seeking a new Coordinator.

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**PROJECT ARTS CENTRE** is recruiting a new Centre Technician. 



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DRAMATURGY: THE

18

ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΟΥΣ  
ΠΕΡΙ  
ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ.  
ARISTOTELIS  
DE  
POETICA  
LIBER.

Ex Versione  
*THEODORI GOULSTONI*  
Perpetuis notis Analyticis illustrata.

Accedunt Integre Notæ.  
*FRID. STYLBURGHII, & DAN. HEINSII:*  
Necnon Selectæ aliorum.

---

*Sit tibi Musa lyra solens, & Cantor Apollo.*  
Ne forte pudori  
Horat. Arte Poet.

C A N T A B R I G I A E,

Apud Johannem Hayes, Celeberrimæ Academix  
Typographum. Sumptibus Thoma Dawson Bib-  
liopolæ Cantabrigiensis. M D C X C VI.



# DRAMATURGY

## The Unanswerable Question

All plays have inherent dramaturgy but few theatre companies in Ireland employ an individual dramaturg, and attempts to define the role tend to end in confusion. **JOCELYN CLARKE** goes in search of answers.

AT A SYMPOSIUM IN BOSTON A FEW YEARS ago on the role of the dramaturg in modern theatre, there was considerable disagreement on exactly what a dramaturg does. In exasperation, the moderator, Anne Cattaneo, a dramaturg with Lincoln Centre Theatre in New York, asked all six members of one panel to state the mission of a dramaturg. This is what she got.

"I'll probably get killed for saying this, but I don't know the answer," said a director of a small theatre company.

"I look for patterns in things," said a dramaturg and academic.

"I am a mediator between the actor and the director," said the executive dramaturg of the Volksbühne in Berlin, one of the oldest theatres in Germany.

"A dramaturg is a great equaliser and a glorious leveller of all that goes into theatre collaboration," said a costume designer for theatre, opera, film and television, who said she talks to dramaturgs all the time.

As a characteristic, dramaturgy describes how a particular play or playwright employs theatrical form to create meaning - or how a particular play makes a story in time or space.

"I want to be sure that every actor understands every word and every line and every scene that's in the play," said a director of Shakespeare and sometime dramaturg.

"There's an old joke that goes: 'What do Americans do with a question? They answer it,'" began Morgan Jenness, a theatrical agent and former dramaturg at the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. "Well, the job of the dramaturg is to make that question as deep and as difficult and as provocative as possible."

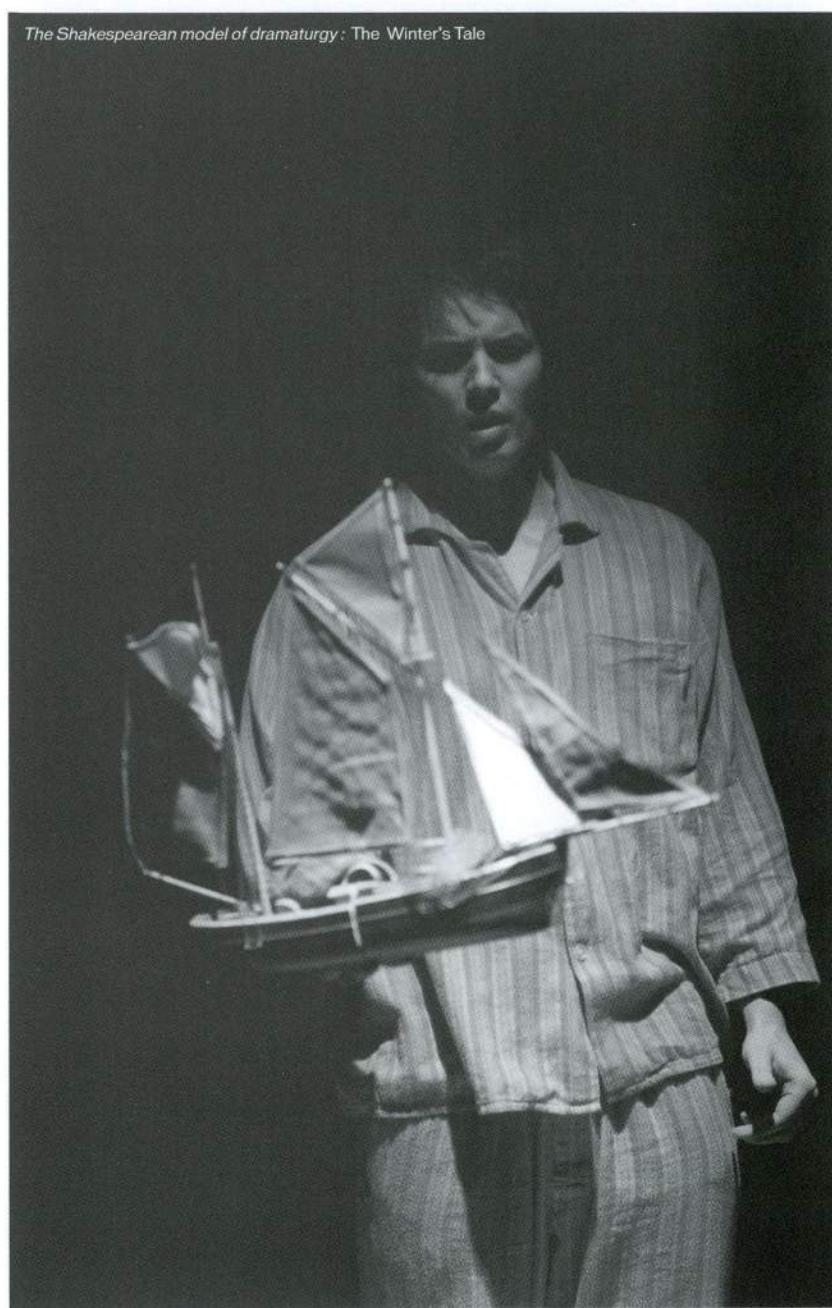
According to William H. Honan who reported on the panel discussion for the *New York Times*, "The International Dramaturgy Symposium, produced by the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts, was at sea."

Later Honan writes that the members of several other panels tentatively settled on the notion that the dramaturg is a kind of theatrical and literary adviser who helps the actors and the director understand the play they are presenting, sometimes to the point of discovering the play, developing it with the author or translating it from a foreign language. The German delegation, at least, seemed to agree that the tradition dates to Gotthold Lessing, the 18th-Century German dramatist, critic and probably the world's first dramaturg.

The question of what a dramaturg is and what a dramaturg does is evidently a knotty one. While the responses of the symposium's panelists encompassed the varied and different functions and roles of a dramaturg, Jenness's response is perhaps the most insightful and useful, not least because it implies that the very questions about what a dramaturg does also provoke very necessary questions about the process of making and producing theatre itself.

So what is dramaturgy, then? Dramaturgy can refer to a characteristic or a function or a role. As a characteristic, dramaturgy describes how a particular play or playwright employs theatrical form to create meaning - as in the dramaturgy of *Hamlet* or *The Cherry Orchard*, or the dramaturgy of Brecht or Tom Murphy - or how a particular play makes a story in time or space. Patrice Parvis in *Languages Of The Stage*, describes dramaturgy as an attribute of a play: "action,

*The Shakespearean model of dramaturgy: The Winter's Tale*



story, fable, catastrophe, rules, unities, etc; ... [the] treatment of time and space, the configuration of characters in the dramatic universe, the sequential organization of the episodes of the story."

As a function, dramaturgy concentrates on the work of selecting and preparing new and canonical plays for production, and applying an *understanding* of

the dramaturgy of the plays to the production process, from pre-production through to opening night. This is a process that includes researching a play's historical, critical and theatrical contexts for the purposes of produc-

The dramaturg in the rehearsal room has been described variously as the 'in-house critic', the 'audience's representative', and the 'conscience of the theatre'.

tion. Within a theatre or an institution, dramaturgy also includes such related tasks as season planning, new play development, outreach, marketing and audience development.

As a role, dramaturgy refers to the person whose name appears on a theatre programme opposite the title "dramaturg". It is always possible to eliminate a dramaturg from a rehearsal or developmental process (or from a theatre) but it is impossible to eliminate dramaturgy.

The shortest and most workable definition of dramaturgy, however, is the art of writing or producing a play (in Greek, *drama* (t) - *ergon* [work] but in French, a *dramaturge* is a playwright) and encompasses the roles of playwright, director, choreographer, designer and actor - as well as literary manager.

So what is a dramaturg, then? The dramaturg in the rehearsal room - or on the staff of a theatre - has been described variously as the "in-house critic", the "audience's representative", and the "conscience of the theatre". I once heard a very old but spry American dramaturg compare the role to "that lever that turns those old engines, you know... a crank!"

All these descriptions derive in large part from the varied career of the "first dramaturg", Gotthold Lessing, who wrote a collection of essays on theatre called the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* that critiqued and promoted certain kinds of plays and playmaking over others - the Greeks and Shakespeare were good, the French bad.

It is in the context of production dramaturgy (of both classical and contemporary texts) that the role of the dramaturg, and indeed the function of dramaturgy, are at their clearest and most discrete. Indeed a production dramaturg's role is defined and delimited by his or her "production casebook", the creation and compilation of which brings together the various critical, academic and

historical attributes of the dramaturg.

According to Mark Bly, the head of Yale University's renowned dramaturgy course, the ideal production casebook should include "pertinent cultural, historical and social background of the play; significant biographical information on the playwright that may illuminate the play; commentary by the playwright in the forms of interviews, letters or passages from other works by the writer; relevant criticism or commentary by other artists or critics; images from painters, sculptors and photographers that can feed, complement or challenge the work of the director and other artists on the project; a listing and brief commentary on related films and music, and their direct or associative value for the stage production, and a highly selective production history of the play. A casebook is a tool for exploration rather than prescription..."

It is precisely in this context of research that dramaturgy is most understood – and the role of the dramaturg is most easily defined. Indeed most university courses in dramaturgy, both in Europe and in the U.S., lay particular emphasis on theatre history and literary criticism, with dramaturgs-in-training cast somewhere between disinterested critic and collegiate historian.

While the function of dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg are well established in most Western European theatres – particularly in Germany, France and Scandinavia – as well as in the U.S., rarely, if ever, are dramaturgs listed in printed production programmes in British or Irish theatres. Instead, a literary manager generally carries out the dramaturgical function in a theatre or on a production - in Ireland only Druid, Rough Magic, Bedrock, Tinderbox, Fishamble and the Abbey have literary managers/Directors. (These are: Thomas Conway, Christine Madden, Alex Johnston, Hanna Slättne, Gavin Kostick and Aideen Howard.)

In a company that accepts script submissions from playwrights, a literary manager's primary task is usually to deal with (or oversee the handling of) these scripts, which all need to be read and reported on, and to recommend plays to the artistic director for production. The literary manager also oversees play development programmes, which generally include workshops or public readings of plays, or other forms of supporting a playwright's process in developing a new play.

So much for the terms and conditions. If what a dramaturg is and what a dramaturg does provoke particularly knotty questions – the very permeability of the terms is the subject of considerable debate – then what dramaturgy *should* be and what a dramaturg *should* do are extremely tangled, particularly in the area of "new play dramaturgy." Both questions have an impact on every aspect of

the theatre-making process: corporate and institutional, ideological and philosophical, moral and artistic.

New play dramaturgy, which refers primarily to new play development but also can also include collaborative projects in drama, music theatre and opera, breaks down into two distinct approaches towards *how* to develop new work (as opposed to *what* to develop, which is a

The process is predicated on an understanding of dramaturgical formulae, culled from historical models (from Aristotle and Brecht to the dreaded three-act model).

whole other but closely related question). One approach is play development and the other is playwright development.

#### **PLAY DEVELOPMENT**

Play development is primarily a production-orientated model, favoured mainly by medium to large theatre companies (with literary departments and managers) and by most play development institutions, where the entire development process from commissioning through reading and workshop to production is focused on preparing the new play for production, and where the dramaturg's role is predominantly prescriptive.

Every stage of the process – which is less scientific than it sounds – is predicated on an understanding of dramaturgical formulae, culled from historical models which have proven to be successful and popular in the past (everything from Aristotle and Brecht to the dreaded three-act model) and to which the new play should conform as much as possible.

Each reading and workshop tests the play for production and also against a chosen dramaturgical formula – in many ways both are seen as one and the same. When tested against the dramaturgical formula, the new play inevitably develops character/narrative/structure problems in the first, second or third act. The playwright is encouraged by the dramaturg to fix them in his or her reading or workshop (preferably in the evening, between sessions). The success of either the reading or workshop is measured by how successfully the playwright has fixed the problems of his or her play.

In this model, the dramaturg and director's roles are distinct – the dramaturg works with the playwright, the director runs the room, and sometimes they double-up: the workshop experience is sometimes bruising because without an advocate (or some kind of advocacy) in the room for his or her play, the playwright can feel very isolated.

*Sources of inspiration: Eileen Walsh in Corcadorca's The Merchant of Venice*



If the playwright can't fix the problem - either because they don't understand it or, worse, refuse to do so because they don't think there is one - they are persuaded of the necessity of fixing the problem because the play, in the view of the theatre's artistic director and literary manager/dramaturg, is not 'working' and

Should the play prove a success in production,  
everyone takes the credit. If it flops, however,  
everyone dishes the blame - with the lion's  
share going to the playwright.

is not 'produceable'. (In the play development model, both terms are synonymous).

Should the playwright then set about fixing the

problems of the play - every playwright wants their play produced after all - and the play goes into production, they slowly realize that their autonomy and ownership of the play diminishes as they try to accommodate the demands of a director, actors or designers. Should the play prove a success in production, everyone takes the credit. If it flops, however, everyone dishes the blame - with the lion's share going to the playwright for their problem-plagued play, or for being difficult.

What is true, however, is that nobody really knows why the play was a success or a failure - except how it conformed to the dramaturgical formula: what worked, worked; what didn't, really didn't. The playwright, in this process, is least convinced of the success or failure of the play, because on a very profound level they have ceased to recognise it as their own. If it is a success, it was because of the repairs they made (repairs they may have resisted) which may have changed it significantly from its original intention and shape. If it flops, it was because the direction or acting or design didn't work, and the original play was fine. While this latter argument is a common complaint among playwrights, it is not always true - but nor are the playwrights necessarily wrong.

The play development model is popular among theatres and institutions because it works. Successful plays continually prove the model. But unsuccessful plays also prove the model: they didn't conform to the prescribed dramaturgical formula. It offers a producer the illusion of control in both the messy process of making a play and in the unruly process of producing it, including marketing and audience development, because it offers several opportunities to test the play in reading and workshop before producing it - or, increasingly, before committing to produce it.

In an increasingly market driven theatre economy - with limited public funding, tight budgets and skittish (and conservative) corporate funders and subscribers - play development has become its own little cottage industry, more so

in Britain and the U.S. than in Ireland. Although the language and aspirations for a new play and its playwright seem more in keeping with the playwright development model, actual practice in Ireland borrows from the play development model, with an overweening emphasis on literary criticism and text analysis – the oft repeated phrase in the rehearsal room is “you can fix that *line* later”. It is equally true, however, that fewer and fewer new plays are being produced in Ireland – there is an emphasis on productions from the repertoire, revivals and adaptations. Playwrights will always be guaranteed a workshop but not necessarily a production – especially if the Research and Development results are, well, unconvincing.

Naturally, the play development model is feared and loathed by playwrights – for all the obvious reasons. But also for less obvious reasons. Although it appears to be a commercial theatre model, in fact, independent and non-profit theatres alike embrace it, because it offers a strategy for artistic as much as commercial success. It is a model primarily about production rather than the playwright.

At its worst, it undermines and disempowers playwrights, it discourages experimentation and it is more responsive to socio-cultural and economic forces than philosophical and artistic impulses. In the best and worst sense, it is audience-driven. It is also, at core, commercially and artistically risk-averse.

#### **PLAYWRIGHT DEVELOPMENT**

By contrast, the playwright development model takes risks. It locates the playwright rather than the play at the heart of the development process. The play is the site in which the playwright can explore his or her own dramaturgy, with the dramaturg and director as the primary facilitators of the process of discovery.

This model envisages a process of artistic development with the playwright over a long period of time, over successive plays and productions. It is not necessarily dependent on the success of a single play – in which the playwright grows as a theatre artist, and whose work develops to its full artistic potential – and if very lucky, both playwright and theatre make some coin.

It is a process where the communication between playwright and dramaturg is more collaborative than critical, and its quality is speculative and interrogative rather than prescriptive. A dramaturg should be at any one time a cheerleader, a collaborator and a critic, or in US critic and producer Robert Brustein’s wry phrase “a humanist in the woodpile”. It is equally a process which enables the playwright to discover and develop their own dramaturgical formula –

rather than imposing one – which they own, defend, argue for and change because they understand why and how it *should* be. Dramaturgically and artistically, a playwright's resistance is fertile.

Historical dramaturgical formulae are theatre memories, "tools for explora-

Too often plays are commissioned and workshopped numerous times without a theatre ever committing to production. Too many workshops can unmake a play.

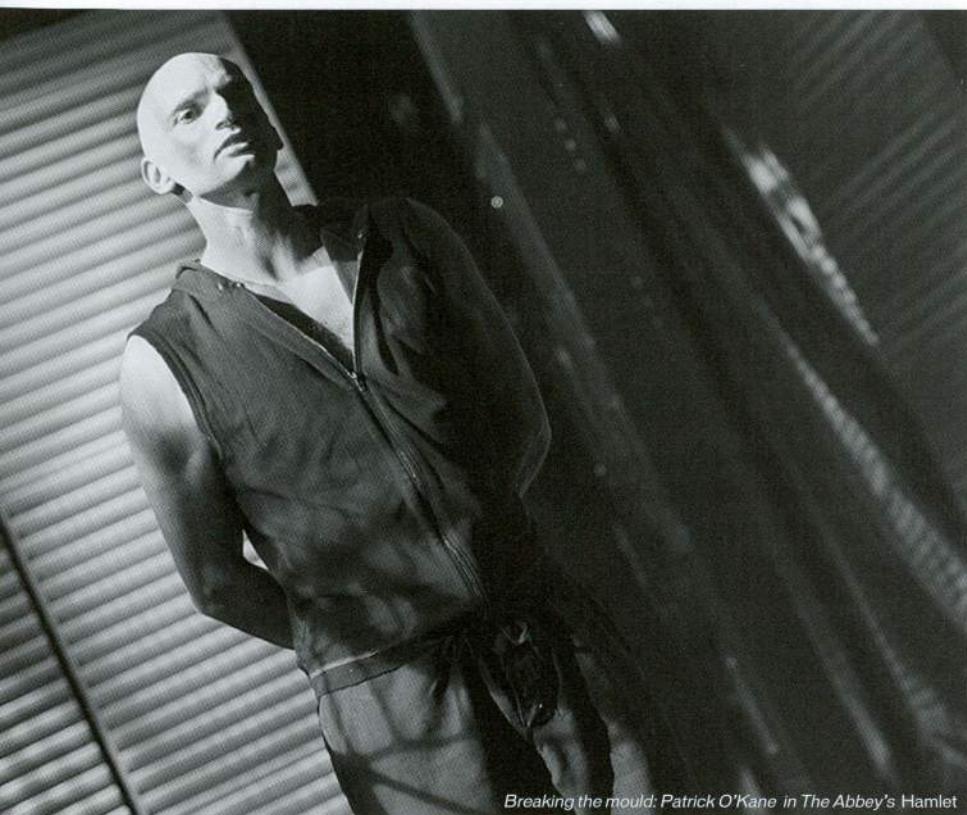
tion rather than prescription", which contemporary theatre artists can either embrace or reject but by which they ultimately shape the present and invent the future. If the plays

and the playwrights that we remember and celebrate all broke moulds – Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht, Beckett *et al* – then a playwright should be encouraged to see them as sources of inspiration, not use them as them as an awkward cookie cutter to shape their own play.

By placing the playwright and his or her dramaturgy at the centre of the process, the playwright development model is shaped by the playwright's needs. Workshops and readings are individually tailored, rather than one size fitting all. The playwright is accorded the respect and dignity he or she deserves as a responsible theatre artist. A theatre's commitment to its artist should extend beyond the terms of its commission contract, ultimately because no playwright (or any other theatre artist) is ever paid enough. It is also a model that demands of a playwright the courage to interrogate their work fully, to be encouraged to take risks with it and to engage wholly with the process of theatre-making and the demands of production. Playwrights all too rarely sit in on pre-production meetings and rehearsals except for during the first week, a few run-throughs and previews.

And finally, this model demands a full commitment by a theatre or institution to a playwright, a commitment to a production rather than just to a workshop, and a commitment to the playwright rather just to his or her play. Ultimately playwrights want their plays produced, and need the support of a theatre and its community. Too often plays are commissioned and workshopped numerous times without a theatre ever committing to production. Too many workshops can unmake a play in the attempt to fix it in the protracted uncertainty of an unclear production commitment. In playwright development, a theatre commits clearly and early, and the playwright responds to the challenge and trust of that commitment, not least in writing better and stronger plays.

Playwright development is guided by that thing called vision - as much by



*Breaking the mould: Patrick O'Kane in The Abbey's Hamlet*

the playwright's vision as by that of the dramaturg and of the artistic director. It sees theatre as a protean art form, where some of its fundamental principles of (r)evolution and progress necessarily entail risk and failure but also lead to growth and success.

Recently I emailed Morgan Jenness to ask if she remembered the Symposium in Boston and this is what she wrote: "A dramaturg needs to pose questions to a playwright that will enable her or him to dig deeper into the play, not necessarily to find answers but to uncover deeper questions (the implication that the play then sends the audience out digging on their own....)."

So what should a dramaturg do? And what should dramaturgy be? Just like theatre at its best. Asking the unanswerable questions. The deeper the better.

# Shifts in Perception

J.M.Synge's *Playboy* continues to cause ripples today. Its legacy was examined in an evening of television documentaries in January, celebrating the playwright's centenary and questioning whether Irish theatre still has the power to shock. **KAREN FRICKER** tuned in.



**T**HIS JANUARY MARKED THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY of the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World* and the unrest it caused. Lest another artistic centenary slip by uncommemorated, the RTÉ Arts Lives series commissioned a new documentary, by Bob Quinn, which both retold the story of those first performances and pondered a continuing tradition of provocation in Irish theatre. This was presented in a marathon Saturday evening's broadcasting that also included a screening of the *Playboy* staged by Druid as part of their DruidSynge marathon (as filmed by Wildfire Films) and a repeat of 'Mighty Talk,' Wildfire's documentary about the making of DruidSynge, first shown on RTÉ in 2006.

'PLAYBOYS AND REBELS', 'THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD', AND 'MIGHTY TALK: A JOURNEY WITH DRUDSYNGE',  
BROADCAST ON RTÉ,  
27 JANUARY 2007

Quinn's documentary was pitched at a broad and non-specialist spectatorship. It sought – and generally succeeded – to tell the events of January 1907 as a really good yarn, intercutting commentary by theatre-makers, critics and historians with well-sourced documentary footage and artifacts, as well as clips from past productions of the play. We hear about the founding of the Abbey, and about Synge's early writing difficulties and the breakthrough visit to the Aran Islands; all setting up the heart of the story – the controversy that arose around the *Playboy*'s satirical portrait of opportunism, credulity, sexuality and violence in the rural Catholic heartland. Particularly clever use is made of quickly-intercut historical clips to emphasise the then-shock value of the word 'shift'. The documentary also suggests – as is now widely accepted – that W.B.Yeats worked behind the scenes to stir the controversy, which brought the issues involved to the foreground of public debate but also had the salutary effect of focussing publicity on his theatre.

Nothing groundbreaking here, nevertheless a story well told; one couldn't help but notice, however, that the voices telling it were almost exclusively male. We got short hits of Lelia Doolan and Garry Hynes at the beginning and end, and halfway through, a welcome bracing jolt of

Anne Enright in full feminist flow – ‘you could argue that Catholic nationalism at the time of Synge was a growing fundamentalism that required that women be pure or they be mothers’ – that was over as soon as it began. As Hynes comments in the ‘Mighty Talk’ documentary, Synge wrote wonderful roles for women, particularly mature women. It was his representation of women as em-

However well the chosen experts despatch their duties, it seems massively ironic that, 100 years later, this is a tale still understood as best told by men.

powered, sexualised, and complex individuals that arguably sparked off the whole *Playboy* ruckus in the first place. However well the chosen experts (Diarmuid Ferriter, Nicholas Grene,

Chris Morash, Eamon Morrissey, Colm Tóibín) despatch their duties, it seems massively ironic that, 100 years later, this is a tale still understood as best told by men.

The attempt to try to bring events up to date was also uneven. It seems too soon to assess the significance of negative public response to Druid’s late 2006 production of Stuart Carolan’s *Empress of India*, and the documentary itself fails to offer a coherent position about what it feels the problem might have been. We hear callers to ‘Liveline’ complaining about the play’s bad language, and there is a mild ironic echo of the ‘shift’ problem in one caller’s reference to “that word shirt without the ‘r’”. But it is never made clear if there were coherent objections to the play beyond negative responses to profanity, and the segment ends up, somewhat bizarrely, using statements from Hynes, Carolan, Doolan, and Fiach MacConghail to set up an empty debate about whether Galway is more uptight than Dublin, and (more troublingly) about what ‘kind of people’ go to the Abbey; and not really contending with assertions that the problem with the play was its forthright treatment of a contemporary loss of religious faith, which some found blasphemous.

Firmer ground underlay the discussion of Northern Protestant playwright’s Gary Mitchell’s current predicament: he is living in hiding following persecution by extreme members of his own community who object to his depiction of internal violence and corruption in the Loyalist movement. Mitchell is convincing and eloquent in arguing that the problem isn’t that he’s off the mark — but rather that his accuracy is more than society can bear. Like Synge, Mitchell comes off as a teller of very uncomfortable truths.

As to the evening’s other offerings, Wildfire’s filming of the DruidSynge *Playboy* works extremely well. Multiple cameras were apparently used to allow cuts and closeups; that the filmmakers managed to achieve this without disrupting

*Marie Mullen, Eamon Morrissey and Aaron Monaghan in The Well of the Saints on the Aran Islands. Garry Hynes (above right).*

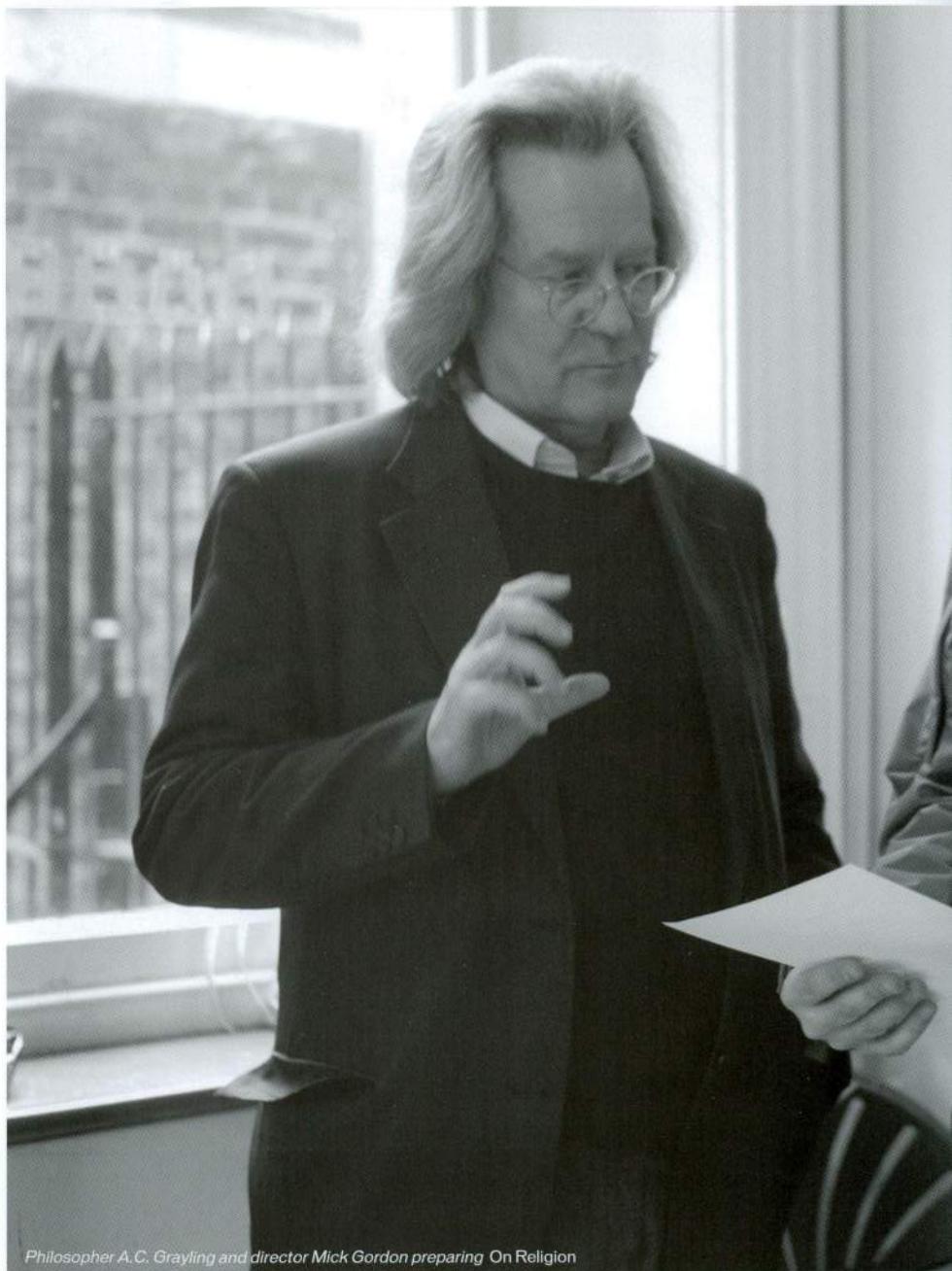


the energy and exchange of a live performance is remarkable. This *Playboy* will become an excellent resource for teachers, students, and historians.

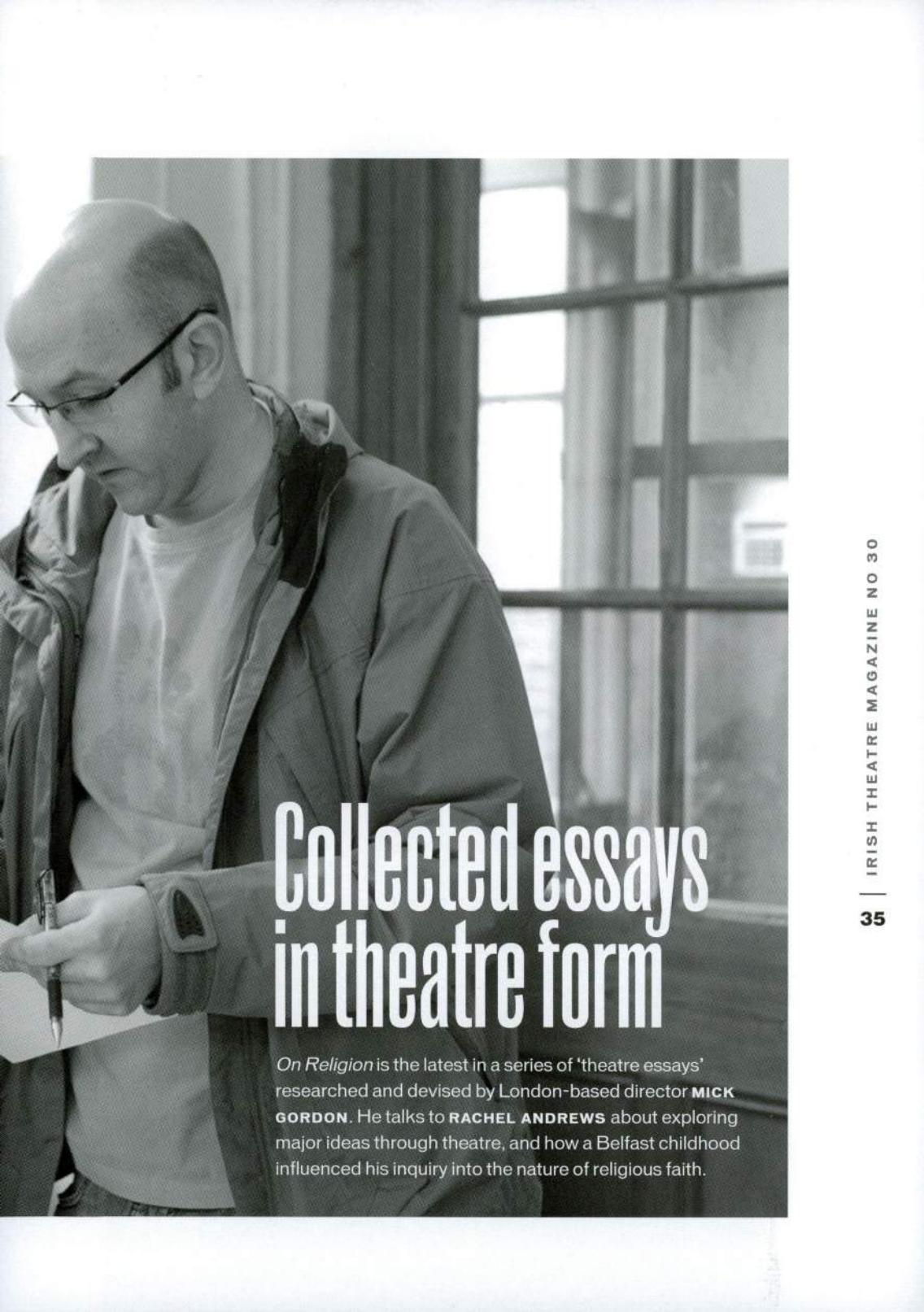
Two aspects of 'Mighty Talk' (which I had not seen before) are particularly striking: first, the illuminating rehearsal room footage in which we get a sense of Hynes's forceful and passionate directing style. Just how theatre is made is something that remains mysterious to many people; these scenes usefully illustrate the interplay between actors' interpretation and experimentation, and a director's instructions and interventions. And while the documentary does dwell a bit too heavily on DruidSynge as a heroic, almost mythically inspired endeavour, the backstage account of one of the marathon performance days gives an exhilarating impression of the hard graft involved, on the part of cast, crew, and creative team alike.

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*Karen Fricker is a researcher at the Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin and reviews theatre in Ireland for the Guardian (U.K.) and Variety (U.S.).*



*Philosopher A.C. Grayling and director Mick Gordon preparing On Religion*



# Collected essays in theatre form

*On Religion* is the latest in a series of 'theatre essays' researched and devised by London-based director **MICK GORDON**. He talks to **RACHEL ANDREWS** about exploring major ideas through theatre, and how a Belfast childhood influenced his inquiry into the nature of religious faith.

**A**T THE END OF DECEMBER LAST YEAR, THE GUARDIAN newspaper published an editorial commenting on the place of religion in contemporary British society. Headlined 'Beyond Belief', it cited the results of a new poll indicating that most British people did not view religion as a central aspect of their identity, and made a plea for the promotion of secularism in modern life. "Who is more likely to defeat bad religion?" asked the writer. "The best you can hope for is to turn bad religion into better religion." The quote was taken directly from a new play, *On Religion*, which had been running for almost a month at London's Soho Theatre. It was written by Belfast-born playwright and director, Mick Gordon, in collaboration with philosopher and public atheist, A.C. Grayling.

It was coincidence but perhaps no accident that the *Guardian* editorial and Gordon's play should have become so closely intertwined. The bombings in London on 7 July 2005 precipitated a climate change in Britain, and religion has since become a hotly debated public issue. Politicians claim that it is the "new class", while secularists such as Richard Dawkins assert that belief in God inflicts great harm upon societies. Behind the arguments, which have largely been played out through the media, is the reality of falling church attendances and a public increasingly troubled by what it views, according to the *Guardian* poll, as the divisive role of religion in contemporary life.

*On Religion*, which finished its run on 6 January this year, was billed in advance publicity as "an exploration of the most controversial subject of the moment", while one interviewer, talking to Gordon before the play opened, described the topic as "the big one". Gordon, whose stated ambition was to "engage with the presiding concerns of society in an intellectual, entertaining and accessible manner", had clearly tapped into something.

The genesis of what Gordon refers to as his "On ..." project began almost ten years ago, during his tenure as Artistic Director of London's Gate Theatre. There, his invitation to French psychologist Marie de Hennezel to share her experiences of working with dying people resulted in the devised piece, *On Death*, adapted from Hennezel's book about palliative care, *Intimate Death*. The experience appealed to Gordon, who was looking for ways of examining his intellectual interests through the emotional prism of theatre. Leaving Britain in 2002 in

*Gemma Jones and Pip Donaghy in On Religion*



order to “question the relevance of theatre to contemporary societies”, he travelled to Uzbekistan, noting how the Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent became a “place of freedom” in an oppressed society. He worked with a Ugandan travelling theatre, making plays about safe sex and equal rights for women, and directed the Oskarlis Kurshonovas Company in Vilnius, which rewrites classics in an attempt to inspire a new Lithuania. These experiences gave rise to Gordon’s desire to create “a body of work challenging the fundamental preoccupations

Gordon soon became interested in exploring the notion of ‘dogmatic opinion as opposed to religious belief’ and how - or if - these two positions can ever talk to each other.

of my own sophisticated society”. This crystallised around the conceit of a series of “theatre essays” (inspired by the works of the French essayist, Montaigne), for which Gordon would choose a theme, examine it, and produce what he calls “ninety-minute think spaces where people can go and reflect on their own cares and concerns.”

He set up a new company, On Theatre, but, inspired by his experience with de Hennezel, chose as his collaborators experts in other fields; in 2005 he co-authored his examination of the idea of the self, *On Ego*, with neuropsychologist Paul Broks, then turned to A.C. Grayling for his subsequent attempt to explore why it is we believe the things we do.

Gordon comes across as passionate, focused, articulate and charming, his Northern Irish accent tempered by the years spent living in Britain – he graduated from Oxford in 1992. He has done well in the London theatrical scene, his intelligence and drive propelling him to national prominence at a young age. By the time of his soul-searching sojourn in 2002, aged only 30, he had already won a slew of awards for his work at London’s Gate. As Associate Director under Trevor Nunn at the National Theatre, he had arguably paved the way for Nicholas Hytner’s reign with the introduction of a six-month Transformations season of new work and cheap ticketing.

In his attitude to work and career he is, evidently, untroubled by hesitancy, a trait that has doubtless served him well in approaching the ‘On Theatre’ project, for which each piece involves up to eight months of research before the dramatisation process even begins.

“It’s a making process and a creative process,” Gordon says of the ‘theatre essay’, explaining that he begins each inquiry in the same coherent manner: with a theme and with a question. (For *On Religion* the question – which was later re-defined – started as: “What place religion in modern society?”) Once he has identified a “primary collaborator”, the research – a huge, ambitious interview



Gemma Jones and Priyanga Burford in *On Religion*

process with a range of experts and “ordinary” people – can get under way. He is careful, too, to seek out the opinions of those with whom he does not agree; he contacted Grayling because he largely concurred with his point of view but knew that, in order “to present the notion of inquiry, we had to interview people who did not think as we might think”. Those people included Richard Dawkins; the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams; Muslim theologian Tariq Ramadan and prominent scientist and rationalist, Lewis Wolpert.

In particular, Wolpert’s life experience – his son is an evangelical Christian – influenced the final dramatic content of the piece, with the narrative turning on the relationship between an uncompromising atheist mother and her more moderate son who has just given up his legal career to become a priest. But all of the interviews forced a redrawing of the original question, and Gordon soon became interested in exploring the notion of “dogmatic opinion as opposed to religious belief” and how – or if – these two positions can ever talk to each other.

He was born a Protestant in the Belfast suburbs and unsurprisingly, has acknowledged his background as a factor in his original thinking about the piece. A child of 1970s’ Peace Movement parents, whose first word was “splosion”, he

grew up viewing religion as a deeply aggressive entity that fostered division whenever it was allocated space within the public sphere. He was brought up as anti-religious and has remained so, despite the fact that his time in Britain has convinced him of the potential value of a more benign and kindly religion, and despite the rather odd experience, during the research for *On Religion*, of discovering just how much he liked and respected some of the religious people he came across.

He tried to find a way of addressing religion that was ‘unconventional, but not provocative; intelligent but human; educative but not didactic’.

These encounters, more than anything, rendered him conscious of the need to find a way of addressing religion that was “unconventional, but not provocative; intelligent but human; educative but not didactic”, to arrive at something which, he believes, became “a plea for kindness.”

Gordon’s ‘On ...’ pieces tend to emerge from each other. *On Religion* was inspired by *On Ego*; he is once again collaborating with Dr Broks to create *On Fear*, an essay examining how we function as emotional beings. A second collaboration with Grayling, exploring the notion of identity, is also in the pipeline. For each piece the research process – and the dangers inherent in that process – remains the same. Despite Gordon’s insistence on avoiding, at all costs, the creation of didactic theatre and his distinction between what he does and “verbatim theatre”, his characters in *On Religion* were criticised as being “mouth-pieces” at times, and the play itself as “more essay than theatre” (Lyn Gardner, writing in the *Guardian*).

However, Gordon appears so inherently aware of those pitfalls, and so cognisant of the “human, emotional” power of theatre that you suspect he will continue to refine his method until he conquers any accompanying difficulties. For the moment, his certainty about the validity of the plays is enough to quell any doubts about their form. The outside interest in them is encouraging also – Peter Brook is considering a French version of *On Religion*, and Gordon hopes someone in Dublin will also make their own of the piece.

“We are offering something that is different,” he says. “We are working to engage people and to inspire them.”

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Rachel Andrews is a journalist and critic based in Cork.

The Stinging Fly Press proudly presents:

# **THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS**

Stories by Kevin Barry



Fast girls cool their heels on a slow night in a small town; a bewildered man steps off a country bus in search of his identity; lonesome hillwalkers take to the high reaches in search of a saving embrace. These are just three of the scenarios played out in Kevin Barry's wonderfully imagined and riotously entertaining stories. Throw in a lust-deranged poultry farmer, a gigantic taxi driver stricken with chilling visions, a jaded air hostess and a stressed-out genie, and you have a stunning, provocative and richly comic collection from a writer of unique gifts.

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The Stinging Fly

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*Annabelle Comyn in rehearsal*

Caryl Churchill's intensely concentrated play, *A Number*, is one of the most difficult works ANNABELLE COMYN has ever directed. Here she describes how the script's precise use of language became her absolute guide in the rehearsal room, where everything was pared back to its simplest form.

# Follow That Line

**W**HEN OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY TO DIRECT *A Number* by Caryl Churchill I sat down to read the play again and again. The writing is complex: punctuation is used carefully and sporadically. A sentence starting with a capital letter and ending with a full stop is not usual in this text and, when it's there, it informs you of the energy, tone and rhythm of the line. Other lines begin with no capital letter and end without a full stop, dash, or slash but are open-ended, with incomplete thoughts, interrupted words or the thought being continued by another character in the next line. There seems to be a consistency in its use and getting familiar with this and the rhythm of the play helps unlock the emotional journey of the piece.

So, though I did research around the various themes or topics in the play: cloning, alcoholism, children brought up in care, there was no greater insight into it than what the author wrote.

The original cast was Tom Hickey and Stuart Graham. I had met Tom on several occasions before rehearsals began. We spoke at length about

Churchill's punctuation. I felt then as I still do now that the writer's lack of punctuation was not an open invitation to put whatever punctuation in, as you will, but a distinct direction in itself. Tom differed on this. Our views on the story and emotional complexities of the play were as one, but our approaches very different. While Tom would have liked to know the emotional landscape of the play, with a

I felt I had been trying to direct away from my style to accommodate an actor who needed a different approach from the way I felt in my heart this play should be approached: via the text.

writer like Caryl Churchill I would tend to look for the emotional journey through her language and punctuation and be guided by that. It was these differences that grew in the first

week and-a-half of rehearsals to a point where we reached stalemate.

I remember Stuart Graham saying the ideas in the play are so screwed up, how do you even start to play the emotional complexities of having been cloned? It is an experience than none of us can even reference. So, beginning became a problem. And, having started, how to proceed, as thoughts in the play are not only unfinished but not always linear, and very often contradictory.

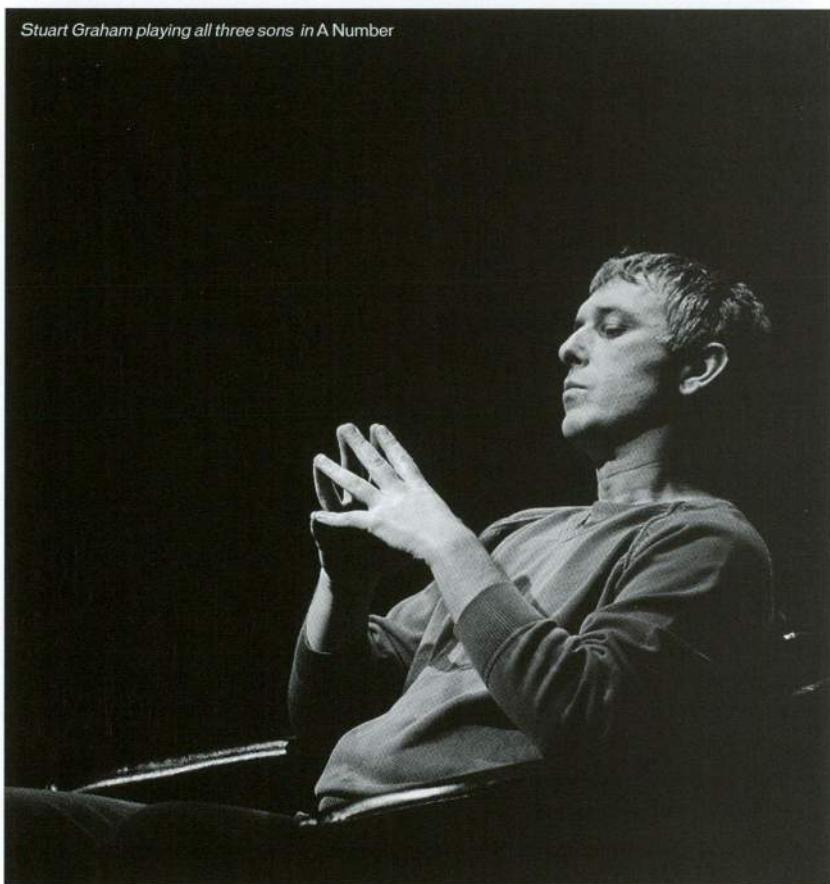
When Tom left the production Stuart and I talked. He felt confused, angry that Tom was gone and I hadn't stopped him, but ready to continue. I felt I had been trying to direct away from my style to accommodate an actor who needed a different approach from the way I felt in my heart this play should be approached: via the text.

After a few frantic days recasting, we found Alan Williams, who flew in from London and was mad about the play. He arrived on Saturday and we spoke at length and in great depth about the play on Sunday. Alan, Stuart and I would now have two weeks to rehearse this complex work.

Nothing was plain sailing in this process and I was still working with two actors who had extremely different approaches. With a great writer such as Caryl Churchill you must trust her writing and be guided by it; she has written it that way for a purpose. It seemed that Alan had complete faith, his precision with her text was absolute, but Stuart wasn't so sure. Sometimes when you don't know the purpose, it's helpful just to say the words exactly as she's written them and that will inevitably release some sense. So repetition was the key - "drill" as Alan put it.

Often notes given by me would trip up the actors when they tried to implement them. By trying to play a note they'd just been given, at times the actors lost the ability to listen and think on the line, which is an absolute necessity in this play when thoughts are finished by the other character. So the result of a director's note was not noticed straight away but it would emerge in the playing later in the day or at

*Stuart Graham playing all three sons in A Number*



another time completely. And once I understood this, we began to make further progress.

Despite this simplistic philosophy of saying the words and drilling, making thought connections on the line was difficult, and Churchill's apparent contradictions in the play could land you in a muddle. One day Stuart decided to stop fighting the script and just follow her directions, and with that came a way in. What I discovered is that there is not always an accessible reason for certain thoughts and that trying to pin a line or scene down to 'this is what the writer is saying' isn't necessarily helpful. In fact, much of what emerges from this play are opposites and contradictions that are able to co-exist quite happily - as they do in all of us. We're just not used to it in playwriting.

Stuart had the added difficulty of playing three different characters. Though he tried and played with different accents and we both considered costume to be a way to differentiate characters, we moved away from these initial delineations and treated each character like an individual personality. With them came their voice (not accent) and their energy too.

Though we both seemed to share a view of B2, the son Salter brought up, we dif-

What we ended up with – I hope – is an intense stillness filled with the complexities of the scene. My resistance was fear and a great awareness of only having two weeks to discover, develop and shape a fully rounded and coherent production.

fered hugely about B1, his first son. I remember Stuart asking me why I was ignoring the one piece of information we learn about B1 in Scene 3, that he “shouted and rambled really”. This

was Stuart’s way into the character and I was resisting it. I felt B1’s first scene with Salter showed a man with great control, wit, intelligence and focused persistence. Why did I feel this? Because of Churchill’s language, punctuation and rhythms in this scene. And yet it was contrary to how B1 is described by B2. But characters’ descriptions of other characters are never to be trusted, since they have their reasons for using certain language too.

What Stuart was aching for was an expression of all the emotions contained within the character that he would eventually contain and use in a more focused way. When I gave him the freedom to explore these inner thoughts, I was initially fearful that we might end up bringing the character down the track of a person who is outwardly an emotional wreck, but it in fact gave Stuart something to work from, and something to control and use to drive his questions to Salter.

What we ended up with – I hope – is an intense stillness filled with the complexities of the scene. My resistance was fear and a great awareness of only having two weeks to discover, develop and shape a fully rounded and coherent production.

Visually too, we chipped away any excess. A chair was abandoned after a week and the costumes became subtle variants on a theme.

If the play was telling us anything it was that what makes a person is who we are inside, and who we are inside is shaped by many complex factors, most important of which is nurture.



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*Annabelle Comyn is a freelance theatre director and Artistic Director of Hatch Theatre Company.*

A Number ran at the Peacock Theatre from 6 February – 3 March.  
It is reviewed on Page 78.

# Researching Beyond Borders

A new international research network will enable both academics and practitioners to keep pace with the globalisation of Irish theatre. The Irish Society for Theatre Research is an umbrella organisation linking Irish Theatre Studies scholars at home and abroad. **SARA KEATING** looks forward to its first conference, taking place in Belfast next month.



**T**HE NEED FOR AN ORGANISATION specifically dedicated to the study of Irish theatre has never been greater. As productions of work by Irish playwrights have proliferated worldwide, it has become increasingly necessary to develop different ways of interrogating Irish theatre. The freshest stagings of major Irish writers, for example, have begun to emanate from abroad, while the active touring schedules of companies such as Druid demonstrate the globalisation of Irish culture that has developed hand-in-hand with economic expansion. The production of classic Irish texts in different cultural contexts is revealing new ways of understanding the significance of plays that have become fixed in the Irish cultural imagination, as Pan Pan's Chinese production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, visiting Project Arts Centre last December, suggested to Dublin audiences. (See review, Page 94.)

*Beckett's Catastrophe staged in Beijing last December*



The production of classic Irish texts in different cultural contexts is revealing new ways of understanding the significance of plays that have become fixed in the Irish cultural imagination.

Society for Theatre Research/Cumann Taighde Amharclannaíochta na hÉireann (ISTR) is scheduled to take place next month at Queen's University Belfast (April 15 - 17). Bringing together top theatre scholars from around the globe, ISTR will work as a transnational research network for Irish theatre scholars and practitioners. Its first symposium will mark the beginning of a series of annual events, which will include a twice yearly publication dedicated to the field of Irish Theatre Studies.

According to Dr. Paul Murphy, Chair of the ISTR Steering Group, the society aims "to develop and promote new and challenging ways of thinking about Irish theatre." As he explains, ISTR emerged during "an open discussion at the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL) conference at Charles University, Prague, during July 2005", where scholars specialising in Irish theatre expressed the need for a research network like IASIL singularly devoted to promoting the development and exchange of resources within the field of Irish Theatre Studies. Out of this conversation a Steering Group emerged, with representatives from the National University of Ireland Galway, University College Cork, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, Derry. The group met regularly "in order to build the necessary structures required to launch ISTR as a viable research society."

ISTR is keen to open up dialogue about what Murphy calls "the diverse contemporary frameworks" that are shaping theatre scholarship in Ireland today. As he

Amid this increasing global exchange of Irish writing and Irish theatre, the need for an umbrella organisation dedicated to interrogating ongoing developments is pressing. An international research network would allow scholars and practitioners to trace the movement of Irish playwrights and theatre companies through different cultures, bringing the weight of primary evidence to bear on Irish theatre scholarship. One such research network has just emerged. The inaugural meeting of the Irish

# GOING GLOBAL

ISTR is closely modelled on the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), which was established to promote collaboration and the exchange of information between individuals and organisations concerned with theatre research on an international level.

IFTR holds an annual conference which attracts hundreds of international scholars and practitioners. It also publishes a valuable annual journal, *Theatre Research International*, which features articles on theatre practices in their social, cultural and historical contexts. The 2007 conference, 'Theatre in Africa - Africa in Theatre', will take place in South Africa in July.

[www.iftr-firt.com](http://www.iftr-firt.com)

## OTHER ORGANISATIONS

**International Association of Theatre Critics: An NGO**  
founded in 1956 to promote international cooperation among theatre critics and foster theatre criticism as a discipline.  
[www.aict-iatc.org](http://www.aict-iatc.org)

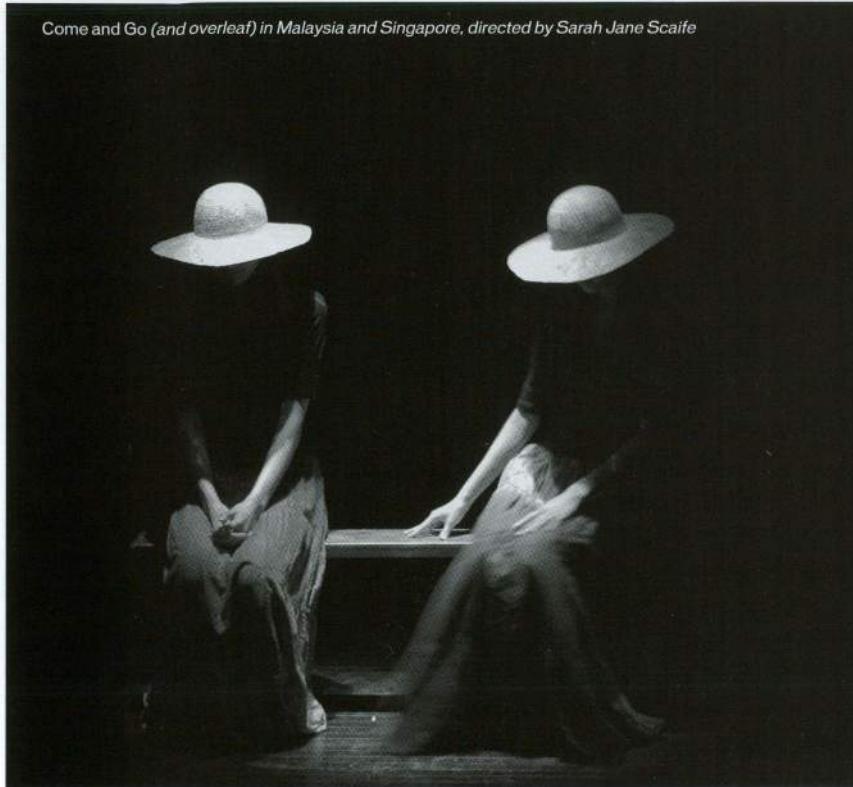


**International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People:** Established in 1965 as a global alliance of professional theatre for children and young people. Its members include theatres, organisations and individuals in more than 70 countries.

[www.assitej.org](http://www.assitej.org)

**International Theatre Institute.** An NGO founded in 1948 to promote international exchange of knowledge and practice in theatre arts and increase creative co-operation.  
[www.iti-worldwide.org](http://www.iti-worldwide.org).

Come and Go (and overleaf) in Malaysia and Singapore, directed by Sarah Jane Scaife



explains, "the field of Irish Theatre Studies is being transformed by new approaches to the rich history of Irish theatre and by the remarkable diversity of contemporary theatrical practice."

The theme of the Inaugural Symposium is 'Theatre and Conflict', which the organisers hope will encourage a debate about the representation of conflict on the stage, on both an intra-national as well as international level.

and international context. These frameworks, as set out by ISTR's manifesto, largely emerge from historiographical, theoretical and cultural debates. However, Murphy insists that ISTR will engage "with the full spectrum of Irish theatre from page to stage", and this includes performance; ISTR, he says, "will provide a space for theatre practitioners to engage with scholars of Irish theatre."

The organisation will be funded by membership fees, which are priced at Stg£20.00 regular and a Stg£10.00 student rate for a yearly subscription. Membership includes eligibility to participate in the conferences that will be held annually in different higher education institutions throughout Ireland, and two copies of the society's bi-annual publication, *Irish Theatre Journal*, which will feature the ongoing research of ISTR's members, and include scholarly articles on Irish theatre, interviews with practitioners, book reviews and other information relevant to the field of Irish Theatre Studies.

#### **INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM**

The theme of the Inaugural Symposium is 'Theatre and Conflict', which the organisers hope will encourage a debate about the representation of conflict on the stage on both an intra-national as well as international level. This broad scope could generate discussions based on issues as diverse as sectarianism, class disparity, gender hierarchy, domestic violence, racial discrimination and cultural dissonance. The location of the first conference in Belfast complements the symposium's theme, and suggests a commitment to encompass theatre practice throughout Northern and Southern Ireland. Professor Janelle Reinelt, President of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) who is currently based at the University of Warwick, will give a keynote lecture addressing the conference theme. A series of working groups dedicated to various pertinent theoretical issues will also meet over the course of the three-day conference. A Performance Studies group, convened by Dr. Bernadette Sweeny from UCC will analyse the relationship between Irish theatre and performance.

A Theatre History and Historiography group convened by Dr. Tom Maguire from the University of Ulster will examine the way in which theatre practices are recorded in Irish theatre history. Professor Brian Singleton from the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin will convene a working group with an interest in cultural identities. This group will explore the changing cultural landscape and the boundaries by which Irish theatre is traditionally defined, focusing on gender, sexuality, race, nation and ethnicity, as well as "popular" performance. A final working group, Textual Practices, will be dedicated to investigating the translation of drama from page to stage will be moderated by Dr. Eamonn Jordan from University College Dublin.

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*The Inaugural Symposium of ISTR will take place at Queen's University, Belfast, 13-15 April. Further information on: [www.qub.ac.uk/schools/School%20of%20Languages%20Literatures%20and%20Performing%20Arts/Subject%20Areas/Drama%20Studies/Irish%20Society%20for%20Theatre%20Research/](http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/School%20of%20Languages%20Literatures%20and%20Performing%20Arts/Subject%20Areas/Drama%20Studies/Irish%20Society%20for%20Theatre%20Research/)*

# Winter of his discontent

Men in crisis loom large in a new collection of recent Irish plays.  
**PATRICK LONERGAN** considers what has been left out.

**B**ACK IN 1998, JOHN Fairleigh produced an anthology entitled *Far From the Land*. Comprising plays that won the Stewart Parker award – an annual prize for first-time Irish playwrights – the book highlighted the strength and vibrancy of Irish dramatic writing at that time, featuring work by Enda Walsh, Donal O'Kelly, Vincent Woods, and others. Its title signified a change in direction – *Far From the Land* suggested that Irish dramatists were moving away from the old preoccupations with nation and rural life and seeking new ways of writing. The book was an assertion of the good health of Irish theatre, which was (some thought) entering a period of renaissance.

**THE TIGER  
IN WINTER**  
*Six Contemporary Irish Plays*  
Edited by John Fairleigh  
Methuen, 2006

Things seem different nine years on, and Fairleigh has now produced a second anthology, featuring winners of the Parker award since 2000. If his first volume symbolised new directions, this collection adopts a more sombre tone, as is obvious from its title: *The Tiger in Winter*. So does this collection provide evidence that spring is just around the corner – or does it show that Irish writing is in crisis, as some suggest?

Probably the most successful work featured here is Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*, a two-hander about a couple's marital difficulties. O'Brien was let down by the apparently premature production of his second play, *Savoy*, but as we've seen from his work on



Richard Dormer in his own play, *Hurricane*

*Pure Mule* – and as is evident here – he's a talented writer, with an excellent ear for dialogue. *Eden* hasn't received much critical attention since its 2001 premiere – perhaps due to readers' intolerance for monologue, in which the play is written. Yet O'Brien's use of this form means that the play succeeds as well on the page as it does on the stage: while it's hard to avoid recalling the performances of Don Wycherley and Catherine Walsh, it remains a satisfying read.

The other plays are more theatrical than literary, and therefore seem less adventurous in print than they did in performance. Malachy McKenna's *Tilsonburg* was theatrically enjoyable because of its humour – which was aided by McKenna himself appearing in the play, as one of two Irishmen work-

ing on a tobacco farm in Ontario. Mark Doherty's *Trad* offered a wonderfully weird theatrical experience, and it's impossible to read it without thinking of Frankie McCafferty and Peter Gowen, who played a father and son in search of the latter's love child. Garry Hynes's direction – and the acting of Derbhle Crotty and Aidan Kelly – turned Christian O'Reilly's *The Good Father* from a good play into a devastating 90 minutes in the theatre. The visceral quality of Gerald Murphy's *Take Me Away* had to be seen to be fully appreciated: in Lynne Parker's production, its presentation of a family of men sometimes had the intimidating force of Tom Murphy's *Whistle in the Dark*. And Richard Dormer's *Hurricane* succeeded because of the quality of Dormer's performance as Alex Higgins.

One of the most notable features of these plays is that, although they were written by apprentice playwrights, they were produced with excellence: they succeeded because their production companies invested seriously in them. Whether they'll have a life after their premiere remains to be seen, and it will be interesting to observe the continuing development of these writers' careers. But it's hard to quibble with the suggestion that these are among the best first plays of the period 2000 to 2005.

Some inferences about Irish theatre can be drawn from this selection. The regionalisation of Irish theatre is evi-

dent in the fact that three of the six plays were first produced in Dublin (by Focus, the Abbey, and Rough Magic), while two were premiered in Galway (by Druid and the Galway Arts Festival), and one in Belfast (by Ransom). The collection highlights the importance of writing development programmes: Murphy and Doherty's plays were products of Rough Magic's Seeds programme, while Murphy and O'Reilly benefited from inclusion in Druid's Debut series. Three of the six plays had been published at the time of their premiere, as part of companies' growing commitment to bringing new Irish work into print. Also notable is that four of the six writers began their careers as actors, a sign of increased mobility between the different parts of the theatre sector.

But an inescapable element of the book is that all of the plays it features are written by men (as was the case with *Far from the Land*), and all of them deal with themes of masculine dysfunction and crisis: it seems that the most successful first plays of recent years owe much to *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*.

Fairleigh indicates that he's aware of this in his introduction: "the charge against self-indulgence," he writes, "is that five of the six plays were either directed or produced by a woman". In fairness, he is restricted in his choice of plays to winners of the Parker Trust



Joe Hanley, Aidan Kelly and Barry Ward in *Take Me Away*

award and, as he points out, women were involved in bringing these plays to the stage. But the line-up of writers raises important questions. Why haven't women writers won the Parker Award? And does the production of one more anthology about screwed-up Irish men perpetuate the view that "serious" Irish drama must deal with masculine themes?

A glance at the Irish Playography reveals that approximately one in every four new Irish plays is written by a woman – hardly an example of equality, but perhaps a higher number than one might expect. Further examination shows that women are considerably more likely than men to be commis-

sioned to write community drama, plays for children, or collaborative works – all forms of drama that are considered to be of lesser value than traditional plays. Women writers' work is far more likely to be self-produced than men's. Relatively more new plays by male authors are produced at the Abbey Theatre, Druid, the Gate, and the other prominent Irish theatres: only Rough Magic has a record of producing as much new work by women as by men, and it's also one of the few companies that consistently encourages women writers to tackle themes other than domestic disharmony, as we've seen in such recent works as *The Bonefire* and *The Sugar Wife*.

In the last ten years we've seen excellent new plays by writers such as Lisa McGee, Tara Maria Lovett, Hilary Fannin, Ursula Rani Sarma, Ionna Anderson, Gina Moxley, Abbie Spallen, Helena Enright, Morna Regan, Stella Feehily, Rosalind Haslett, Christina Reid, and many others. Fairleigh can't be blamed if none of these writers' works appears in his books. But his two volumes might contribute to the perception that there are no Irish women playwrights. Certainly, the line-up of *Tiger in Winter* suggests that gender is a determinant of who gets produced, who wins prizes and who gets published. It should also be noted that these six plays collectively feature parts for 15 men, but only two women

– showing how the prioritisation of the masculine within Irish writing has an impact on other parts of the profession.

One final question is: where next? Irish companies are very positive about first-time playwrights – a tendency rewarded (rightly) by the Parker Trust. But this focus on the new may lead to the neglect of the not-so-new. Programmes such as Rough Magic's Seeds are valuable, but it would be constructive if an Irish theatre company would initiate comparable schemes for the development of mid-career writers, so that the potential evident in this anthology (and elsewhere) can be realised. It's hard to shake the perception that in Ireland it's easier to get a first play produced than a second one.

As for Irish drama? This anthology reveals that although the "cupboard" of new Irish writing may be bare at the Abbey, there are still many talented writers working in Ireland whose voices should be heard. Some of them have been featured in this collection. The fact that many others have been left out doesn't detract from the quality of the work published here: plays such as *Trad, Eden*, and *The Good Father* are indisputably among the best recent Irish works written by anyone, first-time writer or old master. *The Tiger in the Winter* is an immensely valuable contribution to our awareness of Irish theatre – what it is, what it should be, what it might yet become.

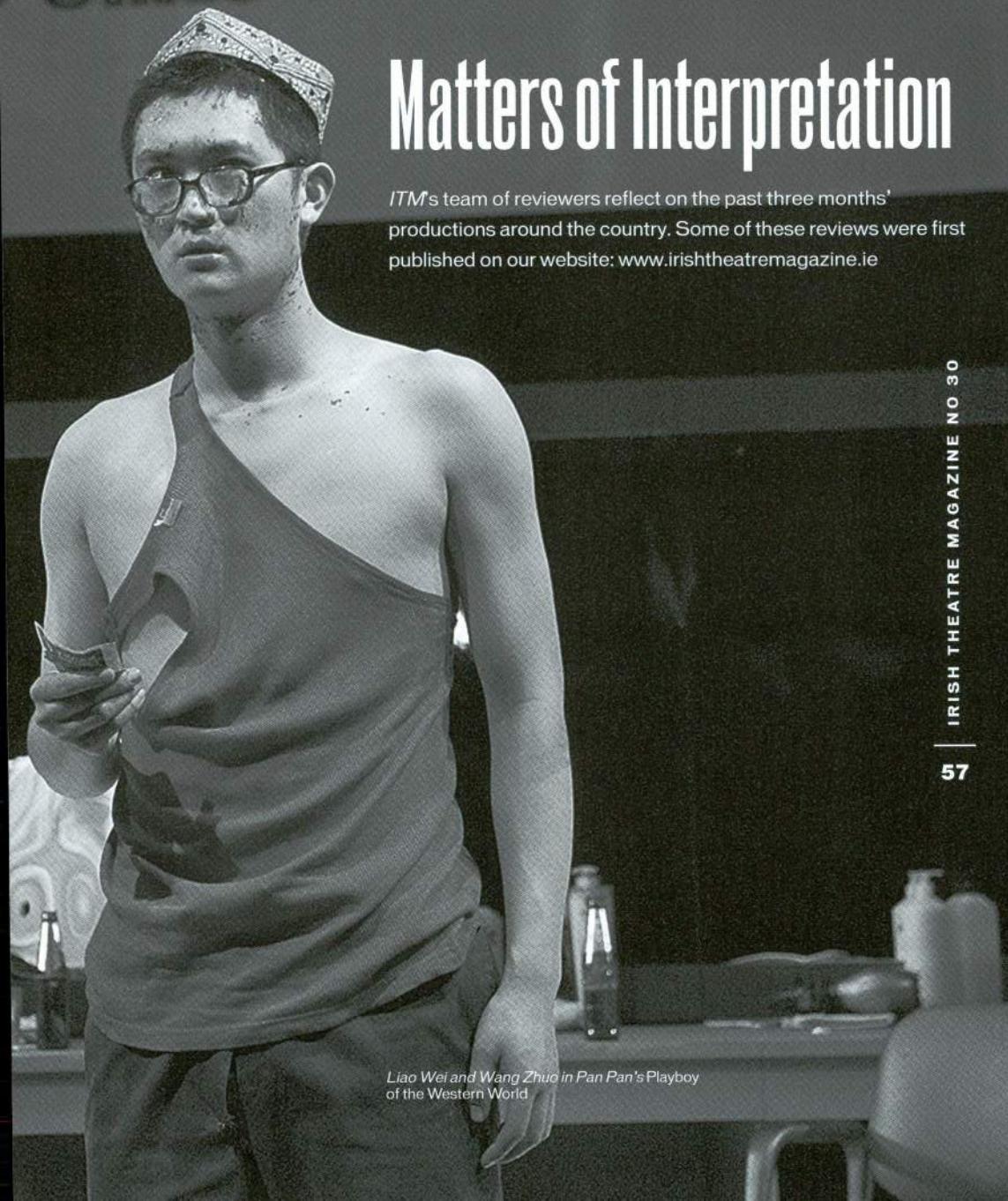
WHERE YOU'LL HAVE  
YOUR NECK AND



WE GOLDEN CHAINS ARO  
GIRLS TO BEAT THE HAM

# Matters of Interpretation

ITM's team of reviewers reflect on the past three months' productions around the country. Some of these reviews were first published on our website: [www.irishtheatremagazine.ie](http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie)



Liao Wei and Wang Zhuo in Pan Pan's Playboy of the Western World

# Notes from a New Country

Recent productions throwing light on Ireland's new prosperity and materialism also suggest what may be lost in the transformation.

## **THERE CAME A GYPSY RIDING**

**by Frank McGuinness**

Almeida Theatre, London

Directed by Michael Attenborough

Design: Robert Jones. Lighting: Paul Pyant

With Ellen Atkins, Ian McIlhenny,

Imelda Staunton

11 January - 3 March 2007;

reviewed 13 January

**BY BRIAN SINGLETON**

MCGUINNESS'S DOMESTIC TRAGEDY of a family coming to terms with feelings of guilt, remorse and pain on the second anniversary of their son's suicide might, on the surface, have much less import for a London audience than an Irish one. There is little by way of action, and imagined futures for the family are rejected throughout the play. Instead we experience what might be described as an atonally choristic lament for the loss of the family as well as a family's loss. For this Irish spectator, however, McGuinness's play is much more than a simple paean. Its choices, characterisations, settings and references point a critical finger at the loss of the family in a very particular contemporary

context of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

This family is anything but ordinary. They are multi-millionaires. The father Leo owns a portfolio of pubs and his wife Margaret is a Professor of English at a University in Dublin. Their seaside cottage in the West of Ireland owes more to IKEA than to Synge. They arrive bringing their provisions with them, leaving nothing behind that might help to sustain the rural economy. And throughout the play, Margaret in particular mourns the loss of her County Donegal roots, and recalls myths and superstitions of a pre-modern past that have been replaced by the new mantras of corporatism, entrepreneurship and greed.

The suicide of the young male is also a particularly hot topic in Ireland currently. Although we never find out the real reason for their son Eugene's suicide, the struggle to come to terms with the imagined causes of his distress and ultimate choice all expose a lack of understanding and a crisis of faith in contemporary society. Certainly Gene had everything he could possibly wish for, as a child growing up in a wealthy household.

*Eileen Atkins and Ian McElhinney in There Came A Gypsy Riding*



JOHN HAYNES

The largesse of the father Leo is played by Ian McIlhenny with an affability that really makes us question Gene's decision. How could such a solidly loving and generous man be insulted by a son's ungrateful suicide? Mother Margaret, however, is played by Imelda Staunton with an unremitting acerbic tongue that controls and criticises even the most simple action, such as making a cup of tea. Perhaps tough love might have been just too tough. Certainly the surviving children, Louise and Simon, constantly carp at their mother's unshakeable desire for perfection. Their actions and choices are very revealing. Louise is a National School teacher and chose not to rise up the ladder and follow her mother's university footsteps. Simon didn't continue his education beyond Masters level in a similar act of refusal to reach the top and now follows his dream working in a bookshop. He also refuses to have children in defiance of the rat race that parenting has turned out to be in contemporary Ireland.

Into this dysfunctional family comes Bridget, a middle-aged single cousin who uses her status as outsider and antagonist to direct her caustic tongue and astute finger at the cankers of the family. She reminds us of Rima West in *Dolly West's Kitchen* or Eleanor Henryson in *The Bird Sanctuary*. In her shocking pink wellies, she pushes the family to come to terms with their

grief, cracking jokes, labouring on taboo subjects, and constantly reminding them that it was she who found Gene's body washed up on the beach. Her mind races from topic to topic, testing, troubling and ultimately attacking the shaky foundations of the family. Her approach is more scattergun than scatty as she destabilises everyone with jokes before she lands a solid knock-out punch on the family's defences. Played by Eileen Atkins for laughs in an accent that ranged across many counties of Ireland and even Scotland, Atkins's Bridget was as irreverent and cruel as she was entertaining. We delighted in her presence but knew that it would always bring trouble. She returns Gene's suicide note two years after finding it and this is seen as an act both of cruelty and madness. Its contents, however, reveal nothing except that his death was no accident. Margaret reads it as a curse on the rest of the family and here her culture acquired through the highest level of education breaks down into superstition.

Attenborough's production focuses exclusively on characterisation, while Jones's set of a cut-away holiday home with mod cons and a huge, intrusive dead branch of a tree perhaps acts as a metaphor for the lost roots of family. And permeating the space is Paul Arditti's surround-sound of sea and seagulls, reminding us that it is to the earth and the air that we return – de-

spite our acquisitions, acculturation, and unstable faith in modernity.

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Brian Singleton is Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

**LESS THAN A YEAR**

**by Helena Enright**

Island Theatre Company

Georgian House, Limerick

Directed by Liam Halligan

Visual Media Design: Kieran McBride

With Seamus Moran and Joan Sheehy

20-25 November 2006; reviewed 25 November

**BY SHEILA McCORMICK**

IRISH AUDIENCES' EXPOSURE TO verbatim theatre has mainly been through companies touring from abroad. Written as part of Island's Studio Initiative, Helena Enright's *Less Than a Year* can be seen as an attempt to use a relatively unfamiliar genre to explore an issue of specifically Irish interest: the state of our health service. Performed in the intimate setting of Limerick's Georgian House, the play recounts a couple's experience of their seventeen-year-old daughter's illness and eventual death from Ewing's Sarcoma. In duologues directly addressed to the audience, the couple express the frustration of battling to obtain appropriate medical treatment for their child from a health system that is presented as at best indifferent and at worst inept.

The action is interwoven with projected images – hair, a girl's bedroom, a

hospital ward – as well as apparently real news broadcasts and random projected phrases such as "cure" and "cancer". But the emotional power of the story means that the audience's focus will inevitably be on the verbatim status of the script, which declares itself as based on the testimony of a real couple: the play's impact lies in our awareness that the events being described actually happened. However, unlike other verbatim plays, *Less Than a Year* does not reveal its sources. Instead, it chooses to use universal 'mother' and 'father' figures, hiding the identity of the parents and their daughter, but also obscuring the identity of the doctors and institutions involved.

There is much debate about the ethics of verbatim theatre, particularly about whether it is acceptable to edit interviewees' comments while still claiming that the verbatim script is based on "reality". Enright's text is problematic in that context. She reveals little about where she encountered the couple or how the piece developed, and we know nothing about the production's ultimate effect on the traumatised couple.

Verbatim text has the potential to feel unfamiliar in the mouth of the actor. Its unpolished nature provides a challenge, especially when a naturalistic performance is called for. In *Less Than a Year*, both actors appeared to struggle at times with the verbatim text, making it difficult for the audi-

Seamus Moran and Joan Sheehy in *Less Than A Year*

ence to become engaged fully in the characters' world. This struggle, along with a lack of emphasis in the script on the father's testimony, prevented Seamus Moran from fully inhabiting his role, placing heavy demands on Joan Sheehy. This was unfortunate: Moran's performance features moments of beauty and subtlety, as he portrays a man struggling, not only with his daughter's illness, but also with his wife's mental breakdown. Moran achieved these moments with a gentle stillness that encouraged the audience simply to listen to his character's testimony, without becoming distracted by unnecessary movement. Also unnecessary was the addition of props, such as

a newspaper and scarf, which had little to do with the characters or indeed their story. This awkward staging and the inclusion of religious iconography, which appeared to lack either artistic or political motivation, made it more difficult to empathise with the couple and their situation.

Had the subject been appropriately contextualised by being related to specific and identifiable places in Ireland, the production could have encouraged social engagement in a way similar to that achieved abroad by such productions as the Tricycle Theatre's *The Colour of Justice*, which reopened debate about institutional racism by chronicling the Stephen Lawrence in-



MAURICE GUNNING

quiry. But the universal relevance of *Less Than a Year* has the effect of generalising the characters' experience.

Instead of leaving its audience with the powerful sense that these people's trauma could just as easily be our own, the play instead makes generalised points about cancer and our flawed medical system – claims that most members of the audience would surely have agreed with before we entered the theatre.

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*Sheila McCormick is writing a PhD on Verbatim Theatre at the National University of Ireland, Galway.*

#### **LIFE SHOP TILL YOU DROP**

**Written and directed by Alice Coughlan**

Wonderland Productions

With Clodagh Reid

Set Design: Alice Coughlan.

Lights: Moyra Darcy

Costumes: Aisling Nic Eoin

Bewley's Café Theatre

15 January 15 - 3 February 2007

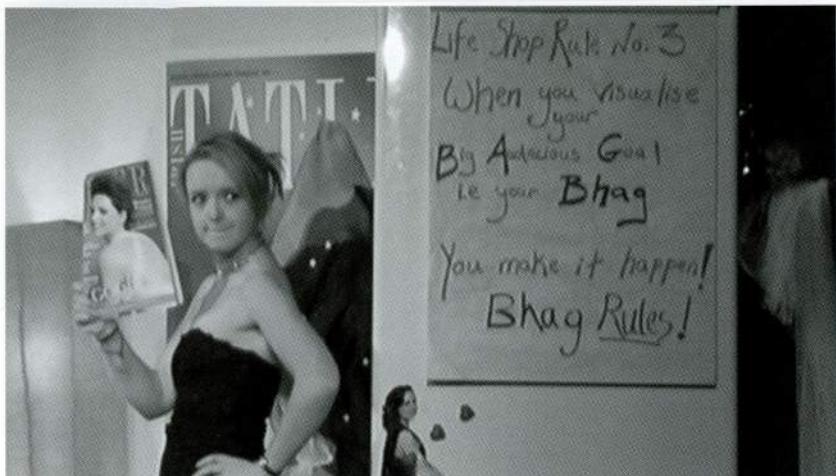
Reviewed January 30

**BY IAN R. WALSH**

THE NEW PLAY BY ALICE COUGHLAN, *Life Shop Till You Drop* is a superficial spoof of women's addiction to self-help that mocks but never engages with its subject. The play takes the form of a monologue delivered by Clodagh Reid playing Ailish McGovern, a neurotic single thirtysomething recruitment consultant. Accepting an

award for "Woman of the Year", Ailish recounts the tale of how she has achieved her "big audacious goal" of getting a boyfriend and is thus deserving of her accolade, using a flipchart to illustrate the self-help strategies she has employed to achieve her success. We're also introduced to the various characters that have both helped and hindered that success, all of them played by Reid. The best performed of these include Concepta, a brash Dublin dating agent; Barry Barton, a married rugger-bugger-seducer; and Ailish's mother, the "bureau of unsolicited advice". The change from character to character is indicated by clever use of costuming and props. Soft toys also double as McGovern's warring parents and an office chair is cleverly used to signify a broken-down car.

Reid shines when performing the minor characters, showing a good comic range, but I would have liked to have seen more variety of emotion and depth in her characterisation of Ailish: she remained the clichéd needy, single woman throughout. In creating such a shallow protagonist, Coughlan and Reid never seem to explore why their character resorts to self-help. Why does this intelligent and educated woman measure success by her ability to gain a husband? Is self-help fueling such ideas? What is the role of self-help in the modern challenge of balancing career and



Clodagh Reid in *Life Shop Till You Drop*

family? Sadly, none of these questions are answered by this play.

The self-improvement genre is promoted tirelessly by day-time television, using the format of confessional: a member of the public gives a pained monologue to a studio audience and an expert life-coach proceeds to make-over their life. Coughlan's script cleverly follows this format with the lead character playing both confessor and life-coach. This gives a unity of both form and content to the work. Thanks to McPherson, O'Rowe, and Friel, the Irish monologue has been primarily associated with men and a crisis in masculinity. It is a form that illustrates the failure of the character to communicate with anyone save an audience. In employing this structure to tell the tale of an Irish woman's quest for

success and acceptance, is Coughlan saying that women are as lonely and lacking in community as modern Irish men? This question isn't clearly answered.

During one scene in the play, Ailish is warned by her British boss that "if you shoot for the stars you might not get off the ground". This glib phrase seems an apt description for this production. Despite its intriguing subject matter and clever overlapping of form and content, its superficial characterisation means that *Life Shop Till You Drop* never rises above simple mockery, seeming content to offer us a soft target – the lonely and desperate – for ridicule.

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Ian R. Walsh is Doctoral Fellow in the School of English and Drama, UCD, researching a PhD on Irish Theatre of the 1940s and 1950s.

**THE TOWNLANDS OF BRAZIL****by Dermot Bolger**

Directed by Ray Yeates

Design: Marie Tierney.

Costumes: Donna Geraghty

With Kelly Hickey, Julia Kryne

Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun

22 November – 3 December 2006

Reviewed 30 November

**BY FINTAN WALSH**

THERE WAS MORE THAN ONE performance to be observed at the Axis Arts Centre in Ballymun. The packed foyer signalled the reunion of old acquaintances. Inside the theatre, the drum of greetings and introductions continued, differing only with the mention of affiliation: social workers, community leaders, lawyers, and local residents were in the house, delighted to see each other and looking forward to the production. In the commotion the opening was being delayed, but the show could not proceed just yet: first a representative from the Ballymun Legal Centre spoke about the community's needs to a supportive, applauding audience. In the face of this spirited investment, you got the distinct feeling that this was not just theatre as entertainment, but theatre as community event.

It is not surprising that the latest instalment by novelist, poet and playwright Dermot Bolger would generate such a buzz. In 2004, *From These Green Heights* – a play that explored the lives

of two families living in the Ballymun tower blocks over a forty-year period – went down a storm, going on to win the Irish Times Irish Theatre Award for Best New Play. Such was the interest in the timely account that now Bolger presents both a sequel and a prequel to *From These Green Heights: The Townlands of Brazil* can be seen as part of the writer's ongoing effort to intercept monopolising and marginalising cultural narratives with tales of sub/urban isolation and dislocation, past and present.

The play is structured according to its dual ambitions of being a prequel and a sequel. Act One is set in 1963 in Silogue and Belcurris, before the towers have been constructed. Eileen (Kelly Hickey), a young Irish girl, falls in love and gets pregnant. Her Church-fearing Mother rejects her, forcing her to choose between a Magdalen Laundry and emigration. She chooses the latter, and in so doing joins the thousands of Irish who left the country during the same period.

Act Two fast-forwards to the present where a young Polish girl (Julia Kryne) arrives in the 'New Jerusalem' of Ballymun. She has come to share in Ireland's mythic prosperity and hopes that her daughter (who has remained in Poland) will reap the benefits of her arduous slog. But with the towers set to crumble, "home" is a difficult concept to grapple with. Her Moldovan friend offers some relief, and the pair



Ann O'Neill, Anne Kent, Kelly Hickey, Julia Kryne, Brendan Laird, Vincent McCabe in *The Townlands of Brazil*

work together to anchor psychological roots when the physical ones prove unstable.

Director Ray Yeates does well to lift this story onto the stage. The play's narrative density and geographical obsessions are fittingly complemented by a cool, stripped-back stage. A selection of furniture-sized cubes and cuboids visually inscribe the architectural interest, allowing the text to breathe through the set rather than clash with it. Despite the social-realist concerns of the plot, movement is frequently non-naturalistic; its stylisation finding company in musical interludes. There is plenty to admire in the acting too, although the high emotional register is difficult for the actors and the audience to commit to faithfully.

The most flawed aspect of the piece is its organisation of stories. It is clear

that Bolger is trying to let the past shed light on the present, but the individual tales are so heavily wrought – in language and in action – that they frequently confuse. This perplexity is compounded with one act so closely paralleling another. The most obvious question is why the writer did not develop each thread into a full-length play, perhaps forming a "Ballymun trilogy". He may be holding out another few years for a post-flats version, but this chapter suffers as a result. Focusing on each "case study" would have allowed a greater individualisation of character and a deeper analysis of context: there are times when thick textuality feels like sociological convenience or gloss here.

These concerns aside, *The Townlands of Brazil* performs a function in excess of any conventional literary or theatri-

cal mandate. While certainly a professional production, the piece is also an important event that undoubtedly stirs up greater feeling the closer to the heartland you are, or indeed the farther away from it you happen to be.

More generally, this is a work that resonates with the pathological Irish interest in place and space, whether it relates to our history of emigration, the integration of other nationalities into the country, right up to our current greasy obsession with property. Bolger offers an alternative vision here: home as a conceptual construction, an abstract knot that gathers and binds people from all cultures together.

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*Fintan Walsh is completing a PhD at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin.*

#### A PICTURE OF ME

**by Louis Lovett**

The Ark, in association with Solstice Arts Centre

Directed by Mikel Murfi.

Set design: Miriam Duffy. Lighting: Mark

Galiane

With Louis Lovett

The Ark, 6 December – 6 January;

Solstice Arts Centre, 8 – 13 January.

Reviewed 6 January

**BY TANYA DEAN**

EVERYBODY LOVES A CLOWN, whether the traditional red-nosed kind or, as in *A Picture of Me*, simply a grown man who exudes childish glee at his

own clownish antics. This warmhearted production, written and performed by Louis Lovett and directed by Mikel Murfi, brims over with affection for Peter (or 'Pee', as he prefers to be known), a very special man who finds endless delight in the rich world of his imagination. Lovett is especially adept at finding avenues to engage children with his performances, and in this one-man show, he deftly combines humorous monologues and physical comedy with spoken asides to the delighted young audience.

In the prelude to the arrival of our hero Pee, Lovett appears onstage dressed as Pee's brother Ronan to gently introduce the concept of Pee's disability to the young audience; he explains that Pee is a bit different, that it takes him longer to learn things, and that sometimes people stare at or don't understand him. Lovett strongly emphasises Ronan's love for his brother, despite the differences between them. With this affectionate introduction fresh in their minds, the young spectators enthusiastically engage with Lovett's antics when he reappears onstage, fresh from a quick wardrobe change transforming him from brother Ronan into the fun-loving Pee.

Living in residential care of some sort, Pee amuses himself (and the audience) by creating a cosy Christmas atmosphere in his lovingly-decorated room, conjuring angels out of cardboard, a papier-mâché turkey for

Christmas 'dinner', and even cheery cardboard avatars of his family to join him at the dinner table. The linear narrative model usually found in seasonal children's theatre is conspicuously absent from this production. There is progression (as Pee prepares to spend Christmas with his brother and sister-in-law) but only towards the conclusion: we don't get the classic resolution to most productions for children – the 'happily ever after' ending that follows a triumphantly completed quest.

This production is instead about inviting the audience to observe a snapshot of Pee's everyday life (hence '*A Picture of Me*'), rather than narrating one particular event or chapter. In

the cold commercialism of December and January, this production provides a quiet afternoon's gentle entertainment for children and parents seeking an alternative to the garish shrieks of pantomime. And what a relief it is to find children's theatre that isn't trying to sell flashing wands or fluffy pink cowboy hats next to overpriced sweets in the foyer.

There are some problems with the production however. Whilst the clowning aspects of Lovett's engaging performance are always entertaining for the young audience, the use of those characteristics as onstage signifiers for disability is a problematic dramaturgical choice. Are the audience being



Louis Lovett in *A Picture of Me*

asked to engage with disability by laughing at or with it? In its attempts to provide an uncomplicated and affectionate portrait of a gentle soul, this production alludes to disability, but it is never explicitly named or explained for the benefit of the young audience. I doubt whether some of the younger audience members would even have understood that the main character was meant to be disabled, rather than simply a funny man who acts like a child.

And some of the other signifiers were problematic as well: Pee's lack of human interaction is a necessity for a one-man show, but he seemed worryingly hermetic; the only vaguely human contact we see Pee initiate onstage are conversations with his 'best friend', a cardboard cut-out of George Clooney. As he sits down to his papier-mâché turkey dinner, one by one the cardboard representations of his family fall to the floor, and suddenly Pee's loneliness stands out starkly from the cheerfully-coloured shell of his room. With his imagination unable to rescue him from this moment of melancholy, Pee's good cheer deserts him. The children in the audience seemed upset by the sight of their loveable hero allowing himself a little cry. However, in a reassuring *deus ex machina*, the production ends on a loving and upbeat note, as the voice of Ronan is heard offstage as he arrives to pick up his brother so they can spend Christmas together.

Although it provides a charming glance at the affection shared by the two brothers, this conclusion was, when viewed dispassionately, at best a temporary reprieve for a character who moments before had been overwhelmed by grief. But for the children of the audience, applauding Pee as he happily bounded out to meet his beloved brother, cardboard spaceship tucked safely under his arm, this was a satisfactorily happy ending to this day in the life of Pee.

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Tanya Dean is General Manager of Irish Theatre Magazine and writes for *Totally Dublin magazine*.

#### **GIRLS AND DOLLS**

**by Lisa McGee**

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Directed by Michael Duke

Designer: Terry Loane, Lighting: Patrick McLaughlin

With Bernadette Brown, Mary Jordan,  
Sarah Lyle, Veronica Leer

Touring, 9 November – 9 December 2006.

Reviewed at Riverside Theatre,  
Coleraine 23 November

**BY CAROLE-ANNE UPTON**

THERE SIMPLY AREN'T ENOUGH plays for women; so a new play for four strong female performers from Northern Irish playwright Lisa McGee is particularly welcome. *Girls and Dolls* is the latest in a succession of pieces produced by Tinderbox that deal with

Sarah Lyle and Bernadette Brown in *Girls and Dolls*

some kind of coming-to-terms with past violence. This time, the broadly political theme is given a gendered perspective: two women in their thirties, one Catholic, and one at least rumoured to be Protestant, meet up to tell the story of what happened when, age ten, they killed a young child in the park. The two girls were immediately separated and only now come together to seek closure; to recall events, to tell their stories, to combine their separate narratives, in a desire to move on. "I think I'll be stuck here forever," says Emma.

*Girls and Dolls* adopts the familiar staging techniques of feminist theatre: an ensemble structure, including the distribution of multiple minor roles amongst the four performers, in a simple presentational form, on a virtually bare stage. The two central characters,

Emma and Clare, appear as adults alongside their ten-year old selves as the play moves between present tense narration and mimetic flashbacks to the traumatic events of twenty years previously. Though hardly a novel device, this gives rise to finely judged performances by Bernadette Brown and Sarah Lyle, whose playing modulates sensitively between the vitality of childhood and the languor of adolescence, capturing the transition from innocence to responsibility that lies at the heart of this play.

These women, these children even, are truly dangerous. Lisa McGee's text turns on its head the stereotype of the Irish mother as a nurturing force opposed to the traditionally masculine forces of violence. It's not true that "all wee girls love babies", although the two girls play out a grotesque fantasy



of a mothering role in their disastrous relationship with the baby. The murder of the child is clumsily prefigured in the plot structure, first by the mutilation of a doll, then the killing of a dog by the two girls. Together these actions reveal a culture of feminine violence, but the play stops short of developing anything bolder than a reappropriation for its female characters of traditionally masculine attitudes amidst conventionally patriarchal values. The outdoor setting takes them out of the traditional hearth but only to recreate the feminine domestic space in a tree house. Behind Clare's disturbed behaviour, there's a fairly traditional Freudian construction, with the suggestion that Clare has been sexually abused by her father. And Emma's male role model, her father, lurks in the background to the action.

The whole reconciliation motif is underdeveloped here, since the play charts the events leading up to the murder but, unlike precursors such as Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, it gives us no sense of the consequences of the telling of the story. We don't know if the two achieve the closure that they clearly long for. The play stops just when things start to get interesting in terms of its relevance to post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in Northern Ireland.

It's hard to interpret the central action purely as a political metaphor in the wake of the infamous real-life murder in 1993 of two-year old Jamie Bul-

ger by two ten-year old boys in Bootle. Apart from changing the gender and relocating events to Northern Ireland, this play doesn't seem to know which way to go with the story.

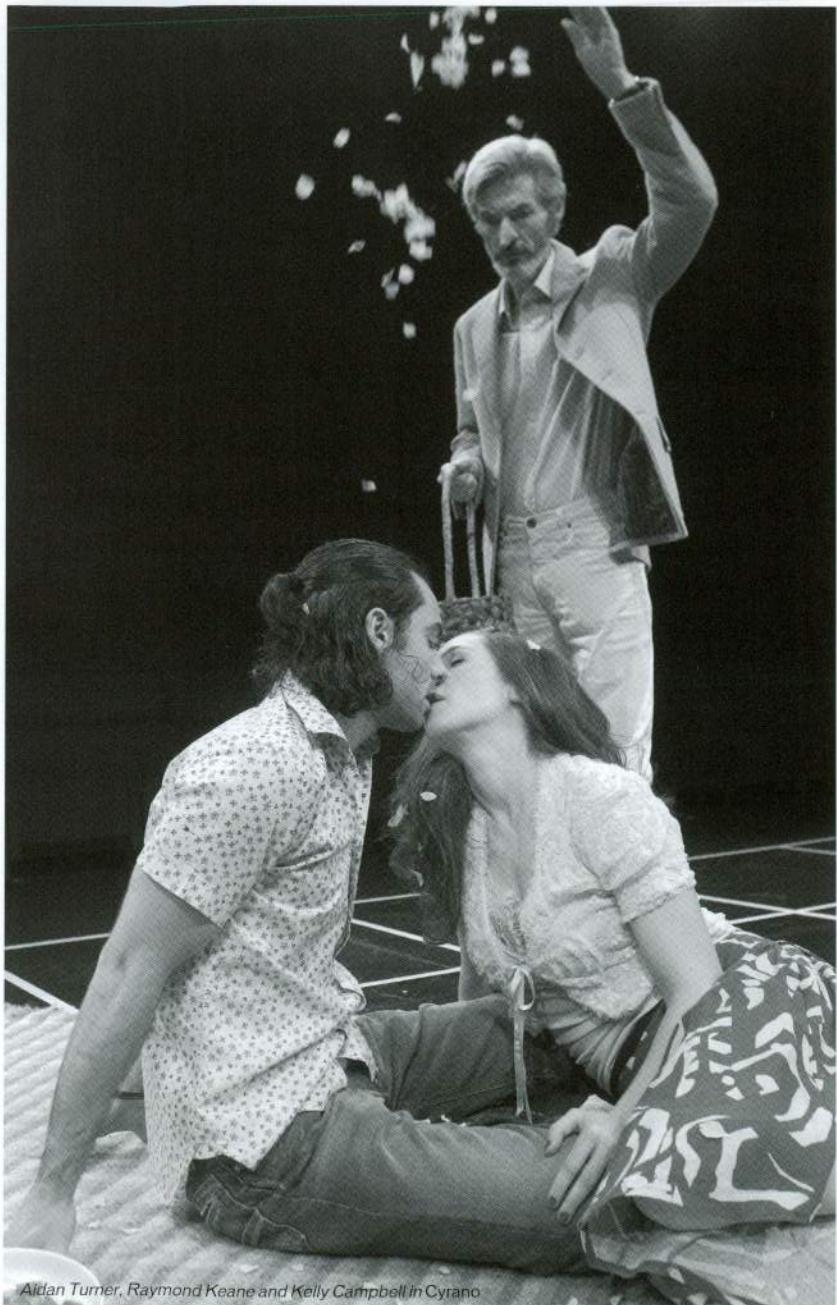
*Girls and Dolls* tries to open up a feminine space with its series of liminal motifs: the adult Emma is pregnant; the younger girls just entering puberty. The memory narrative plays out on a bare set with little sense of location in time or place, but Terry Loane's round timber frame structure is more pleasing than inspiring.

The narration from the two older characters was directed largely as contemplative inner monologue. As a result it lacked urgency and whole sections of the performance suffered from the absence of visual interest or plot dynamic. In many ways this would make a better radio drama than a stage play.

The theatre was packed and the audience appreciative when I saw this, but it felt like a missed opportunity. There's a powerful storyline, lively dialogue, some engaging performances and a chance to explore contemporary experience in Northern Ireland from a female perspective, but it's never fully developed. Tinderbox clearly have the potential to produce theatre that really connects with audiences in Northern Ireland, but they haven't fulfilled it with this.

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Carole-Anne Upton is Professor of Drama at the University of Ulster.



Aidan Turner, Raymond Keane and Kelly Campbell in *Cyrano*

## CYRANO

by Veronica Coburn

Barabbas Theatre Company  
Project, Space Upstairs  
Directed by Veronica Coburn  
Design: Alan Farquharson.  
Lighting: Suzanne Keogh  
Audio-visual: Jack Phelan  
With Raymond Keane, Kelly Campbell  
and Aidan Turner

8-18 November 2006; reviewed 15 November

BY TOM DONEGAN

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY VERONICA Coburn, Barabbas's version of Edmond Rostand's classic 1897 tragicomedy *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a strange beast. Featuring a combination of innovation and original elements, the play's transposition of the big-nosed bard's ill-fated amour into a parable of modern relationships is an awkward one, unfortunately doing more to perplex and irritate than entertain.

Leaving the seventeenth-century France of the historical Cyrano far behind, Alan Farquharson's set design reconfigures Project's Space Upstairs as a TV studio kitchen, complete with functioning cameras, flat-screen monitors, and opposing seating banks along its two longest sides. This space is disputed territory, we learn: Raymond Keane's Cyrano (here recast as Ireland's premier celebrity chef) is under threat from the ambitious advances of Aidan

Turner's Christian; an energetic Jamie Oliver type intent on usurping his culinary crown. The opening duel between them is a classic piece of Keane choreography, leek-foils sending vegetable sparks flying as they clash and dash about the stage. Sadly, however, this opening scene provides the first and last glance of the Barabbas clown, with dialogue taking the place of physicality as the action turns to the main business at hand.

Following the traditional storyline, the rivals' relationship takes a dramatic turn when Cyrano discovers that the woman he has always loved but never dared tell on account of his ridiculous appearance, has fallen for Christian's good looks. Roxanne - personified by Kelly Campbell as an expatriate *New York Times* restaurant critic - is a woman of sophisticated tastes, so Cyrano dreams up a scheme whereby he will furnish Christian with romantic advice to provide an outlet for his own frustrated emotions.

In the original *Cyrano*, the characters inhabit a world regulated by the chivalric code, and unrequited love is held in higher regard philosophically than the fulfillment of base desires. It is easy to see in this context how Cyrano's self-sacrifice engenders a sense of honour and tragic glory. While the attempt to find a contemporary equivalence for this scenario starts out amusingly enough, the un-

folding depiction of two men deliberately deceiving an innocent woman for their own gratification quickly takes on sinister overtones.

In her eagerness to establish her characters as distinctive modern individuals, Coburn changes them so dramatically from their predecessors that the dimensions of the ill-fated love-triangle are distorted – literally beyond belief. Cyrano, for one, is so uptight it hurts, seemingly unable to accommodate his outmoded romantic ideals with the fact that in the twenty-first century relations with the opposite sex can actually be enjoyable. His once bold and witty poetry has also suffered a turn for the worse, the clichéd content of the emails he composes on Christian's behalf becoming ever more grating as the piece goes on. By contrast, Christian preaches cringe-inducingly from the gospel of Laddism, doing his best to put the evolution of the modern-male back a few decades with a chauvinistic celebration of "savage babes" and try-before-you-buy seduction techniques.

For her part, Roxanne is a curious mix of pretension and naiveté, repeatedly dismissing Christian's unrefined tastes before allowing herself to be bluntly manipulated into submission. Of course, this could be very interesting if at any point she threw off the role of victim and fought back, but she never does; the requirements of the plot

keep her firmly in the role of the fair maiden powerless to resist, despite the new woman façade. In scene after scene, we watch the conniving pair set up a series of 'dream dates' designed to let Christian have his wicked way with her whilst his mentor keeps tabs on proceedings with voyeuristic intent. The use of green-screen technology to add 'real' backgrounds to these sequences confuses matters still further; its superficial appeal seeming totally at odds with the depth/truth-over-surface/lies theme on which the rationale of the Cyrano myth hangs.

By the time Cyrano finally gets round to telling Roxanne about his feelings, his heroic status has simply ceased to be tenable, a nauseatingly over sentimentalised finale exposing him instead as a rather pathetic, bitter, and twisted old man. Instead of heightening the majesty of 'what might have been' to tragic proportions, the scene actually produces the opposite effect. Perversely, of the two romantic attitudes offered by the play it is Christian's emotionally stunted approach that is therefore ultimately most appealing; his cynical mantra "you'll be sad, you'll eat kebabs, you'll get over it" seeming infinitely preferable to the orgy of frustration and regret in which Cyrano's pursuit of true love's calling concludes.

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*Tom Donegan is a freelance arts journalist and theatre critic.*

**THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL****by Richard Brinsley Sheridan**

Abbey Theatre

Directed by Jimmy Fay

Set: Ferdia Murphy. Lighting: Paul Keogan

Costumes: Leonore McDonagh

With Cathy Belton, Nick Dunning, Rory Keenan,

Simone Kirby, Mark Lambert, Ned Dennehy,

Tom Vaughan Lawlor, David Pearse

6 December - Saturday 27 January 2007

Reviewed 9 December

**BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

SHERIDAN'S GREAT PLAY ABOUT backbiting, gossip, and materialism seems particularly pertinent in Ireland now. So the news that Jimmy Fay would direct *The School for Scandal* seemed promising: he's noted for his ability to take plays from other countries or other times, making them speak to audiences here and now, while always avoiding being parochial or gimmicky – we knew in advance that this production would never involve actors speaking in Dublin 6 accents in contemporary Ranelagh.

What was surprising, however, was that this *School* seemed to have no relationship whatsoever to contemporary Ireland. It's lavishly designed, easygoing, entertaining, and entirely unchallenging; it is, in fact, exactly the kind of thing one might see at Christmastime in any Anglophone city, anywhere in the world. That in itself isn't a bad thing but, as a Jimmy Fay production for the new Abbey, it felt out of place

and strangely tentative.

It does start off like a brave new departure, however. Ferdia Murphy's set locates the action in a white box with skewed dimensions. Lit by Paul Keogan, the set always appears in primary colours, as do Leonore McDonagh's wonderful costumes. The visual impact created by these designers' work is excitingly novel: the light never casts shadows against the white set, creating the illusion that the actors are almost two-dimensional figures, while the use of a limited palette of striking colours makes them seem like comic book characters.

Sheridan's play presents characters who are superficial, but this design reminds us that their entire world lacks depth – as we see in a key scene in which the play's hero treasures a two-dimensional portrait of his uncle, while failing to recognise that the living man in front of him is that very person.

The problem is that this aesthetic places so much emphasis on the superficial that it leaves the actors with very little room to, well, *act*. If you're performing in a two-dimensional, cartoon-like set, it will inevitably be difficult to bring depth to your characterisation – to suggest that Sheridan's characters are not simply empty vessels making lots of noise, but that they are instead masked figures, presenting a face to society that will disguise their true selves.

Admittedly, some of Sheridan's char-

Cathy Belton in *The School For Scandal*



ROS KAVANAGH

actors are stereotypes, and David Pearse, Mark O'Regan, Marion O'Dwyer and Ned Dennehy all have fun in their supporting roles in exactly the way you'd expect if you've seen these actors perform before. But the major figures in the play should be more complex, struggling between natural inclinations and the social roles demanded of them. Cathy Belton's Lady Sneerwell should convey that her apparent love of gossip arises from having been a victim of it: she is, in other words, a damaged creature seeking revenge. The anger of Mark Lambert's Teazle towards his wife should arise from his confusion between love and his sense that a husband ought to behave in particular ways. As his young wife, Simone Kirby should show some awareness that she is pretending to have a lover not just for fashion, but also for fear of being the victim of gossip herself. Tom Vaughan Lawlor resists the impulse to play his role like a pantomime villain but we rarely have a sense that anything is at stake for him. The actors don't often seem to know how much psychological depth their characters should have: they move from farce to naturalism to expressionism arbitrarily, and rarely seem comfortable within themselves or with each other.

This problem may arise because the production doesn't seem to know exactly what it wants to say. The obvious message in the play is that "gossip is bad", but Sheridan also

conveys strong views about imperialism and gender. The two Surface brothers at the centre of the play can afford to live carelessly because both expect that their wealthy uncle will return from the colonies with a fortune: the play links the dissolution of life in London and the exploitation of people in India and the West Indies.

This dissolution is further related to the commodification of women, whose recourse to character assassination arises from their status as objects in the marriage market. Neither of these themes should necessarily be highlighted, but their existence shows that Sheridan was exploring what happens to a society dominated by money. Because this production seems content to focus on the explicitly comedic elements of the script, its moments of depth in both theme and characterisation seem out of place.

It's great to see Fay's work appearing on the main stage of the Abbey, and it's great also to see Sheridan performed in Dublin again – but one can't help feeling that we've only caught a glimpse here of just how interesting the director and the writer really are. This *School for Scandal* is enjoyable and attractive – but it feels like a missed opportunity, a prioritisation of style over substance.

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*Patrick Lonergan is a lecturer in Drama in NUI Galway and is Reviews Editor of Irish Theatre Magazine.*

# European Dreams

If Irish theatre can sometimes seem cut off from international currents, some recent productions redress the balance. Our critics map the terrain from Britain to Russia.

## A NUMBER

by Caryl Churchill

Peacock Theatre

Directed by Annabelle Comyn

Set Design: Brien Vahey.

Lighting: Sinéad Wallace

With Alan Williams and Stuart Graham

Costumes: Joan O'Clery. Music: Philip Stewart

6 February – 3 March; Reviewed 9 February.

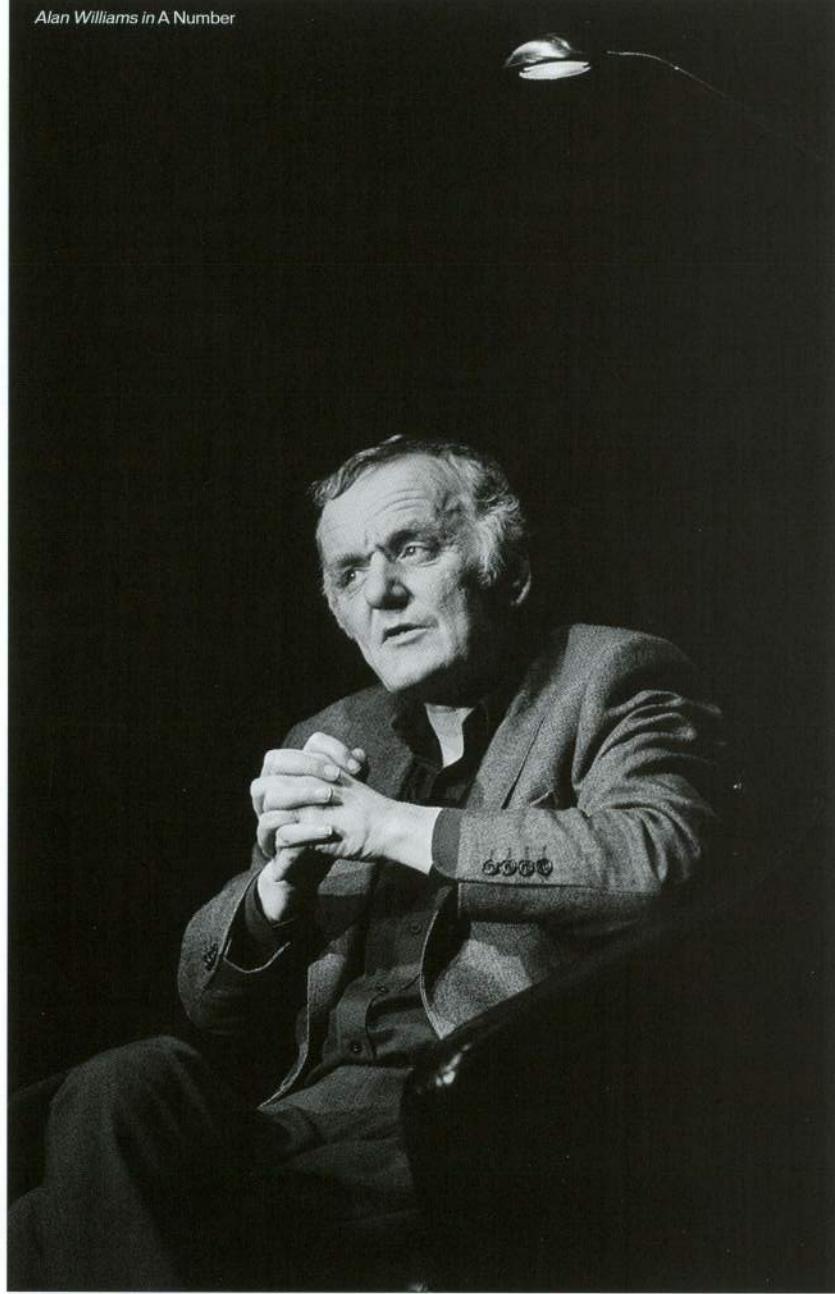
BY TANYA DEAN

THE SINS OF THE FATHER, MULTIPLIED. The troubled relationship between patriarch and son is not exactly a new preoccupation for the Irish stage, but *A Number* is a unique spin on an enduring theme. Sometime in the past, Salter had his son cloned and now his mistakes are coming back to haunt him. Although the more obvious issues associated with human cloning are investigated (notions of identity, ethics, rights of the individual), the focus of Caryl Churchill's text is the dysfunctional relationship between Salter (Alan Williams) and his 'sons', or at least the examples seen onstage; Bernard 1, Bernard 2 and Michael (all played by Stuart Graham).

Simple markers are used to signify the identity of each clone: a different hairstyle, subtle costume changes, and so on. And Stuart Graham's clear performance style differentiates plainly between each character, from Bernard 1's damaged sociopath to Michael's affable maths teacher. In performing the variants of the master-copy, Graham turns in three assured and distinctive performances. As Salter remains seated during the entrance and exit of each clone, the passage of time is marked beautifully by Sinéad Wallace's elegant lighting design, as the disc-shaped stage is gradually illuminated in a circular pattern, almost like a clock ticking.

Under Annabelle Comyn's direction, the gradual revelation of Salter's impotence as a father is winched out of him as his sons push to find the truth. Although at first he insists that this cloning was done without his permission, he gradually admits that the first clone (Bernard 2, whom he has raised as a son) was created on his orders (although all the subsequent copies were made

*Alan Williams in A Number*



ROS KAVANAGH

without his knowledge), replacing, he claims, the son he had lost in a car crash. The unexpected arrival of the original (Bernard 1, who was put up for care when he was four years old) pushes Salter further to confess that he had the clone created because he had failed his first son as a father, and wanted to wipe the slate clean and try again. Salter's moral logic verges on the abhorrent, as he persuades himself that he has compensated for the emotional mess he made of his birth son by throwing the first attempt out and starting again. Whilst he accepts some culpability, he also self-righteously believes he deserves acknowledgement for improving on the second try. "I did some bad things. I deserve to suffer. I did some better things. I'd like recognition."

The emotional impact of this startling admission is deadened slightly by the static staging, as Williams's Salter remains seated for the duration of the performance, while variations on a theme of his son are paraded before him. Williams' bloodless delivery adds a chilling effect to his almost disinterested admissions of remorse, emphasising how his associations with cloning has devalued human individuality. However, the inactive staging strips the production of the suspense implicit in the text as Bernard 1 stalks Bernard 2, who he feels usurped his place as Salter's son. Williams's reaction to the news that Bernard 1 has

tracked down Bernard 2 and killed him is curiously impassive. In the final scene Salter baldly states, "I didn't feel I'd lost him when I sent him away because I had the second chance. And when the second one my son was murdered it wasn't so bad as you'd think because it seemed fair. I was back with the first one...now he's killed himself...now I've lost him, I've lost...now I can't put it right anymore."

The ethics of cloning are murky at best, and *A Number* tackles how some of the sons feel that this multiplicity compromises their own identities. Is this a crime, a theft and if so, who is culpable? Or, as Salter keeps emphasising, in distastefully acquisitive reaction to the bizarre situation: who to sue? Salter returns to the potential for litigation over and over, as if by wringing financial gain from this, something can be salvaged from the situation. When he hears that the professor behind the scandal is dead, he triumphantly states, "So we sue the hospital."

Overall, this is an engaging and strong production, but occasionally shows hints of the troubles that dogged it during rehearsals (Alan Williams was cast a few weeks before opening night, replacing Tom Hickey). Some more dynamic blocking for Williams would enliven the performance, and possibly add more tension to the suspenseful aspects of the plot.

**DREAM OF AUTUMN****by Jon Fosse**

Rough Magic

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

Directed by Tom Creed

Design: Conor Murphy. Lights: Sinéad McKenna

With Karen Ardiff, Kathy Kiera Clarke, Deirdre

Donnelly, Frank Laverty, Des Nealon

22 November - 9 December, 2006

Reviewed 1 December

**BY HARVEY O'BRIEN**

THERE IS SOMETHING TERRIBLY "last century" about Jon Fosse's *Dream of Autumn*, the subject of a handsome production by Rough Magic. It's an austere existential drama featuring emotionally restrained characters who speak in ellipses as time warps itself around various crises in their relationships, not only with each other but with the big themes of human existence: sex and death, seen through a fairly familiar symbolist filter.

It all takes place in a graveyard, tastefully evoked by Conor Murphy's expressive set. The audience enters facing a darkened, reflective water wall with a path of blue glass gravel running all the way along the set, from which artificial fog curls at the wings. The gravel marks a dividing line between life and death and it seems we, the audience, are the dead, facing the dark reflections of ourselves as we wait for the actors to arrive. It doesn't get any cheerier once the play begins.

The central narrative thrust involves the initially married Man (Frank Laverty) and the other Woman (Kathy Kiera Clarke), a couple whose conversations are frequently inspired by the graveyard in which they meet. Contemplating the potential back stories of the dead, the hypothetical lives of the living, and the paradox of their sexual excitement in the midst of death, the couple make a mental connection strong enough for Man to divorce his wife Gry (Karen Ardiff). Time moves on while space remains the same, and a series of deaths brings them back to the graveyard, variously in the company of one another, Man's Mother (Deirdre Donnelly) and Father (Des Nealon), and, eventually Gry herself.

Fosse's dialogue is consciously meditative, poetic and self-reflexive, with many repetitions and re-iterations of basic lines, and many variations presented of the idea that the more you speak about and analyse a subject, the more it loses its meaning. Being aware of this doesn't stop Fosse from going over very familiar material and running it through characters whose idiomatic dialogue doesn't disguise a bog-standard domestic drama with fairly clichéd characters, notably a judgmental mother whose disappointment with her son's divorce and hostility towards her new daughter-in-law borders on plain old-fashioned sexist caricature.

*Deirdre Donnelly in Dream of Autumn*



ROSS MAVANAGH

Tom Creed delivers a controlled, thoughtful production here. The actors work hard, risking silence and poetic repetition while trying to hold onto the threads of core drama amid such evident metaphorical musings. A couple of people I spoke to afterward used the word "pretentious" to describe the play, but I would reserve that word for a text or production which reaches beyond its abilities while maintaining an attitude of smug success. Neither Fosse nor Creed is guilty of smugness here. The text is solid and the production is immaculately tuned to render it for the audience. The rewards are comparatively few though, in spite of the press release's enthusiasm for the opportunity to appreciate the work of this important Norwegian dramatist. There is certainly a Scandinavian feel to it, with Murphy's set and Sinéad McKenna's lighting evoking the cold hues of the frozen North.

Not yet old enough to serve as a "classical" piece like so many productions of Ibsen, and yet not vibrant enough in itself to feel contemporary, the play is wrapped in a sense of the contours of reality locked into a mid-twentieth-century psycho-sexual symbolist landscape. Ultimately it says little that we have not heard too many times before. This is, again, not to fault the production, which is exquisite, but to note that its value may depend on a predisposition to hear-

ing these things again.

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*Harvey O'Brien lectures in Film Studies at UCD and reviews theatre for culturevulture.net*

**ANNA KARENINA**

**by Leo Tolstoy, adapted by Helen Edmundson**

Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Michael Barker-Caven

With Peter Gowen, Paris Jefferson,

Bryan Murray, Michael James Ford,

Andrea Irvine, Jonathan Forbes, Lisa Lambe

Set and Costume Design: Simon Higlett

Lighting: Paul Pyant

5 December 2006 - 3 February 2007

Reviewed 20 December

**BY ROS DIXON**

ADAPTATIONS OF *ANNA KARENINA* for the screen often focus almost exclusively on its heroine. Yet the novel has not one main character, but two: Anna and Konstantin Levin. Anna's story – her passionate and tormented affair with Alexei Vronsky, her fall from grace to shame, and her eventual suicide – is told in parallel with, and in deliberate contrast to, Levin's search for love and meaning in life, aims largely achieved in his eventual marriage to Kitty. Written in 1992 for Shared Experience, and now given a new production at the Gate, Helen Edmundson's adaptation for the theatre roughly follows Tolstoy's chronology, retains his major themes, and gives

both protagonists equal weight.

In approaching the work, Edmundson was intrigued by the novelist's decision to tell their stories together, and by the impact of his having done so. Her solution in translating these intertwining plots to the stage is masterful. She uses both as narrators of their own and each other's tales. Her text mirrors Tolstoy's but adds a twist: as characters Anna and Levin do not meet until towards the end of the second half, roughly as in the novel, but as narrators they interact from the start. They frequently ask each other "Where are you now?" a question of metaphysical significance which also allows for rapid and fluid changes of locale.

Their stories unfold, now simultaneously, now separately, on a virtually empty stage. Simon Higlett's unchanging set of bare brown brickwork is somewhat reminiscent of the inner courtyard of a Russian townhouse, but is devoid of period features. His concave stage floor allows for separate playing areas that are further differentiated by Paul Pyant's lighting. Together with Higlett's sumptuous costumes, this produces some stunning stage images: elegant dancing figures at a ball, peasants mowing with scythes against a glowing red sun.

Sound and silence are used to considerable effect. Both acts open with a haunting chant from a darkened stage; the peasants sing as they work, and the noise of the train that will crush Anna

is created by the actors' urgently drumming feet. By contrast, the fate of little Seriozha Karenin (charmingly played by Matthew Price) is made all the more poignant by his silence. He mimes delighted play with his adoring mother, but is equally mute when unable to repeat lessons to his terrifying father Karenin (Bryan Murray).

Elsewhere, wordless but intense physical action generates powerful emotional effects. At the opening of act two, Vronsky (Jonathan Forbes) enters holding out his hand to Anna but moving away before she can grasp it; then his action is matched by Karenin. Without meeting, both actors continue to approach her and withdraw, establishing a pattern of movement whose intensity matches the increasing ferocity of their rivalry, and which is cut short climatically when their paths finally cross. Later Anna's rejection by society is physicalised in a crescendo of music and action, as a wall of menacing figures drive her into a corner of the stage.

Edmundson's adroit adaptation is skilfully directed by Michael Barker-Caven in a production whose overt theatricality is a welcome departure from the naturalism more usually seen at the Gate. Whole scenes are conjured by the simplest of means, with few props. A number of bentwood chairs, for instance, ingeniously serve many purposes: as seats on train, as a means to 'imprison' Kitty in her new life, as a bucket when Levin sows seeds. The

*Paris Jefferson and Peter Gowen in Anna Karenina*



centrally important scene of the horse race is created by the cast playing first horses and then riders, astride the chairs. Vronsky sits centre, riding with increasing tension and urgency his mare Frou Frou – who is played by Anna, linking the excitement of the race with the passion of their love-making. At the last fence, a false move by Vronsky causes his mount to fall; she breaks her back and is shot. A neat allusion to Tolstoy's idea that Vronsky's conquest is the action of a murderer, this scene also connects this pivotal moment with the premonitions of death represented throughout by a muffled, other-worldly figure.

The action, some but not all of which is in Edmundson's script, is executed with aplomb by a small, tautly controlled ensemble, some of whom also play several individual roles; Caitríona Ní Mhurchú shows remarkable versatility in three. Michael James Ford is robust as Anna's brother, the roguish Stiva Oblonsky; while Andrea Irvine arouses sympathy as his misused wife, Dolly. Lisa Lambe is a compelling Kitty, and Peter Gowen's enormously sympathetic and humane Levin is a *tour de force*.

There is, however, a difficulty in the portrayal of Anna. She is a complex character who experiences a wealth of emotions and radical changes of mood. At times she is naively optimistic, at others ablaze with desire; one moment coquettish, another petulant, another

furious. She falls head over heels, plays tenderly with her child, then sinks, her illusions shattered, into dark despair and morphine-induced hallucination until, unable to bear her pain and humiliation, she kills herself. This is the Anna of Tolstoy's detailed descriptions, and of Edmundson's meaty dialogue. Paris Jefferson's portrayal at times lacked the necessary passion and conviction this demanding role requires. *Anna Karenina* tells two stories: we must be as deeply touched by Anna's death as overjoyed by Levin's final happiness. Without a wholly persuasive Anna this otherwise enchanting production is flawed.

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Ros Dixon is Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and a specialist on Russian theatre history.

#### THREADS – A Season of Dance Events

by Irina Pauls and David Bolger

Coiscéim Dance Theatre

Set design: Monica Frawley; John Comiskey

Lighting: John Comiskey.

Costumes: Monica Frawley; Sinead Cuthbert

Project, Space Upstairs (and other venues)

25 November to 9 December

BY MICHAEL SEAVER

THE DESCRIPTION "GERMANIC" has almost insulting connotations to us Irish. It suggests you're predictable, unsophisticated, and lack a sense of craic. But *Threads*, a mini-season of Ger-



Thomas Maucher and Muirne Bloomer in *Hanging On By a Thread*

man dance by Coiscéim Dance Theatre, set out to find similarities between Irish and German dancemaking, placing two live performances at its centre: *Hanging on by a Thread* by Irina Pauls and *Out of Harm's Way* by David Bolger. Although Irish choreographers and dancers such as Finola Cronin, Marguerite Donlon, Olwyn Grindly and Ríonach Ní Néill have found artistic homes in Germany, such co-incidences don't necessarily translate into

strands of influence. Defining any national style is problematic, but German dance is more elusive than most. National identity has never materialised in German dance, mainly because cultural policies lie with individual regional states throughout the federal republic.

Instead German dance has been associated with particular historical styles, in the twentieth century characterised by two phenomena: social mass



Monica Munoz Marin, Robert Jackson, Muirne Bloomer, Marco Volta, Emma O'Kane in Out of Harm's Way

movement, and dance attaining equality within the artscape. *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance), which gained popularity in the 1920s, was primarily concerned with dance as a philosophical, metaphysical or even spiritual statement, whereas *tanztheater* featured body and movement in the discourse of the psych and society, everyday behaviour and its norms. In more recent years Pina Bausch has embodied the essence of *tanztheater* and, in the words of critic Deirdre Mulrooney (who curated the season's ancillary talks and screenings), Bausch's work could be seen to be playing a part in the cleaning of the psychic wound in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

So are there any connections between

*tanztheater* and Irish choreographic practice? Finola Cronin and Ríonach Ní Néill have acknowledged the strong hand of *tanztheater* in their choreographies, such as *The Murder Ballads* and *A Thing Of Beauty And A Joy Forever*, but it is only in the past twenty years that Irish dance has truly aligned itself to European practice. Previously, companies such as Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre and initiatives like the National Choreography Course and Wexford's Movement Month turned to the U.S., and to a lesser extent Britain, for guest choreographers and mentors.

Although David Bolger would probably include certain elements of *tanztheater* in his credo, Irina Pauls' *Hanging on a Thread* is, unsurprisingly,

closer to the Bauschian ideal of approaching a subject from a variety of visual and theatrical viewpoints and presenting them in an open structure. Based on the myth of Ariadne, the production features eight performers, who are ensnared within John Comiskey's web of steel girders and cables which, although suggesting entanglement, also offered a protective shell.

Emerging from backstage in a swarm, the performers tap canes on the ground and take short steps, stop, turn and then move in a new direction. But this clumping is unravelled as they spread to different areas of the stage and begin a series of isolated set pieces. "Where is teddy?" asks Mike Carbery, answering with a range of non-possibilities, suggesting that innocence no longer has a place in the modern world. It was a nice convention, but overstays its usefulness like the utterances of random numbers and letters that begin to evolve into "M50" and other more predictable sequences. The steady rhythm of stand-alone duets and group pieces betrays the flimsiness of the structure, but Muirne Bloomer representing a kind of Ariadne figure, unifies the work, constantly tangled in self-doubt and manipulated by those around her. One long duet towards the end with Thomas Maucher offers respite, as she releases completely into the movement in the warm balm of John Comiskey's lighting, but in the end she snaps, both literally and

metaphorically: a broken necklace releasing the fury of the Gods in the form of large beads that tumbled down from the gantry to flood the stage.

Bolger similarly traps his characters within a set, this time a hideously flowered wallpaper room with matching furniture. In the loose narrative of *Out of Harm's Way* the seven performers arrive to the room one-by-one over the watchful eye of a Pierrot-like figure, played by Mike Carbery. The overblown domesticity depicts conformity and safety for a cast of characters that are fleeing danger. Environment causing changes in identity and behaviour is a recurring theme in Bolger's work, whether the soft surroundings of a hotel room in *Chamber Made* or the desolate warehouse in the film version of *Hit and Run*.

Aspects of past work creep in along with the characters: the bed and flung bodies of *Chamber Made*, the sexual tensions and mismatches of *Straight with Curves*, the sense of danger of *Hit and Run*, and the overall scale of the *Rite of Spring*. But rather than distract, they all amalgamate to offer a breadth to *Out of Harm's Way*, a completeness that belied the conventions within the straightforward narrative. Alexis Nealon's soundscore, like that of Mathiass Engelke in *Hanging on by a Thread*, was ever-shifting, and tripped up the narrative in places when it seemed to get too comfortably into its stride.

Soon it is obvious that the outside

must infiltrate this room, whether the fear from which they are fleeing or Carbery's character. In the end it is stagehands who rip down the set and carry it offstage, leaving the characters vulnerable and searching for the cosy comfort they have gotten used to for the past hour. They find it in a small glass pod and as they crush their bodies together to get inside the final image of entangled limbs writhing confirms how they have emotionally coalesced as characters.

By placing his work within the context of German practice, Bolger underlined his strong sense of narrative, the very thing some critics describe as his "Irishness", although he did concede in pre-production interviews that the extended programme of screenings, workshops and critical events came from his own curiosity rather than any great intellectual manifesto.

The false sanctuary these places offer intensifies characters' idiosyncrasies, which then collide, ultimately causing them to change.

Certainly *Threads* offered a taste of German choreography, but in the broader sense it was problematic because of what it regarded as German dance. This was almost exclusively defined as dance that is influenced by *tanztheater*, and the insistence on *tanztheater*'s heavy influence within current practice led to a somewhat one-dimensional snapshot. Not least, it ignored the increasing evidence of Ger-

man dance jettisoning historical baggage of *tanztheater* practitioners like Bausch and Susanne Linke and moving from a theatrical paradigm to a performance paradigm.

Irish audiences will be familiar with the work of Thomas Lehmen, who is part of an increasing network of artists rejecting *tanztheater* in any of its forms. Although Arnd Wesemann (editor of *Ballet-Tanz* magazine) acknowledged this transition from the theatre to more social settings during his talk, Pauls and fellow choreographer Norbert Servos were adamant that *tanztheater* continued to have unvarying influence. Certain traits are tangible, such as the actions on stage being comparable to real experiences of the audience. And yes, Pina Bausch did ask her dancers questions as a compositional starting rather than imposing movement onto their bodies, but she wasn't the only one. Historical paths of influences in German – and European – dance are long and winding, and involve several trips across the Atlantic.

It was a social choreography, *Rhythm Is It!* by Royston Maldoom, screened at the Irish Film Institute, that was heralded as a possible new direction for dance in Germany. Working with over 250 schoolchildren, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is at odds with the ambivalent acceptance of the institutionalisation of dance in municipal theatres, and offers local government all-important opportunities to

display art in a social setting. Ironically, Maldoom first worked in Ireland, particularly Belfast, in the 1980s and was influential in developing a strong community dance field. As Germany embraces social models, Irish dance is becoming more consensual and has shifted work like Maldoom's to the philosophical and funding margins.

Whatever its blemishes (including foolhardy outdoor screenings in freezing November!) *Threads* posed more questions that it could possibly answer and has strengthened the slim connection between Irish and German dance.

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*Michael Seaver is Dance Critic with the Irish Times and contributes to numerous dance publications.*

#### **BLACKBIRD**

**by David Harrower**

Landmark Productions

Directed by Michael Barker-Caven

Design: Joe Vaněk. Lighting: Sinéad McKenna

With Stephen Brennan and Catherine Walker

7 February - 3 March; reviewed 12 February

**BY PETER CRAWLEY**

A FEW HOURS BEFORE LANDMARK Production's Irish premiere of *Blackbird*, its writer appeared on the national airwaves to promote it. This was never going to be a walk in the park. David Harrower's provocative drama, which debuted in Edinburgh in 2005, has generally been described in one of two ways: the disingenuously coy "a play

about relationships", or, at the other, but no less simplistic, extreme, a "paedophile drama". The RTÉ broadcaster Ryan Tubridy, almost conducting his interview with a bargepole, essentially asked David Harrower to defend himself as author of the latter.

This refusal to engage with the substance of the play, which, at its centre, involves a sexual encounter between a twelve-year-old girl and a forty-year-old man, is hardly an aberration. In fact, it seemed a true measure of the level of cultural debate surrounding paedophilia, even – or perhaps especially – in a country so psychologically scarred by child sexual abuse. At the suggestion on the radio that a child might have sexual yearnings of her own, one unchecked interjection crystallised the taboo. "She's twelve!" exclaimed the broadcaster. "She should be playing with toys!"

Against the emotional horrors of paedophilia, we deal only in absolutes.

In this astonishing play, however, David Harrower does not deal in absolutes. The fact that he dares to show the psychological fallout from an improper relationship, in a meeting that takes place 15 years later, is enough to inspire vertigo. Although the Irish theatre has hardly banished such a subject from its stage – in the last few years paedophilia has been dealt with haphazardly (Corn Exchange's *Lolita*), as the engine for a revenge tragedy (The Gate's *Festen*) and almost forensically



Catherine Walker and Stephen Brennan in *Blackbird*

(Tall Tales's *Frozen*) – in humanising both paedophile and child, with all the complexity that entails, Harrower offers more of a moral jolt. It's not for nothing that Michael Barker-Caven's engrossing production begins with one word: "Shock" – underscoring this sudden reunion between the girl and the man with the hard metallic slam of an office door as light falls on the detritus of a rubbish-strewn recreation room.

Una (Catherine Walker), now in her late twenties, has traced Ray (Stephen Brennan) to a miserable industrial complex in England where, having served

time in jail for her rape, he has changed his name and started a new life. What she has come for – closure, revenge, or to rekindle their relationship – is never made clear; their words, like their relationship, stumbling and unresolved. Walker, in a bravura performance, preserves a tightrope balance between fragility and hostility. As she strides towards Brennan's crumpled and pathetic Ray with accusations and questions – "How many other twelve-year-old girls have you had sex with?" – the lines between victim and aggressor become jarringly blurred.

If Harrower does not offer an obvious repudiation or exculpation of Ray, no one could say that his play exists in a moral vacuum. It is a point eloquently embodied in the production's design. Joe Vaněk's imposing set is angled, the playing space literally backed into a corner, but it contains enough bric-a-brac to conceal. Sinéad McKenna's marvellous lights give out the sickly glow of bug zappers and the ghostly impression of an outside world beyond frosted glass panels, but there is also the clinical scrutiny of fluorescent strips. The urge to conceal is everywhere, yet there is nowhere to hide. Thus exposed, the play unravels the insights and delusions of its profoundly damaged characters in a way that demands our utmost attention and vigilance. When Una recalls that her girlish crush was ruthlessly exploited, and asks Ray, "What could I have possibly given you that wasn't my twelve-year-old body?" the line is doubly horrific – awful for its harsh realisation, and awful because Una still needs to hear that there was something more. Abandoned shortly after their tryst, a lost child in a strange town, her life seems to have been in stasis ever since; her emotional and sexual development arrested by the lingering stigma of her abuse. *Blackbird* should not be seen as a broad diagnosis of paedophilia, but its unflinching depiction of the usually silenced victim is breathtaking.

Barker-Caven is not always in complete command of this complex material, and there is something distant, almost metronomic, about the rhythm of the arguments - stabbing questions that accelerate, reach a crescendo and subside, while the characters move with a tick-tock of advances and retreats. But in one masterful sequence, which elevates Walker's performance to the level of the extraordinary, he need make no apologies. When the lights suddenly fail, Una is left alone again in the dark. Emotions flit across her face – fear, excitement, elation, abandonment – and their relationship is replayed, wordlessly, in its entirety.

There are many lines in the play that leave you reeling with their brutal force, but the strength of what Harrower leaves unsaid is still more haunting. Delivering these characters without stern comment is not the same as abdicating responsibility for what he portrays, and harrowing as it is – I am not convinced that I drew breath during its ninety minutes – the play is written with unwavering compassion and understanding. As for the disorienting, dark ambiguity of the play's ending – which could have been clumsy and sensationalised in a lesser production – it seems perilous to probe deeper.

Some places, you just shouldn't go.

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Peter Crawley is News and Web Editor of this magazine. This review was first published on [www.irishtheatremagazine.ie](http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie)

# Making Histories

Our critics assess recent productions that attempt to take new angles on familiar plays, while others revisit events from the past and make them strange again.

## THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

by J.M. Synge

Pan Pan Theatre Company

Directed and Adapted by Gavin Quinn

Translated by Sun Yue

Designed by Aedin Cogrove

With Xia Zi Xin, Cheng Jun Nian,

Bai Shuo, Bao Gang

Project Arts Centre, 13 -16 December 2006

Reviewed 13 December

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

PAN PAN'S *PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN World* is not just a theatrical performance of a well known play; it's also a social performance about contemporary Ireland, and its attitude to multiculturalism and immigration. As theatre, it is highly enjoyable but sometimes flawed. As a social act, it's massively significant, in positive and negative ways.

Director Gavin Quinn relocates the action from the turn-of-the-century Mayo shebeen to a contemporary Beijing "whoredressers" – a hairdresser's that doubles as a brothel. This change of scene works surprisingly well: in Synge's original, the characters suffer greatly from the suppression of sex; in

Quinn's version, they suffer from overexposure to it. Likewise, the emphasis on isolation and being "lonesome" in the original might have suffered in the transposition from rural Ireland to a modern city, but it works very well here: there are more people around, but intimacy seems just as unattainable. This shift makes Synge's play seem suddenly relevant to contemporary life again.

Quinn also makes the Irish audience work to understand the production's Chinese elements, with mixed results. As all of the action is performed in Mandarin, surtitles are required; instead of translating the script into modern Hiberno-English, Quinn instead displays Synge's original, which is modified only slightly. What's being performed here is the act of translation – we're always aware of the difference between the script that we're reading and the script the performers are using – which has the effect of making the Chinese version seem a derivation from a pure original, rather than a relocation of a text from one culture to another. More successful is the use of Chinese themes, names, and words: all of the characters' names are changed ("Pegeen" becoming

*Zhang Ting Ting and Sun Xiao Yan in The Playboy of the Western World*



"Lala", for instance), while Christy's isolated status is intensified by his being Muslim: here he is renamed Ma Shang, and makes constant reference to Zhen Zhu (Allah), making him seem like an outsider to both Chinese and Irish audiences – which interestingly recalibrates any "us and them" dynamic in the auditorium.

The production also shows a sound approach to the staging of the play, with Quinn dealing well with the problems that confront every director of *The Playboy*. The race scene is not just narrated but displayed on a videoscreen – probably useful for contemporary theatregoers, who are less familiar with storytelling techniques than Synge's original audience. Quinn also shows an awareness of how strongly the theme of performance runs through the play – which he intensifies by showing us the actors waiting to make their entrances, and by placing video links on stage, revealing the actors in their dressing rooms.

So this production isn't just notable for its intercultural elements, but should also be admired as a successful version of the play itself. An important element of that success is the acting, notably from Xia Zi Xin and Bai Shuo in the Pegeen/Lala and Widow Quin/Kun Guafu roles. And it is generally a delight to see this play being performed by young actors, who seem genuinely excited by its power.

What then of the social performance? Quinn's production is a glimpse into Ireland's future – to a time when the country's culture will be expressed not just in Irish or English, but in Mandarin and other languages too. As such, it is a decidedly important moment for our theatre, with huge social and cultural value: it shows us what is possible, and will therefore inevitably point us towards new ways of making theatre in Ireland.

Unfortunately, it had political value also. Watching the junior minister, Conor Lenihan, take the stage before the action began, I couldn't help thinking of Pegeen's reminder that there is a world of difference between gallous stories and dirty deeds – that it's great for the Government to support this production of *The Playboy*, but there's a risk of that support being used to disguise their record on immigration and the arts. This *Playboy* shows how much Ireland and its theatre have changed over the last twenty years: we've seen Synge reinvented by Garry Hynes, Niall Henry, and now Gavin Quinn – and we've seen Ireland reinvented by cultural, economic, and social transformation. Lenihan's presence was a useful reminder that if there's been a lot done, there's still a lot more to do – culturally, economically, and socially. And Quinn's production provided an invaluable glimpse of what is possible.

**AMERICAN BUFFALO****by David Mamet**

The Gate Theatre

With Sean McGinley,

Domhnall Gleeson, Aidan Gillen

Directed by Mark Brokaw

Set: Alexander Dodge.

Lighting: Hartley TA Kemp

Costumes: Leonore McDonagh

13 February - 6 March, 2007

Reviewed 14 February

**BY SUSAN CONLEY**

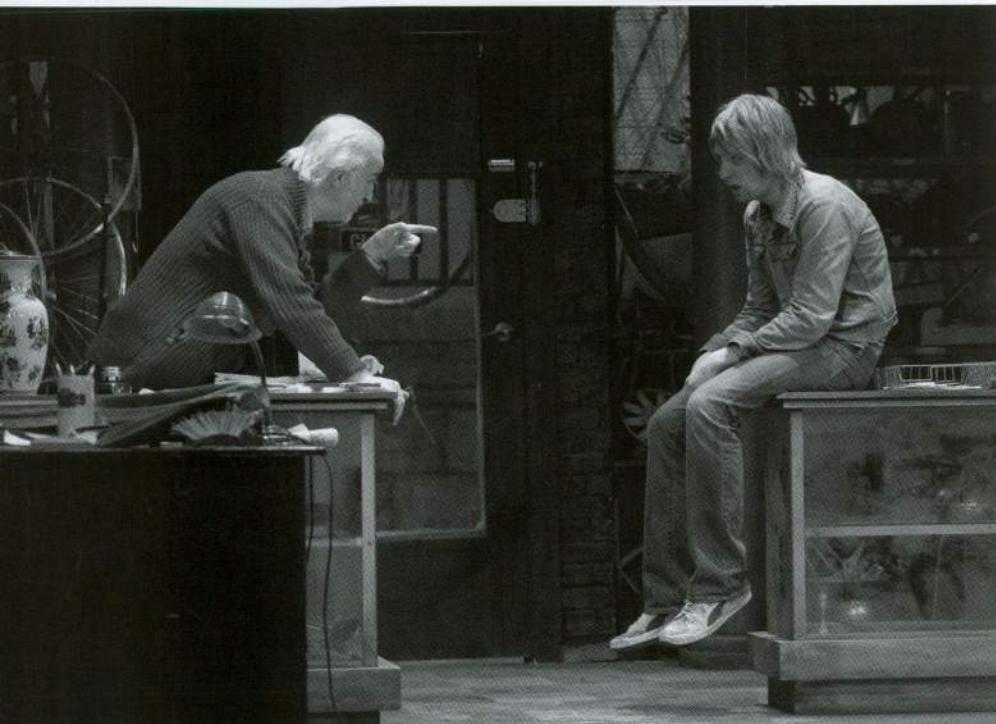
WATCHING EARLY MAMET INEVITABLY becomes a somewhat forensic experience. This Gate production of the Chicago-born playwright's 1975 work inspires such a clinical approach, as its tale of an unattempted robbery, of men colluding to undermine each other with straightforward underhandedness, plays like a chamber piece in preparation for the symphony that will eventually become 1984's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Even the profanity seems rather delicately employed, an arpeggio of scatology rather than the now familiar fortissimo of repeated f-sharps; that is, *Moonlight Sonata* as opposed to *The Jupiter Symphony*. The production itself must answer to this, and one wonders if it and the text were singing from the same hymn sheet.

'If I kept all the shit I threw out...' muses Teach (Aidan Gillen) as he insinuates himself into Don's (Sean McGinley) junk shop. This statement serves as the emotional centre of the

play, a reflection of post-Watergate, pre-Wall Street America, an America that was beginning to think that, having saved the world, maybe it deserved a little more than it was getting, while conversely not knowing the value of much. Nobody knew what anything was really worth, but they sure as hell knew they wanted more of it. Teach hasn't got a clue as to what he could have got for his old junk, but now somehow feels that he could have—should have—got something.

This sense of entitlement underpins the logic of the heist, in which the guys are keen to steal... a nickel. This nickel, of Indian Head/Buffalo minting, is very rare now, but perhaps less so in the 1970s, given that cessation of production of the coin dated only to 1938. In the world of the junk shop, they're stealing back something that they assume was stolen from them, since Don isn't entirely sure that he hadn't been short-changed by the guy who offered him ninety bucks for the thing. Because, logically, if the guy was willing to pay that much for five lousy cents, then surely it was worth even more?

Alliances shift and wobble as 'business' and 'friendship' bleed together: 'business' because shady dealings are elevated to the status of career, and 'friendship' because the attachments forged here are based on proximity, easily dismissed or lugubrious at best. Throughout, the short-hand, referential style of dialogue that Mamet made



Sean McGinley and Domhnall Gleeson in *American Buffalo*

famous swirls around like dust-motes in Alexander Dodge's beautifully re-alised nirvana of detritus, occluding the facts of the situation—that these guys are chancers without a hope, and would as soon do the other out of something than not, and that they, in fact, have no right to criminally reverse a deal done fair and square.

The play meanders along traditional lines: Act One is devoted to the set up of the 'job', with Teach convincing Don to dump Bob (Domhnall Gleeson) in favour of himself, and act two is the escalation of the frustration attendant

upon the heist's failure to come off. Gillen ricochets around the set like a pinball with ADD, fully embodying Teach's inalienable right to butt in where he's not wanted, manipulate circumstances to his advantage, and - key to the play's notion that friendship is business, and probably bad business at that - spread discord through his group's dissolute ranks. His performance is not well met by the rest of the cast: while Gleeson is a dependable go-to guy for pallid cringing; while this an entirely suitable and well-presented attitude for Bob's strung-out junkie

self, he falls too heavily on the side of spaciousness and shows little of an addict's cunning. Added to this is McGinley's placid Bob, a man who is handling it all - his suspected fleecing, the planned breaking-and-entering - with suspiciously little sweat. These are penny ante guys, and we must believe that this is the heist of their lives, but we don't. Everything - everything, their so-called friendship, their so-called business - hinges on this windfall, and yet there is no sense of urgency until Teach loads his gun.

Director Mark Brokaw seems to have stopped short at the notion of these men as a trio of sad sacks, without investigating the potential sadness under their misguided sense of privilege. There can be the illusion that a Mametian discourse is void of subtext, since the fragmentary nature of verbal interaction appears to express the underrcurrents sufficiently— in fact, it *all* appears to be subtext. Eschewing Chekov's dictum, Teach's gun never fires; this is the embodied threat of the interplay between the men, the potential to the ultimate violence from and toward which they must skate throughout. There is little that threatens about this production, little that smacks of sheer desperation, consigning a potential Hallelujah chorus of misery to a minor key of chagrin.

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*Susan Conley is Art Director of this magazine and a writer and critic.*

### THE EXIT WOUND

**Written and directed by Johnny Hanrahan**

Meridian Theatre Company

Triskel Arts Centre, Cork

With Julie Kelleher, Michael Loughnan, Elizabeth Moynihan and Kieran Ahern

Sound Design: Cormac O' Connor. Lighting:  
Paul Denby

Costumes: Joan Hickson. Design Consultant:  
Bernadette Roberts

22 November – 2 December 2006

Reviewed 1 December

**BY NICOLA DEPUIS**

LINKING LIVES AFFECTED BY THE assassination of one of the Kennedys is a popular theme at the moment. It's true that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had a rippling effect on an entire generation: few who were alive on that day forgot where they were when they heard the frightening news. This is the premise upon which Johnny Hanrahan's latest play *The Exit Wound* is based: the title is a reference to the fatal head injuries received by JFK, but also refers to the figurative wounds worn by the play's four characters, all of whom experience separate tragedies following the president's assassination.

The play is a promenade piece presented in three parts, each performed in a different area of the Triskel Arts Centre. For the first story, *The Lost Field*, we are led into a downstairs room, with a long table

*Elizabeth Moynihan, Charlie Conway and Joan Goggin in The Exit Wound*



MICHAEL MCSWEENEY/PROVISION

consuming most of the space. There is a large cake in the centre of the table, with an American flag decorating it. Hugh (Michael Loughnan) and his granddaughter Julia (Julie Kelleher) are sitting at opposite ends of the table with audience members lining the chairs between them. Hugh begins by launching into a lengthy monologue about his love of the 'land' before telling the story of a card player called Liam who gains material wealth but loses the love of his life, all because of a card game.

However, this story bears no relevance to the rest of the play and so gives more of an impression of padding than a necessary exchange between two characters. This monologue is interspersed with stunted dialogue between the pair, during which we find out that Julia is bitter because of her grandfather's abandonment of his wife and children, including her mother, on the day that JFK was murdered. Hugh soon tells his own version of that day's events, when he returned to find his loving wife in bed with his brother, the parish priest and Julia's biological grandfather.

During this scene Julia reveals that she is "completely promiscuous. I've fucked every one of my friends' boyfriends". But because this statement again has no apparent relevance to the action and plays no part in telling the story, it seems more like

titillation than revelation. This isn't the fault of the actress who retains an air of natural reserve throughout the entire scene, in sharp contrast to the often stiff gestures of Michael Loughnan. However, Michael's strong but weary presence complements Julie's modern uncertainty perfectly, engaging both the older and younger audience members.

For the second performance we are led to an upstairs room and handed blindfolds so as to increase our appreciation of the aural performance about to be presented. From a stereo in the corner, the unmistakable voice of Kieran Ahern bursts into the room as we are introduced to our third character, Pascal, a television personality who recalls with an enthusiastic but almost incomprehensible staccato the events of the day JFK was shot. Unfortunately, this use of pre-recorded material in a live performance only serves to take away from the mood of the piece, and in its place adds a layer of levity, which seems unnecessary when describing the assassination of a man. The blindfolds reiterate this by appearing to serve only as a device to distract us from the fact that we are listening to a pre-recorded performance, rather than a live actor.

For the third story *The Ice Queen*, we are led into another upstairs room where we meet Joan (Elizabeth Moynihan), whose life was marred by having to care for her sister fol-

lowing a car crash on the day Kennedy died. Audience members are allowed to sit or stand in various areas of the room, making the experience and vantage point different for everyone. Moynihan stalks the room like a wounded passenger of life, surrounded by a chorus of mesmerising older actors from the *Retired People's Network*. Members of this silent chorus had appeared throughout the play, gazing into the distance, moving eerily and infrequently around the room, effectively conjuring up a sense of lost time and lost loved ones.

Their physical presence throughout adds a weight to the production that could not have been achieved through dialogue alone. The script tends to veer off-course too frequently with lengthy unnecessary monologues throughout. The impact of JFK's assassination is the only thread tying these three stories together and in the end proves too weak. Although Hanrahan succeeds in infusing the story with some very beautiful descriptions, the production could have gained momentum – and left more of an impact – with a thorough edit and less dependence on the theatrical gimmicks of promenading and pre-recorded performance.

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*Nicola Depuis is a playwright and journalist. Her first play The Queen of Fucking Everything is in pre-production.*

#### THE LIVERPOOL BOAT

by **Marie Jones and Maurice Bessman**

Red Lead Arts

Dockers' Club, Belfast

Directed by Carol Moore

With Louis Emerick, Bronagh Taggart,

Lara Lynne O'Neill, Richard Clements,

Miche Doherty

Set: Niall Rea. Lighting: Conleth White

Costumes: Heather Long

Reviewed 18 October 2006

#### HOLDING HANDS AT PASCHENDALE

by **Martin Lynch**,

Green Shoot Productions,

Courtyard Theatre

Directed by Hannah Eidnow

Set Design: Mike Lee.

Lighting: Sinead McKenna

With Ciarán McMenamin, Freddie White

Both productions from

19 October – 4 November 2006

BY MARK PHELAN

THE BOX-OFFICE HIGHLIGHT OF THE Belfast Festival at Queen's 2006 was undoubtedly Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, which boasts the best one-liner of recent times: a jaded A-Level student, asked to define history by his teacher, blithely replies: "it's just one fucking thing after another". It is utterly impossible to imagine an Irish playwright ever writing this line, as is borne out in two new plays by Marie Jones and Martin Lynch, in which the burden of history is carried less lightly and with less levity than



Richard Clements and Tara Lynne O'Neill in *The Liverpool Boat*

in Bennett's blockbuster.

Lynch and Jones share a distinguished (and often overlapping) career as artists, actors and activists; both playing key roles in the formation of the all-female theatre company Charabanc. This connection is further cemented by the fact that another co-founder of Charabanc, Carol Moore, directs Jones' latest play *The Liverpool Boat*, which is performed in the Dockers' Club in Sailorstown. The site-specific setting invokes another connection to Lynch, whose seminal play *Dockers* originally opened in the Lyric with an audience of dockers bussed in from Sailorstown, a critical moment in the North's theatre history that actually inspired Jones, Moore *et al.* to set up Charabanc in the first place. However, this promising mixture of collaboration and coincidence was less an auspicious augury of what was to

come than a cruel reminder of what could have been.

Co-written by Jones with Liverpool writer Maurice Bessman - a partnership presumably intended to symbolise the shared history and heritage of both post-industrial cities - *The Liverpool Boat* was originally intended for performance on an actual ferry until logistics scuppered things. This perhaps explains why the Liverpool dimension to the play seems so arbitrary and unnecessary, as indeed was the casting of ex-*Brooksiders* star Louis Emerick in the main role as the entertainer on the ferry travelling back and forth between both ports.

The embarkation point for the play is "one night in 1969", as a motley collection of locals board the Liverpool boat hoping for a better life in England, only for their dreams to be dashed on reality's rocks (clichés intended). In this particular theatrical

crossing, the form is as problematic as the content, due to the production's absolute failure to engage meaningfully with the traumatic narratives of its storyline. Writers and director seem unable to decide whether the show is a comedy or a cabaret, a musical-tragedy, or piece of site-specific storytelling. Though explicitly set in 1969 – an epochal moment – there is little real engagement with the upheaval about to be unleashed in Belfast as the McCafferty family flee from their alcoholic father. Muckers Catherine and Shirley (Bronagh Taggart and Lara Lynne O'Neill) escape East Belfast for the adventure of the WRAF, only for Taggart's ingénue to be seduced by louche lounge-room crooner Kurt Silver. Meanwhile, gay Ballyclare farmer – yes, you read that right – Norm(an) (Richard Clements) flees on the eve of his wedding and boards the boat bereft of luggage but with plenty of baggage, until camp ship steward Sinbad (Miche Doherty) takes him on a journey of sexual self-discovery. Ostensibly an exploration of the complex social forces and traumatic personal experiences of emigration, *The Liverpool Boat* (rightly) opens up issues of class, gender, race, and sexuality – but only to transform them into crude caricatures, cheap laughs, and sentimental corn.

At the heart of the problem is the decision to play the show as a bizarre

musical-cum-soap-opera-cabaret, so that it opens with a mawkish musical number on the pain of emigration, moves through an excruciating 'Sit Down You're Rockin' The Boat', before concluding with a blunt Brecht-Weill version of 'Mac the Knife', which is all cabaret and no cutting edge. Moreover, the musical format stretches already thin material so that characters become ciphers of class, race, gender, and sexuality – none more crudely caricatured than the ship's gay stewards.

There were moments of real potential, however. The secretive lives led by Sinbad & Co and the suggestion that the ship offers sanctuary from the openly homophobic societies of Belfast and Liverpool is intriguing – but this evocative motif is wasted, as the homosexual crew camp it up as dancing queen parodies. It is much the same with Norm's story, whereby the now openly gay "expat" living freely in Liverpool agonises over returning home to "come out" to his conservative family – a novel reworking of the theme of the exile's return prevalent in Irish theatre. However, what could have been original and innovative was embarrassingly outdated, as one camp caricature after another lisped, minced, and sashayed across the stage, all pursed lips and double entendres. Without irony or authenticity, such portrayals made a mockery of their subject. This



Freddy White and Ciaran McMenamin in *Holding Hands At Paschendale*

was also true of the play's treatment of race: philandering black singer Silver impregnates an (impossibly) gullible Catherine, and then successfully conceals the fact he is married to another woman in Liverpool for twenty years. This tale of sleaze on the high seas would be cartoonish, were it not that Catherine's experience of rearing a mixed-race baby in Belfast is reduced to little more than a facile punch line.

All this is little fault of the actors: a large, talented cast with moments of excellent ensemble work. Clements and Doherty valiantly try to bring depth to two dimensions, whilst the banter between Taggart and O'Neill and the bickering of the McCafferty family (Frances Quinn, Katie Tumelty, Tony Devlin, Gordon Fulton) is mostly convincing when an otherwise solid Packy Lee isn't shouting. One other disappointing

dimension to the play was that it never fully registered its connection to Sailortown, once a thriving community teeming with timber mills, engineering yards, cinemas, dance halls, hard-chaws, dockers, doffers, demagogues, and an exotic infusion of foreign sailors that anticipated Belfast's belated multiculturalism. This vibrant community is richly recorded by local laureate John Campbell, whose vivid vignettes of how commerce, trade, music, politics and poverty collided and commingled in this historic quarter are referred to in the play's programme, and whose recent death enhanced the sense of requiem of the area and what could have been a memorable local history play.

Lynch's play *Holding Hands at Paschendale* is forged from family biography: an uncle recounted to the author the story of how his grandfa-

ther spent 24 hours shackled to a man sentenced to be shot for desertion during the first World War. Lynch's play is an act of archaeological retrieval which explores the barbarous, brutal conditions of the conflict when shell-shocked soldiers were maligned and murdered by their erstwhile brothers-in-arm, while in the process, opening up the issue of Irish involvement in the Great War.

Given Yeats's distaste for the 'blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick' of Wilfred Owen's war poetry and his censure of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* on the grounds that its author had not stood on its battlefields, it is fascinating to see how contemporary Irish

playwrights have politically (re)engaged with the first World War; to retrieve the stories of those written out of Ireland's official history by excavating and expressing Irish involvement in, and experiences of, the Great War. In this, Lynch's play joins Sebastian Barry's *Steward of Christendom* and MacGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, although it resembles more the latter's hostage drama *Someone to Watch Over Me*: both characters in *Paschendale* spend the entire play shackled to one another.

Willie (Ciarán McMenamin) has been ordered to guard Cockney prisoner Mo (Freddie White) who is to be court-martialled and shot for cow-



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## The Importance of Being Earnest

by Oscar Wilde

DIRECTED BY PETER HUSSEY

4th International Dublin Gay  
Theatre Festival

7th – 12th May  
Andrews Lane Studio

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ardice. McMenamin is venomously contemptuous of Mo and all too happy to vent his frustration on his hapless prisoner whose incessant efforts to strike up conversation with his sullen companion, and whose deluded daydreams of becoming a star of the music hall, bespeak his gentle nature and shell-shocked mind.

Stuck in a barn, a short distance from the frontline, both men are cut off from their command, and the court martial is delayed. As the battle rages round them, Mike Lee's evocative set, where every alternate wooden beam of the barn is missing, assumes the appearance of a prison cell. Predictably, both men gradually get to know one another so that their manacles assume a more metaphorical significance as each discovers that the other volunteered for the war for personal reasons rather than political convictions. Their sense of solidarity swells when each empathises with the other's troubled relationship with their fathers. The handcuffs which imprison them thus come to symbolise the more invidious shackles which bind and blind them, but the poetics and politics of this imagery also hint at the redemptive potential and possibilities of their new found solidarity, though this is tragically recognized too late when Willie belatedly tries to help his friend escape.

The final scene between both men is genuinely moving – and the poten-

tial for dialogue to transform and transcend even the most bitter divide is discreetly indicated without didacticism, as Lynch's exploration of the "morality of killing" exerts a valency that extends beyond the fields of France to those closer to home.

The length, and limitations of the play's unremitting realism (in stark contrast to other first World War plays), make this an extraordinarily difficult play for the actors – a challenge compounded by the fact that each is handcuffed to the other throughout the play. It is a considerable tribute to the skills of McMenamin and White and the direction of Hannah Eidnow that they pull this off with two superb performances.

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*Mark Phelan lectures in Drama Studies at Queen's University Belfast.*

#### **MOONLIGHT MICKEYS**

**by Colin Thornton**

Calipo Theatre Company

Directed by Darren Thornton

Design: Kieran McNulty. Lighting: Eamon Fox

With Peter Daly, Janet Moran and Colin O'Donoghue

Bewley's Café Theatre

15 November - 9 December 2006

Reviewed 9 December

**BY FINTAN WALSH**

CIVIL WAR IS NOT A TYPICAL CONCERN of lunchtime theatre, where a production is expected to accommodate



Peter Daly and Colin O'Donoghue in *Moonlight Mickeys*

a meal as well as a performance. But here, in Calipo's take on the Irish Civil War, theatre and history are served up in a sumptuous combination, steering all attention away from the bowl of vegetable soup.

A black-and-white silent film projection opens the performance, adding virtual depth to the small playing space and the cosmetic suggestion of historical document. Schoolteacher Big Mickey Murphy (Colin O'Donoghue) appears onstage to narrate the filmic action, which features him and his lover (Janet

Moran) whispering sweet nothings to each other on a Dundalk train platform.

The year is 1922, and although love is all around, so too are snipers. Just as he is about to board the train that will chug him part of the way to Yonkers, Big Mickey takes a bullet from a political enemy and dies, "jellied in the belly by a gunner in the gutter". Onstage, but seemingly speaking from beyond the grave, the departed conducts his own post-mortem of the last week of his life – recalling days that involved a clumsy

prison break, betrayal, and murder. As Murphy's body topples to the platform on screen, mourned over by his hilariously hysterical sweetheart, the forensic operation onstage is set in motion: forget JR, "Who Shot Big Mickey Murphy?" is the question troubling the souls of the Dundalk-dead.

As if one Mickey wasn't pleasurable enough, Calipo treat us to two. Enter Small Mickey Murphy (Peter Daly), Big Mickey's brother. Although a suspect in Big Mickey's murder, Small Mickey is united in death with his brother onstage to mobilise the detective work. But don't hold out for investigative intrigue or historical verisimilitude here: this venture is purely comic. O'Donoghue and Daly lead us on an irreligious tour of Dundalk's criminal underworld, embodying the grotesque characters they encounter, and voicing the eclectic range of Louth accents they speak. They dip and dive out of roles with sparkly finesse, Daly having an edge on O'Donoghue with his farcical incarnations. And with names like Scrounger, Slippery, Jini Joe Johnson, and Detective Idaho featuring among the many invoked characters, we might well think that the talent of writer Colin Thornton was nurtured on a cocktail of silent film, slapstick comedy, and detective fiction, topped off with a dollop of *film noir* and a sprinkling of Dickensian rhetoric.

Delightful as the production may be, you can't help wondering if details about the Irish Civil War are too faintly furnished here to even approximate a plausible backdrop. One imagines the piece was conceived by imagining a Civil War story told through a synchronically popular medium – silent 1920s movies – but other than this subtle connection, war has little to do with this production. The subject is essentially playfulness; and form, character, and dialogue are all drawn into this highly entertaining game. While the knowing frivolity goes a long way to licensing this emphasis on humour, the refusal to address the war beyond a couple of references is occasionally unfulfilling.

It appears that contemporary Irish theatre has little room for sacred cows. Some of the most successful productions in recent years, at home and abroad, have comically questioned the status of popular histories: Rough Magic's *Improbable Frequency* (2004) turned the issue of Irish neutrality literally into a song and a dance, while Corn Exchange's *Dublin by Lamplight* (2004) camped up the founding of The National Theatre.

While Calipo brings nothing quite as grand in staging or politics to the boards here, it does unleash an equal measure of irreverence. In fact, seeing *Moonlight Mickeys* as part of this theatrical trend might well explain why

the precise relationship between comedy and context is never entirely explained in the piece. Everyone is laughing at Ireland and Irish history after all: need we say or do more? This raises interesting questions about Irish theatre's relationship to national politics. Most obviously, we might ask whether uncritical impiety is too hasty, or well overdue. Is it acceptable, as Calipo and co. seem to think it is, to laugh cathartically in the face of history? Does the wish to move beyond history, fuelled by a sense that nothing "national" is sacred or even useful anymore, bring its own dangers?

#### THE STUFF OF MYTH

by Roger Gregg

Crazy Dog Audio Theatre

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

Directed by Deirdre Molloy

With Karen Ardif, Eimear Forristal O'Grady,

Roger Gregg, Morgan Jones, David Murray

Design: Colm Molloy

8-24 February 2007; reviewed 9 February

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

ROGER GREGG'S IS A DISTINCTIVE VOICE in contemporary Irish performing arts. You may not be overly familiar with his name, but will have heard him many times. Gregg is one of those very busy actors whose work is rarely the subject of critical review in publications of this kind: a voice-over artist. Much more interestingly

though, Gregg has been at the spearhead of a small revolution in radio drama in the past ten years or so, eventually resulting in numerous awards both in Ireland and abroad for shows such as *Time Out for Bill Lizard*, *The Last Harbinger*, and *Infidel*.

Gregg's audio theatre is innovative and exciting. His humour is a concoction of familiar elements brewed through a philosophical and political perspective which is uniquely his own, and with the regular crew of Crazy Dog Audio Theatre, he has deployed the capacities of radio to stretch the limits of aural drama. *Press 3*, a play that formed part of a series known as *The Diabolic Playhouse*, was one of the most effective pieces of radio drama I have ever heard, and Gregg continues to win plaudits for each production aired.

Crazy Dog's move to the stage does not produce the same frisson. Though Deirdre Molloy directs this parodic walkthrough of classical Greek mythology, the sensibility is still very much the same as the radio plays, as is the methodology. The show is a mixture of comic skit, musical performance, and 'straight' drama in retelling and reworking the myth of Orpheus and Euridice. It even occasionally reaches for emotional effect and philosophic depth in spite of the scornful Hades's remark "If I wanted to see a bunch of twats prancing around pretending to be



Roger Gregg, Morgan Jones, David Murray, Chris Heaney and David Murray in *The Stuff of Myth*

profound, I'd go to the theatre."

There is great energy in the production, from the 'opening up' of the dramatic space provided by props, costume changes for double and triple jobbing actors, stage blocking and movement, to the performances of the cast. I did have the privilege of seeing this company do a show live on air many years ago (at a science fiction convention), and the effect was astounding. Seeing the actors writhe, gesticulate and emote while largely stationary at a set of microphones was a singular theatrical experience, and their ability to connect with the live audience (and draw them in to the show as characters)

was frankly more entertaining than most straight stage drama I'd seen at the time.

The cast work equally hard here to infuse their multiple characterisations with comic life, and largely succeed, yet more seems somehow less, especially during the first act, which drags a little before the pace picks up after the interval. It is as if freed from the constraints of the recording environment, the potential energy in this particular comic circuit is unleashed with less power than expected.

Part of the problem is that the show remains perhaps too closely linked with the aural aesthetic, to the point where the visible action is over-

ly underscored by musical cues and foley effects. The audience could quite easily close their eyes and follow almost the entire show, but if they don't, they may find certain actions overplayed by double emphasis in aural and visual cues. One example of this is a scene where Karen Ard iff, in the role of Agave, tries to teach wide-eyed Euridice (Eimear O'Grady) about sexual allure. With each pose struck by Ard iff, a musical stinger is heard. Though this adds to the sense of bawdy exaggeration, it also seems unnecessary.

These are critical/academic reservations of course, and they fly in the face of a show which sets out from the beginning to be an entertainment.

It is fun, with David Murray a wonderfully smug and slightly stupid Orpheus, clad in black leather and a frilly shirt; neatly matched by O'Grady's beguiling grace as Euridice. Ard iff is lusty fun in her many roles, as is Morgan Jones, taking advantage of his physical size to portray larger than life emotion for broad comic effect as Hades, then seeking pathos as the jilted Aristaeus. Gregg himself plays several roles and several musical instruments in the score he composed. I continue to watch this performer and his collaborators with interest, but *The Stuff of Myth* is more an extension than an expansion of Crazy Dog's worthwhile and recommended work on radio. ■

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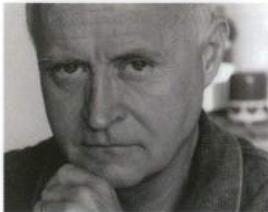
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