

irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

€7.50/£5 VOLUME 5, NUMBER 24 AUTUMN 2005

Corcadorca
take to the
streets

Druid's
Synge cycle



UPSTATE LIVE PRESENTS

THE GREEN FOOL

BY PATRICK KAVANAGH

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE AND DIRECTED BY DECLAN GORMAN



BELFAST FESTIVAL
AND NATIONAL TOUR
OCT - NOV '05

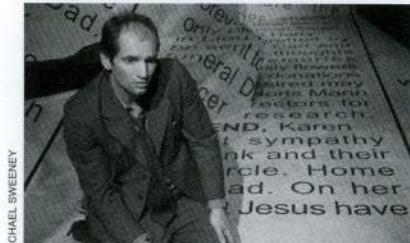
“★★★★★ A truly brilliant production”

SUNDAY BUSINESS POST

For more information contact:
tel: +353 41 9844227
email: admin@upstate.ie
web: www.upstate.ie



IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE PATRICK KAVANAGH
CENTRE, INNISKEEN, CO. MONAGHAN, IRELAND



TOP: PATRICK O'KANE; CENTRE: EAMON MORRISSEY AND MARIE MULLEN; BOTTOM: KEITH PATTISON; BOTTOM: COMPAGNIE JO BUTHUNE (PHOTO: MICHAEL SWEENEY)

4 WHAT'S NEWS

12 OPENING NIGHTS Mark your diaries for the autumn festival season.

15 OFFSHORE What Irish theatre artists are up to overseas.

16 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Comings and goings behind the scenes.

19 SOUNDING BOARD Technical Director Nick Anton points out the dangers of not adequately training and supporting technical staff.

20 EXPANDING THE COTTAGE WALLS Karen Fricker assesses Druid/Syngé, Druid's once-in-a-lifetime staging of the entire Syngé canon, and asks why we now shy away from the politics of class and power in Syngé's writing.

32 THE WORD ON THE STREET Lynda Radley joined the outdoor crowds at Cork's Relocation festival to see what Irish companies could learn from the visiting site-specific experts.

42 BOOK REVIEWS Director Thomas Conway thumbs through two new studies of Irish arts practitioners - at home and abroad.

47 REVIEWS See overleaf for listing.

104 EXIT STAGE LEFT

ON THE COVER: Jerzy Gralek in Corcadorca's *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: Michael Sweeney/Provision

REVIEWS

Our critics review 31 productions:

- 47 COLD COMFORT** Prime Cut
49 CONSPIRACY THEORY Bodily Functions Theatre Company
51 A CRY FROM HEAVEN Abbey Theatre
53 DARK WEEK Playgroup, Everyman Palace Theatre Company
55 DOG SHOW Peer Pressure Productions
56 A DOLL'S HOUSE Abbey Theatre
58 EXIT 2. SURVIVING A. Slaughterhouse Theatre Company
60 FAMILY STORIES B'spoke Theatre Company
62 THE FEVER Mangiare Theatre Company
64 THE GLORY OF LIVING About Face Theatre Company
66 THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA? Landmark Productions
68 HERE LIES Operating Theatre
70 LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN Gate Theatre
72 A LITTLE BIT OF BLUE Passion Machine Theatre Company
74 THE LITTLE MERMAID Big Telly Theatre Company
76 MADAM T. Meridian Theatre Company
78 MEG'S HEAD Lyric Theatre
79 THE MERCHANT OF VENICE Corcadorka Theatre Company
81 MOUTH Articulate Anatomy Theatre
83 NO MESSIN' WITH THE MONKEYS The Ark
85 POND LIFE ANGELS Asylum Theatre Company
86 THE SANCTUARY LAMP Galloglass Theatre Company
88 ...TANKS A LOT Barabbas - The Company
90 TEJAS VERDES B'spoke Theatre Company
92 TINE CHNÁMH Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe
93 TWO HOUSES Upstate Live
95 UNDER MILKWOOD Island Theatre Company
97 A VERY WEIRD MANOR Lyric Theatre
99 WHAT HAPPENED BRIDIE CLEARY Peacock Theatre
101 THE WIREMEN River Productions and **THE HA'PENNY BRIDGE** Alastair McGuckian, Producer

VOLUME FIVE,
NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR
AUTUMN 2005

EDITOR

HELEN MEANY

PUBLISHER

NIK QUAIFE

ART DIRECTOR

SUSAN CONLEY

NEWS & WEB EDITOR
PETER CRAWLEY

REVIEWS & BOOKS EDITOR
PATRICK LONERGAN

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
LAYLA O'MARA

DISTRIBUTION
NEW ISLAND BOOKS

SPECIAL THANKS

Tania Banotti
Loughlin Deegan
Ciarán Walsh
and
our subscribers

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Helen Carey
Ali Curran
Cormac Kinsella
Brian Singleton
Ciarán Walsh (chair)
Willie White

IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE

ADDRESS

74 Dame Street, Dublin 2

E-MAIL

info@irishthemagazine.ie



Continuity and Change

THERE AREN'T ANY HIDDEN SHOCKS in this issue of *Irish Theatre Magazine*: in fact, it is intended to look reassuringly familiar, despite the change of editor. The fact that the magazine's core editorial team remains in place has contributed to a welcome sense of continuity, while the outgoing editor, Karen Fricker, is a major contributor to the issue. She casts a reflective eye over Druid's ambitious staging of the entire Synge canon (page 22). *DruidSynge* was the undisputed highlight of the summer's theatre, rivalled only by Corcadorca's Relocation series, which was a necessary reminder that creative stagings don't depend on buildings and institutions.

There's a familiar ring to our two running news stories also: the ongoing restructuring at The Abbey and the consultation process engaged in by the Arts Council, which should, any month now, result in an actual policy document on theatre. Of course going to press in late August does mean that we're operating amid a strange sense of suspended animation, of all life being on hold while everyone working in the arts takes off to the sun – or to Edinburgh.

But changes are bubbling up in the

background here as we move towards the five-week period of hyper-activity generated by the Dublin Fringe Festival and Dublin Theatre Festival this autumn. Our website, irishtheatremagazine.ie is evolving rapidly under the watchful eye of web editor, Peter Crawley, and will be carrying on-line reviews of every theatre produc-

tion in the Fringe. Look out for our new team of critics, bringing energy and fresh perspectives to the shows.

Later in the year the website will become more interactive, creating an on-line forum for debate and feedback – so you'll have an opportunity to answer back to the re-

viewers. Over the next few months the printed magazine will be moving in new directions also, both in look and in content. Behind the scenes, two new board members will be bringing their expertise to the mix: Brian Singleton, Head of Drama at TCD and Cormac Kinsella, literary publicist.

In the meantime please send comments and suggestions to editor@irishtheatremagazine.ie. All contributions are welcome as we move into the next phase. Watch this space!—Helen Meany

Perestroika in Lean Times

THE ABBEY THEATRE IS NOW ATTEMPTING TO RESTRUCTURE ITS management in the aftershock of last year's devastating financial mismanagement. The board of the theatre have finally announced their intention to resign this month when the National Theatre Society is expected to be dissolved in favour of a new corporate structure. This follows a KPMG report that anatomised the theatre's accounting failures and

uncovered the extent of 2004's losses - a deficit of €1.85 million, more than double that originally reported.

Through increasingly frosty relationships between the outgoing board and the Arts Council (which, Minister John O'Donoghue has confirmed, will remain the theatre's direct funder) Director Fiach MacConghail is now ushering in his new

regime. This is no small challenge.

MacConghail must restructure the management of the theatre under a €3.6 million deficit while conforming to the new company structure the Abbey will assume next month. This re-structuring is being developed in consultation with the Change Programme Team, which was one of the conditions of the Arts Council's

emergency €2 million grant last year, while SIPTU have sought assurances from the Arts Council about the security of jobs at the theatre.

With the KPMG report highlighting continuing accounting problems – as many as five different budgets had been drawn up for 2005 – the Abbey is understandably keen to get its financial management in order.

In the new hierarchy, there will be four director positions in the theatre directly under MacConghail. The position of Director of Finance and Administration and that of Director of Public Affairs have been advertised, with interviews scheduled for this month. Tony Wakefield has been appointed Technical Director, but it is surprising to see that an appointment to the new role of Literary Director is expected in this month also.

This makes Jocelyn Clarke, who currently heads the Literary Department as the Abbey's Commissioning Manager, an early casualty of the theatre's financial constraints. Clarke learned in July that his contract would not be renewed when it expires in October, but he will remain attached to two of the plays he commissioned during his tenure and will see them through to production between late 2006 and early 2007. Were Clarke extended another contract, the theatre would be obliged to make him a permanent staff member – something that is not under-

stood to be financially tenable. It is thought that the new role of Literary Director will be offered on the basis of an annual contract.

"The Literary Director becomes a senior manager in that context," Clarke explained. "That's as it should be. But under [former artistic director] Ben Barnes that wasn't the way it was, unfortunately. It bodes very well for the literary department and its future."

Clarke's last project for the Abbey will



be a children's show, after which his plans include writing an opera libretto, a project about Afghanistan for the New York Theatre Workshop and his continuing association with Anne Bogart's SITI Group. "Frankly I've done four years of national service and it's been a rollercoaster ride," he says. "I'm very sad to go but I'm also very happy to go on to different and interesting things."

Meanwhile, to attempt to safeguard the financial future of the National Theatre, the Abbey has also advertised the roles of Financial Controller and Assistant Accountant who will report to the director of Finance and Administration.

what's news

WHAT'S THE PLAN?

When the new Arts Council set aside the Arts Plan last year it served as something of a bloodless coup, precipitating the resignation of former director Patricia Quinn and ushering in a brand new era of ... well, what exactly? Alive to the concerns of the arts sector for a transparent, user-friendly and clearly communicative council, which would be responsive to the needs and concerns of organisations of all shapes and sizes, the council is still formulating its strategy through a process of consultation, draft documents, further



consultations, revisions, some more consultation - and then perhaps a finished strategy.

With the publication of the original draft of "Partnership for the Arts" in June ("a framework, not a plan" it insists), the council was confronted with the fact that, for all the warmth of the document's declarations on the value of the arts, and its bright aspirations,

without including costings of its priorities or a proposed timeline for their implementation, the document was always going to meet with cautious-to-sceptical responses at best.

While welcoming the consultation process and the apparent flexibility of the council, the written response from Tania Banotti, CEO of Theatre Forum, to Arts Council Director Mary Cloake went to the heart of the matter: "It is difficult to comment meaningfully on priorities for action in the absence of any estimate of cost or impact."

A draft document, of course, is not set in stone, but Theatre Forum understands the urgency of turning the strategy into a policy better than most. Seamus Crimmins, Arts Policy Director of the Arts Council admitted to *itm* that the Council will make its budgetary bid for the Book of Estimates (in November) before the strategy is published.

"The council will propose to government levels of funding which in some way have to bear in mind the issues within the strategy," he said, adding that it will contain "certain issues that carry key financial ambitions [which will be] made

continued on page 8

Critical Mass

As we're heading into the (extended) theatre festival season in Dublin, we're marking your cards about the annual Irish Theatre Magazine International Critics' Forum which takes place during the Dublin Theatre Festival (30 September–15 October). Bringing leading international and local critics together to discuss a wide range of productions in the second week of the festival, this year's forum will be held on **Thursday**

13 October, at Project Cube, at 5.30

p.m. Audience feedback is welcome.

Admission - and opinion - free.

Hail and farewell

ITM's board of directors pay tribute to the achievement of its out-going Editor-in-Chief, **KAREN FRICKER**



THIS ISSUE OF *ITM* IS AN IMPORTANT ONE in the history of the magazine, as it is the first in seven years not created under the watchful eye of Karen Fricker. Karen has been the engine of the magazine over the past number of years and to put it simply, it would not exist in its current form without her vision and talent.

Looking back over the various editions, they all bear the indelible mark of Karen's rigorous professionalism and her sheer enthusiasm for live performance. This sums up Karen's great gift - she approaches each production (no matter what the omens are) with a positive attitude and a willingness for it to succeed. When it does, she is generous in her praise; when it doesn't, her criticism is constructive and strives to highlight a show's achievements.

During her reign, she has also displayed a remarkable generosity to her colleagues. One of the things that I know Karen feels passionately about is the "next generation" of writers and journalists. By nurturing those around her, she leaves behind a core team of writers and contributors, whose skills have been enhanced by the depth of her knowledge and experience.

For Karen, I know that it has been a difficult decision to move on and for us too, it's going to be difficult to recognise that her editorship is at an end. We wish her every success with her future endeavours. She'll be greatly missed by all her colleagues and friends at *itm*.

CIARÁN WALSH
Chairman, *Irish Theatre Magazine*

what's news

clearly to the department". He was not in a position to explain what those issues might be.

The Arts Council may recognise the value of outside lobbying groups applying political pressure to secure adequate arts funding, but the lack of a published and agreed strategy, policy, or even framework, puts all lobbying groups in a difficult position. "If we go in [to lobby Government] it's got to be on the basis of a formal plan," says Banotti, "and this one is going to come very late. It should ideally have been out earlier in the summer."

In the meantime, Theatre Forum has commissioned a working group, headed by new board member Claudia Woolgar, to investigate the issues brought up in a position paper on touring by Jane Daly – commissioned by the Arts Council, but only nebulously covered in the draft strategy.

THE JANUARY CHILL

One of the few concrete decisions that the Arts Council has made, apparently without consultation, is already proving widely unpopular, however. Delaying revenue funding decisions until January may give the council more time to deliberate between the publication of the Book of Estimates and the allocation of company grants, but it leaves smaller organisations with little security to determine their year's programme. Planning a spring production without financial assurance may seem too risky, leading to steep competition for venue space in the autumn.

THE EMPTY SPACE

As for the goal to procure a new mid-sized performance venue for production companies, speculation is already rife that the current site of the Abbey might be redeveloped when the theatre eventually moves to its new home at George's Dock. But without a price or timeframe announced it is hard to get excited about hopes still untethered to reality. There will soon be a finished strategy (followed by further consultations in October). Now what's the plan?



HOFFMANN

IT'S A VISION THING

"Oh right, the 'no vision' comment," says Wolfgang Hoffmann wearily.

During a panel discussion at Theatre Forum's annual Conference in June, the new director of the Dublin Fringe Festival revealed to an audience that he had "no artistic vision" and the phrase has come to haunt him. Naturally it was taken completely out of context.

"It has already had some repercussions," he says. "Most of the people there said 'fair play'." But he admits that people

continued on page 10



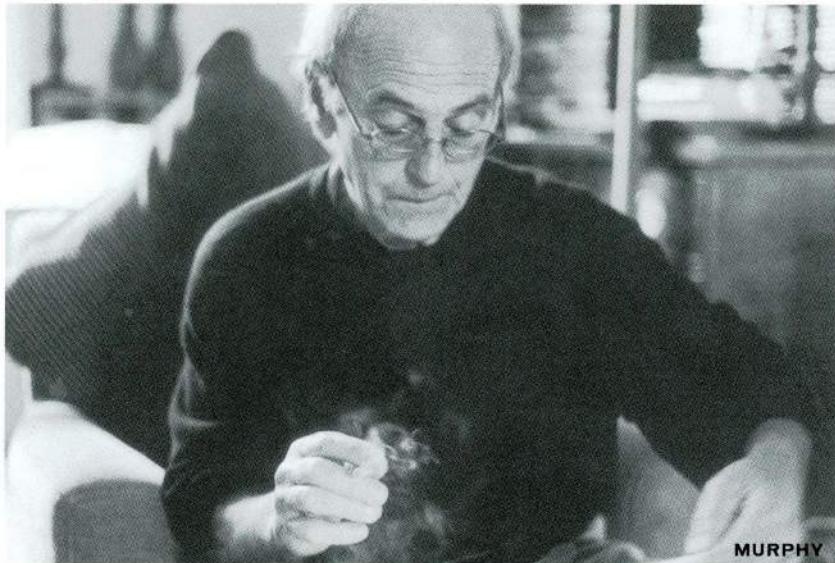
One Expensive Show?

Appearances can be deceptive. If the gargantuan nature of Pan Pan Theatre Company's daring project, *One :Healing With Theatre* - a documentary film, a large-format illustrated book (featuring actors including Neill Conroy, above) and a performance involving 100 actors - suggested a hefty price tag, the company's artistic director Gavin Quinn explained to *itm* how it was actually cost effective. "It's probably much less expensive than any show in the Gate," he says.

Paying equity rates to the 100 performers for the week of production may have cost Pan Pan in the region of €40,000 alone, but this compares easily to paying, say, six actors for a three-week performance and a six-week rehearsal period.

Costs were further amortised by sponsorship from the Railway Procurement Agency and Bank of Ireland, the use of a largely salvageable wooden set designed by Andrew Clancy, and €4,000 proceeds from a limited edition of the book, co-published with Lilliput Press (Pan Pan are just 50 copies short of breaking even on the publication). It also helped that the show sold out. "Except for one night when 17 people who bought tickets didn't show up," adds Quinn.

(One will be reviewed - by more than one critic - in the next issue of *itm*.)



MURPHY

who have heard it reported second-hand have raised eyebrows. "What I meant to say was that I don't want to put my stamp on the festival as much as I wish to work with the arts community. It's not so much that I am bringing my vision to Dublin. I

look at what's happening here and what needs to be supported and encouraged. That has to do with my subjective view, or vision, but I'm open to and dependent on what is on offer."

He wasn't surprised that the comment has come back to haunt him. "It was meant to be a little bit provocative anyway", but this will not make him more guarded in the future. "No. I'm sufficiently embarrassed every time I say something stupid. I'm not getting any wiser."

Ten minutes of fame

Beehive Theatre in Dingle, Co Kerry, is inviting playwrights to send new 10-minute plays for possible inclusion in the company's Festival of New Writing, to be held in Spring 2006. The closing date is 15 October 2005. Further information from Trish Howley at 066-9152924, email: beehivetheatre@eircom.net

LONDON CALLING

Tom Murphy has bypassed The Abbey Theatre with his new play, *Alice Trilogy*, which opens in London's Royal Court Theatre in November. This is the first of his plays to premiere in London since *A Whistle in The Dark* in 1961 and *itm* understands that it was also offered to the Royal National Theatre in London. The play was

not written under commission. According to his agent, Alexandra Cann, the finished play was offered to the Royal Court and the theatre acquired it. "It just seemed like the right time and the right play to offer up in London," says Cann, although Murphy would not comment on the significance of international opening.

Directed by Ian Rickson, the artistic director of The Royal Court, and featuring Juliet Stevenson as the eponymous Alice, the play follows the character through three stages of life.

Talking shop

Theatreshop is hosting its twelfth annual conference on September 22nd and 23rd. This two-day open encounter with international producers, programmers and presenters will take place in Liberty Hall (22nd) and the Spiegeltent (23rd). Guest speakers, one-to-one meetings and an opportunity to talk about touring will be included. (www.theatreshop.ie/conference)

Rumours abound about a possible second life for the play in Ireland next year, but as *itm* went to print, nothing could be confirmed.



Fishamble seeks a new General Manager

This exciting position offers the successful candidate a unique opportunity to strategically guide Fishamble into the next stage of its development. The successful candidate will be responsible for the overall management and administration of the company's activities, including productions of new work, training & development initiatives and national & international touring.

Applicants should be dynamic, enjoy the challenges of creating new work, have experience in Arts Administration/Producing, have proven management qualities and be able to work well under pressure in an individual and team context.

Please send a detailed C.V. and cover letter to arrive **no later than 16 September 2005** to:
The Artistic Director, Fishamble, Shamrock Chambers, 1-2 Eustace Street, Dublin 2 or
info@fishamble.com Further information on www.fishamble.com
Fishamble is funded by the Arts Council and Dublin City Council.

'Fishamble has detonated a controlled explosion of fresh talent' **FINTAN O'TOOLE**

'Fishamble puts electricity into the National grid of dreams' **SEBASTIAN BARRY**

opening nights

NEW IRISH PRODUCTIONS coming up

in the next three months – mark your diaries!

THE DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL (DTF) RUNS
FROM 30 SEPTEMBER - 15 OCTOBER.

SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE:

The DTF commission of **THE BULL** is inspired by the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, by Michael Keegan-Dolan's Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre. O'Reilly Theatre, **3-15 OCTOBER**

The Gate Theatre and DTF present **PINTER 75**, a celebration to mark the 75th birthday of Harold Pinter, including a dramatised reading by Pinter of his play *Family Voices*.

The controversial political drama **BLOODY SUNDAY: SCENES FROM THE SAVILLE INQUIRY** will be given its Irish premiere at The Abbey from 11 October.

Conall Morisson will direct **HAMLET** (*pictured above*) in a co-production between The Abbey and Belfast's Lyric Theatre, as part of the DTF's Shakespeare series, Such Sweet Thunder. This follows his current Abbey production of **THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**. **HAMLET** will transfer to the Lyric during the Belfast Festival at Queen's (**21 OCTOBER**).

IRISH PRODUCTIONS IN THE DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL (12 SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER)

INCLUDE:

Bedrock's two shows are part of its series, Urban Ghosts: **PALE ANGELS** and **SELF ACCUSATION** (**12 SEPT-17 SEPT, SS MICHAEL & JOHN (SSMJ)**

Rough Magic brings its SEEDS II pro-



gramme to the festival - three shows by its SEEDS II directors: **WOYZECK** directed by Matthew Torney (**27 SEPT-2 OCT, SSMJ**); **LILIOM** directed by Darragh Mc Keon (**27 SEPT - 2 OCT**) and **4.48 PSYCHOSIS** directed by Tom Creed (**26 SEPT - 2 OCT PROJECT CUBE**). The company also presents three play readings by the SEEDS playwrights (**01-02 Oct**).

SEMPER FI'S ADRENALIN (PICTURED RIGHT) (19 SEPT-1 OCT) IS AT A MYSTERY LOCATION - MEET ON THE STEPS OF THE CUSTOM HOUSE; COISCÉIM PRESENTS KNOTS (20-29 SEPT, SAMUEL BECKETT CENTRE).

THE BELFAST FESTIVAL AT QUEEN'S RUNS FROM 21 OCTOBER- 6 NOVEMBER. HIGH-LIGHTS INCLUDE:

THE SECRET DIARY OF ADRIAN MOLE by Sue Townsend, and **PRIVATE PEACEFUL** by Michael Murpurgo, both at Old Museum Arts Centre; **HAMLET** (see DTF above) at the Lyric Theatre; Tinderbox Theatre Company's **FAMILY PLOT**, by Daragh Carville, Queen's Studio, **3-5 NOVEMBER**

I, KEANO opens at Cork Opera House on **VERIFI**

14 SEPTEMBER and runs until **1 OCTOBER**.

Bedrock presents **SHOOTING GALLERY**, by Arthur Riordan and Des Bishop, directed by Jimmy Fay, at Andrew's Lane Theatre, from **18 OCTOBER**.

Smashing Times Theatre Company presents the Irish premiere of **THE EMPTY CHAIR** by Joe O'Byrne, **15-19 NOVEMBER** at The Space at The Helix.

The Lyric Theatre, in association with An Grianán, Letterkenny presents **THE LONESOME WEST**, by Martin McDonagh, from **16 SEPTEMBER**.

Barabbas' new show, **LUCA**, directed by Veronica Coburn, will be performed by Raymond Keane, Eoin Lynch and Amy Conroy at Project, from

3 NOVEMBER.

Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **FROZEN** by Bryony Lavery, Project Cube from **25 OCTOBER**.

Following Vassily Sigarev's **LADYBIRD**, which runs until **10 SEPTEMBER**, Focus Theatre's Eastern European Season continues with Romanian writer Gianina Carbunariu's **STOP THE TEMPO**, from **12 SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER**.

The 10th anniversary of the Town Hall Theatre, Galway will be celebrated between **12-30 SEPTEMBER** with a wide range of productions and events, including a public talk by Garry Hynes on **28 SEPTEMBER** and **OPERA THEATRE COMPANY'S** touring production of **THE CORONATION OF POPPEA** on **20 SEPTEMBER**. This opens at The Helix on **9 SEPTEMBER** and then tours.



DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL 2005

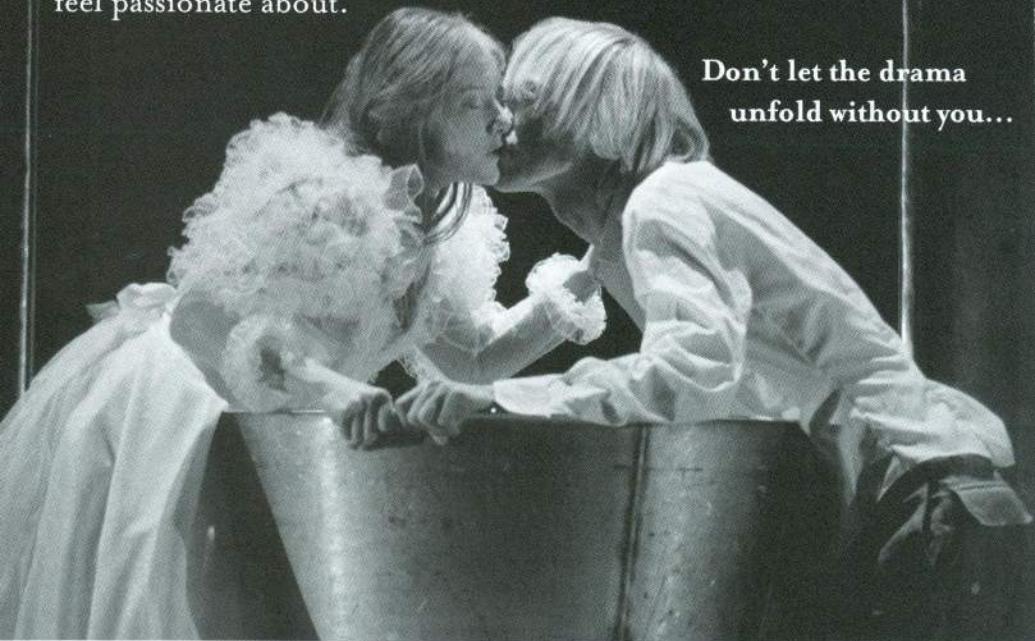
September 30th to October 15th

Get ready for another exciting Festival packed with the best international and Irish work.

Embrace it...

With three dynamic **Shakespearian** productions, one new musical creation based on the music of **Morrissey and Marr**, a new piece of dance theatre from visionary **Michael Keegan Dolan**, and the most outstanding **political theatre** you're likely to see, there's plenty to feel passionate about.

Don't let the drama
unfold without you...



BOOKINGS: **01.677 8899**

WWW.DUBLINTHEATREFESTIVAL.COM

the arts
council
scoilnálaíoch
ealaíon

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

Following its run in Project in April this year, **ROUGH MAGIC'S** *The Sugar Wife* by Elizabeth Kuti, directed by Lynne Parker is transferring to The Soho Theatre in London, from 19 January – 11 February 2006.

BIG TELLY THEATRE COMPANY tours its underwater production of *The Little Mermaid* to the Hans Christian Andersen Anniversary Festival, Denmark between 23 August and 6 September, followed by the Shanghai International Festival between 30 September and 17 October. The Company has already taken the production to the Taipei Children's Festival, Taiwan in July this year.

Pan Pan's Artistic Director **GAVIN QUINN** will direct English Touring Opera's *The Magic Flute* at Arts Depot, Finchley, London, from 14 September

Irish Actor **OWEN SHARPE**, who has previously appeared in National Theatre productions of *A Laughing Matter* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, has been cast as Pippin in *Lord of the Rings, The Musical*, which opens in February 2, 2006 at Toronto's Princess of Wales Theatre.

JAMES NESBIT, of *Cold Feet* fame, is to star in Owen McCafferty's *Shoot The Crow* at Trafalgar Studios, London in October.

crooked house theatre company short training courses

directing skills

Sept 26 - 27

devising issue based theatre

Oct 10 - 11

theatre of the oppressed

Nov 14 - 15

contact

crookedhouse@riverbank.ie 045 448309
www.crookedhouse.ie



entrances & exits

LAYLA O'MARA notes the coming and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre

The Model Arts and Niland Gallery in Sligo has recently appointed a new Director, **SARAH GLENNIE**, (pictured) who takes up her new position in September, replacing Suzanne Woods... **CIARA FLYNN** is stepping down as General Manager of Fishamble Theatre Company to study at Cambridge. The company is seeking a new General Manager and the closing date for applications is 16 September... **ALAN KING** is taking over as Artistic Director of Bewleys' Café Theatre. He replaces **MICHAEL JAMES FORD**, who will continue his long involvement with the venue by joining the board and directing productions there.

GEORGINA NEAL has been appointed as Opera Theatre Company's new Development Director... **JO EGAN**, freelance producer, takes up her new post with Kabosh Theatre Company as Creative Producer. She will be responsible for the development of creative spaces, as well as practitioner development and strategy... The Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray, Co Wicklow has appointed **LIA BRESNIHAN** as their new PR & Marketing Manager. **RACHEL HORAN**, who previously filled this position has moved to The Helix as Marketing Manager.



MARIA JOHNSTON is stepping down as Arts Programme Manager, (Production Companies) with the Arts Council. No replacement has yet been announced... **DECLAN GORMAN** is to step down as Artistic Director of Upstate Theatre, Drogheda. **JACKIE BARKER** is the new Project Manager, with Gorman becoming an Associate Director.

Irish Theatre Magazine's new Editor, journalist **HELEN MEANY**, takes up the part-time position of Curator of Critical Voices (3), the Arts Council's bi-annual programme of debate on arts, culture and ideas, which will run from February to November 2006.

SITUATIONS VACANT:

Theatre Forum is seeking a Membership and Development Officer to replace Amy O'Hanlon who is leaving to travel. (Closing date 5 September). The Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick, is seeking a Programming Director... Kilkenny Arts Festival has advertised for an Artistic Director. ... Thurles Regional Arts Centre is appointing an Artistic Project Manager... Dance Theatre of Ireland is seeking to fill two new positions: Tour and Productions Co-ordinator and Company Administrator.



Bank of Ireland



@

Bank of Ireland Arts Centre
Foster Place, Dublin 2

**Introducing the inaugural season of
amateur performance presentations
by drama students aged 12 – 25.**

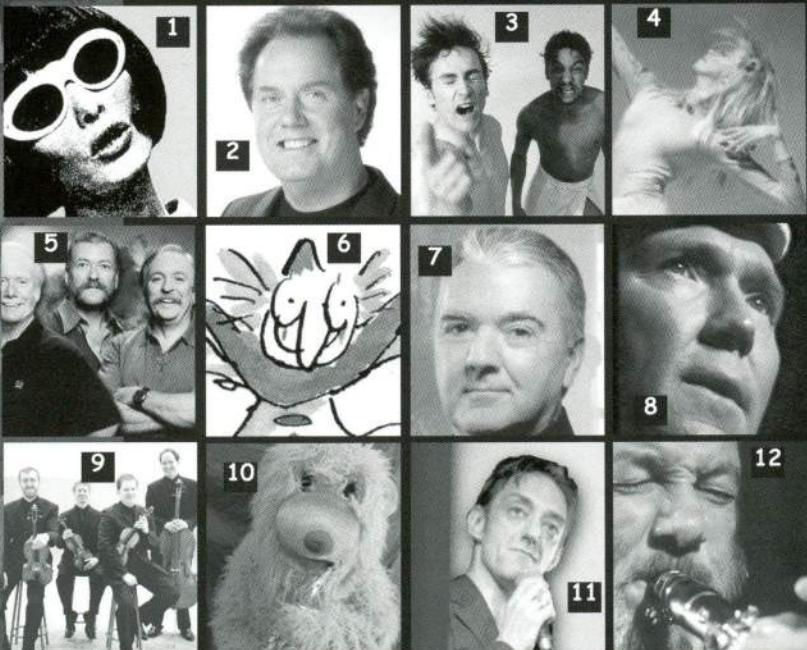
**See www.boi.ie/artscentre
for more details**

draiocht

Draiocht's Autumnal Rogues Gallery

Correctly match all the faces to names
& get **2 free tickets**
to the show of your choice!

email answers to marketing@draiocht.ie
by Friday 9 Sept 05



rte vanbrugh quartet ... liam clancy ... dermot carmody ...
teddy bears concert ... red hurley ... paddy cole ...
funny girls ... wolfe tones ... johnny mcevoy ...
the white piece ... a mid summer night's dream ... clown ...

www.draiocht.ie

tel 885 2622

Due to the lack of training and unsatisfactory working conditions of technical staff, Irish theatre is an accident waiting to happen, argues **NICK ANTON**, Technical Manager of Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise

THE FACT THAT WE HAVE HAD comparatively few serious injuries within the theatre sector is due more to good fortune than good practice. The old adage, "the show must go on" is responsible for too many cases of exhaustion to count, and with exhaustion comes shoddy work, frayed tempers and accidents. On many of the shows I have worked on, the skill level of the crew has been questionable. The lack of satisfactory training for young people interested in working in technical theatre, and the absence of infrastructure to train technicians already working within the industry are huge problems.

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one dedicated course in technical theatre within the Republic; it is assumed that doing a bit of everything, from acting to costume design, is a valid form of education.

There is currently no way, other than word of mouth, for production managers to tell whether a technician is actually up to the job. We have had no governing body, no trade association and no training facilities. I have seen some scary things being done by people who claim to be technicians, people whom I would not trust to foot a ladder for me.

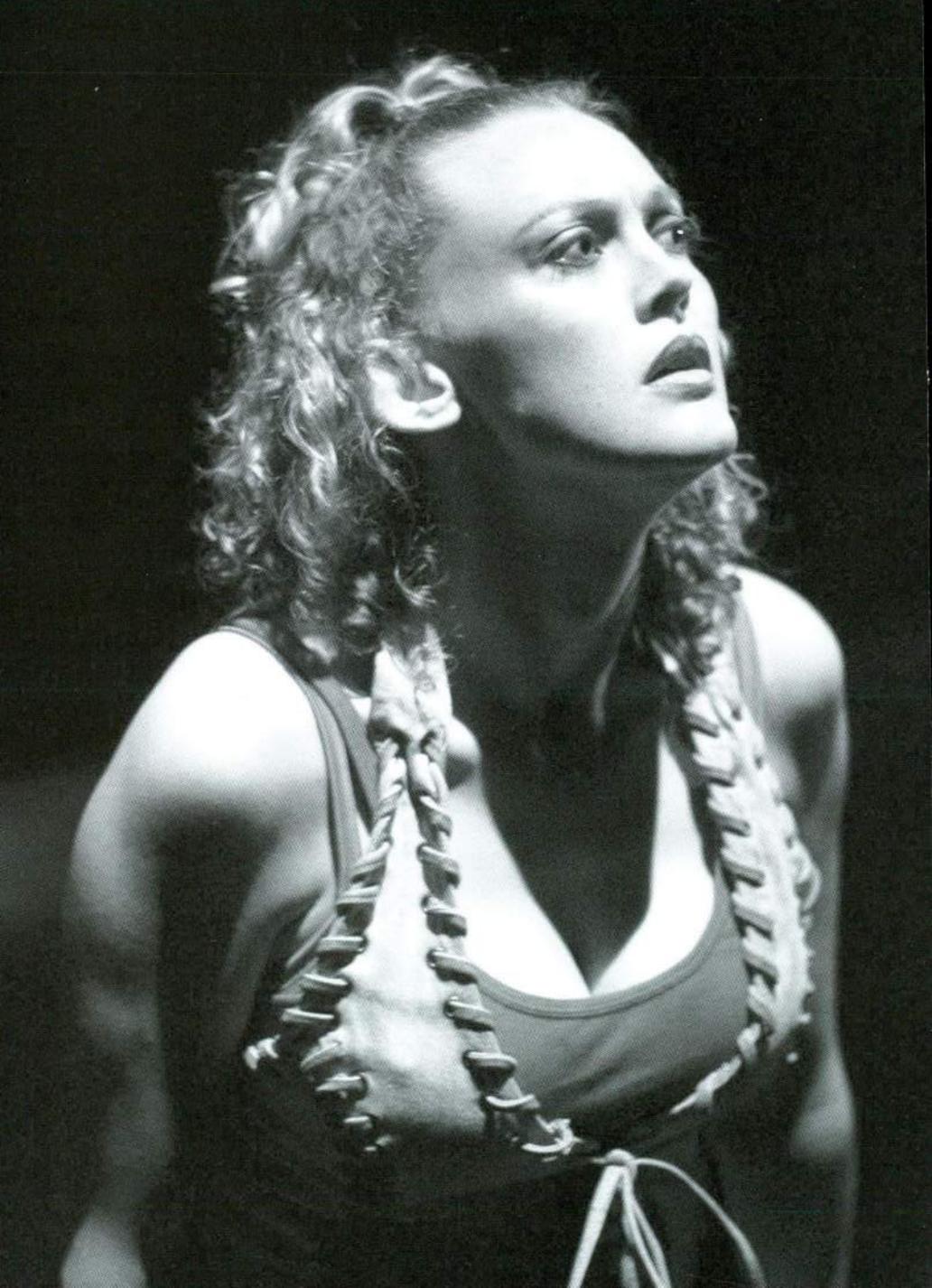
In the past two years, moves have been afoot to get our house in order and tackle

the lack of training and standards. The initiative is being led by technical practitioners and, thanks to Theatre Forum, word has spread further and small groups around the country are being pulled together. A number of courses have been organised. A working group on standardising safety statements and drawing up templates is also being put together and we have just established an Association of Irish Stage Technicians.

There is no point in spending millions of euro on beautiful buildings, with state of the art lighting and sound equipment, and then not staffing them effectively. There could be an opening for the Arts Council to directly fund and vet the technical staff in receiving houses to ensure a good standard. I would also call on the Arts Council to provide funding for ongoing training for technical staff in venues. As with all art forms using technology, theatre moves fast and it costs money to keep people abreast of developments. It is unfortunate that, considering all the public money that has been spent, in too many of our venues you might as well be in the parish hall.

(This is an edited version of a paper delivered at the Theatre Forum conference in June. For information on the newly formed Association of Irish Stage Technicians see www.theatreforum.ie)





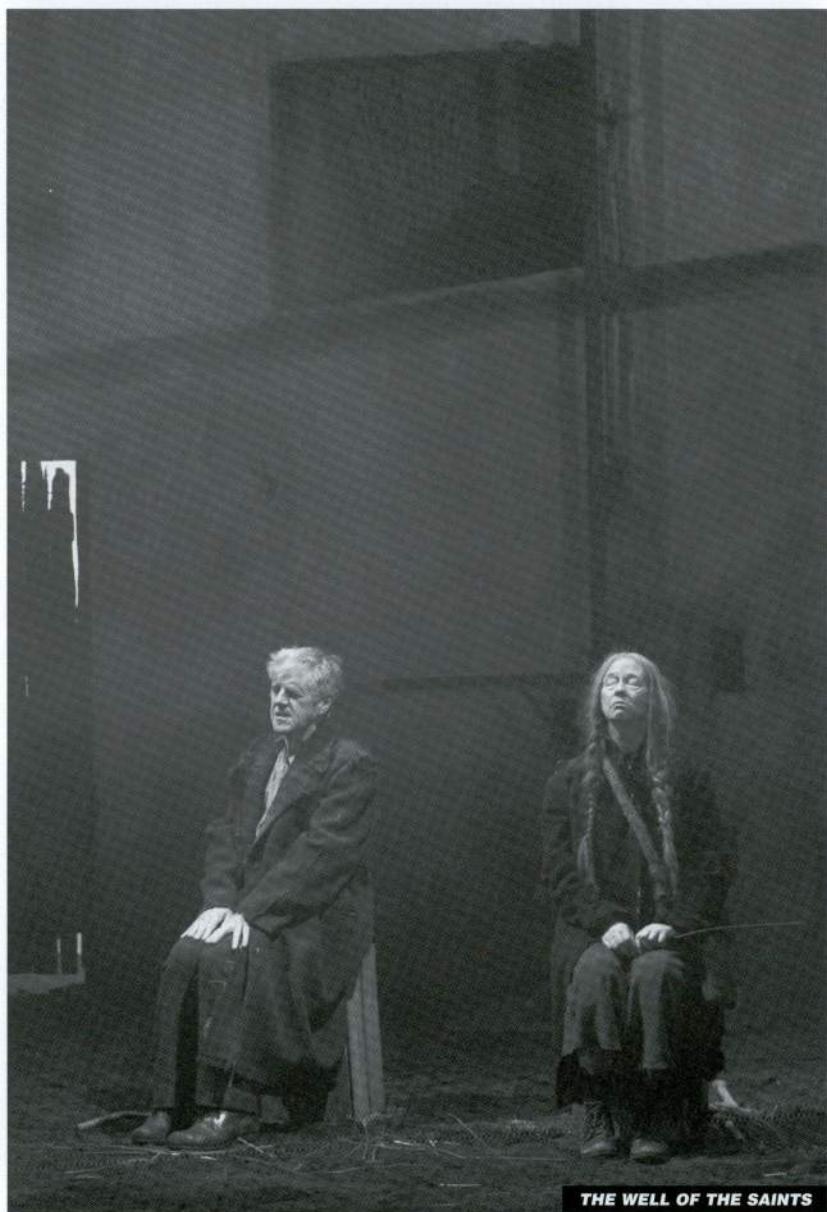
Expanding the Cottage Walls

THE SCALE AND AMBITION OF DruidSynge ensured that it was a major theatrical event even before it existed. So, having dazzled the critics and confirmed Garry Hynes' brilliance as a director, what has it conveyed about Synge's achievement and continued importance?

KAREN FRICKER asks why we now shy away from the politics of class and power inherent in his writing. **PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEITH PATTISON**

T IS "A TRIUMPH," ACCORDING TO *THE CONNAUGHT Tribune*. *The Examiner* gave it five stars. Emer O'Kelly in *The Sunday Independent* imagined it as a "chariot of dramatic fire" and "a spinning sun in the theatrical heavens." Michael Billington declared punningly in *The Guardian* that it is quite impossible to "have too much of a good Synge." And Fintan O'Toole, in *The Irish Times*, proclaimed DruidSynge "one of the most important events in the history of Irish theatre."

There is indeed much to admire about DruidSynge: superb production values and performances, including dazzling work from Aaron Monaghan, Eamon Morrissey, and particularly Marie Mullen; on the full cycle days, an astute ordering of the plays that showed off the virtuosity of the cast and creative team; and a *Playboy* that may finally relieve from Garry Hynes and Druid's own 1982 version the burden of being considered "definitive." The level of ecstatic critical uniformity generated by DruidSynge doesn't come along very often; nor, indeed, does a theatrical project as ambitious and impressive. But on a deeper level one has to ask what, exactly, are we all praising. More substantiative arguments as to DruidSynge's merits (or indeed, flaws) have been thin on the ground. Part of the reason lies in the nature of the project itself: Druid has very effectively conjured a sense of necessity, even inevitability, around the enterprise of staging Synge's tragically abbreviated canon. The idea, however, is not beyond contestation: there is no rule that says that the complete works of any writer need to be compiled and presented together. But Druid's capacity to execute the project on an appropriate scale and with adequate resources doubtless relied on the concept of doing them all: it had to be frameable as something rare and once-in-a-lifetime. And so, DruidSynge became a major theatrical event even before it existed: all aspects of production, press, and marketing have been skillfully marshalled to present a coherent, unified, and attractive theatrical product, including a tribute book edited by



THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

EXPANDING THE COTTAGE WALLS

Colm Tóibín, dedicated website, educational activities, and productions of the plays interconnected by casting and design elements and sometimes performed in a single day.

All of this adds up to something of a monolith, so that high praise becomes a foregone conclusion. It also focuses critical attention on the first half of the neologism "DruidSynge" – on the contribution of Druid, and in particular of Garry Hynes herself, in bringing these somewhat disparate plays together as a comprehensive performance unit. Where Synge is in all this, and what a restaging of all of his works at this particular historical moment might tell us about his achievement and his continued importance, have been left out of most critical assessments. The initial response of some wags after the world premiere Synge cycle day at Galway's Town Hall Theatre was to wonder whether it was really necessary to go to such lengths to prove what we knew all along: that Synge wrote one great play. This is overly cynical – yes, *The Playboy of the Western World* has been affirmed yet again, in Hynes' raw, fast, and emotionally enveloping staging, as a work of enduring vitality and importance, but DruidSynge argues for the greatness of some other of Synge's plays, in particular *Riders to the Sea*.

But it is undoubtedly the case that not all of these plays are equally good, and that several of them seem necessarily tied to the specific time and place in which they were written. *The Well of the Saints* and *The Shadow of the Glen* simply don't have the capacity to shock that they used to, and while they offer great opportunities for lively staging and performance, which were largely grasped here, the effect of seeing them performed had something of an educational effect: we've done these now, we've ticked them off. The Beckettian aspects and the anticlerical satire of *Well* were well accounted for in the DruidSynge production, but one was also reminded of how talky and overextended the play gets in its midsection; surely a little textual trimming would not have gone amiss?

It was hard to tell in performance whether Hynes was trying to play *Shadow* against its expected comic grain, or whether this effect came through because of the apparent uncertainty of the actors, Mick Lally in particular. But by not playing up the surprise value of the husband's "rebirth," the play felt like a damp squib: I was left with the impression that there is probably only one effective way to perform the play – as sharp, dark satire — and we'd not seen it.

One of the greatest unexpected rewards of DruidSynge has been the opportunity to observe the creative progress of Hynes and her collaborators as they grapple with exactly the questions that I am trying to confront here, about the changing

Where Synge
is in all this,
and what a
restaging of all
of his works at
this particular
historical
moment might
tell us about his
achievement
and his
continued
importance,
have been
left out of
most critical
assessments



THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

meaning and relevance of Synge's plays over time. Because Druid produced three of the six plays separately last year before presenting them together as DruidSynge, we have been able to observe Hynes actively at work, honing and refining her approach and changing her casting and interpretation sometimes quite radically, and in ways that show her to be acutely in tune with the responses of audiences and critics, and to the different qualities and energies that new actors bring to a production. In last year's *Playboy*, for example, Aisling O'Sullivan's hilarious, carnal performance as the Widow Quin skewed the play in her character's direction; with the stronger, earthier presences of Monaghan and Catherine Walsh as Christy and Pegeen in the revised version (replacing Cillian Murphy and Ann-Marie Duff), and Mullen replacing O'Sullivan as a more restrained, but more emotionally compelling Quin, the play felt in much greater balance. I did not see

last year's *Well of the Saints*, but understand that the replacement of Lally with Morrissey as Martin Doul added a firmness and consistency that was lacking the first time around.

Once again,
and now in the
present day,
Ireland is
represented at
home and
abroad by
historical visions
of a rough and
robust peasantry
to audiences
who are, most
likely, not of the
classes they are
seeing depicted

In particular, Hynes' revisions to her production of *The Tinker's Wedding* over the past year have been considerable, and steer us directly into the area of Synge's writing that has most troubled past commentators, but which has been disturbingly absent from discussion of DruidSynge: the cultural politics of his representations. In an essay in the volume edited by Tóibín, *Synge: A Celebration*, Anthony Cronin usefully recaps the terms of these debates, even as he dismisses them as "dready quarrels": ever since Synge wrote, he has been accused of romanticising the peasant life he depicted, especially since he was hardly a peasant himself, but the scion of Protestant landowners. To some, Synge's plays have always been an indulgence in stage-Irishry, while others argue that he is covered by the rules of artistic license to interpret what he observed on the Aran Islands and in Wicklow, and that to dwell on the idealisations in his representation of social under-classes is to joylessly miss the point of his boisterous, irreverent achievement, which was to represent back to official Ireland what it did not, at the time, acknowledge were essential parts of the country's fabric – poverty, sexuality, anti-clericalism.

The latter part of that argument makes a lot of sense historically, but the larger point, of course, is that times and situations have changed. Fintan O'Toole also offers an essay in the Tóibín book, in which he makes a typically passionate argument for the importance of Druid's early productions of Synge in the late 1970s and early '80s. These were significant, he says, because they captured and interrogated the "public mood" during a time of cultural transition, when the old shibboleths of Irishness were breaking down and new sexual, social, and economic realities intruding. If we accept this compelling argument, the issue naturally arises of the cultural moment into which DruidSynge is speaking. And what does it say about the "public mood" of the present day that we seem much more eager to lionise Hynes and pay lip-service to Synge's greatness than really engage with the politics of class and power inherent in his representations? Five of Synge's six plays are explicitly and exclusively set among the peasant classes; even in the sixth, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, which ostensibly involves Celtic myth, Synge couldn't help but insert a peasant character, a point Hynes underlines in her production here.

DruidSynge is an inherently high-end cultural activity, playing at established Irish venues and then headlining one of the world's



DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

most elite arts events, the Edinburgh International Festival. Once again, and now in the present day, Ireland is represented at home and abroad by historical visions of a rough and robust peasantry, to audiences who are most likely not of the classes they are seeing depicted. This is arguably a strand of theatrical Orientalism – peasants as an exotic “other” being performed for the entertainment and diversion of the more civilised. To me, what isn’t being said about DruidSynge indicates a profound lack of a shared discourse around issues of power, class, and representation in today’s Ireland.

To me,
what isn’t being
said about
DruidSynge
indicates a
profound lack
of a shared
discourse
around issues of
power, class and
representation in
today’s Ireland.

I’m being purposely provocative here – and so, it seems, is Hynes, in her staging of *The Tinker’s Wedding*, and the ways in which that staging has changed. Last year, she set the play sometime mid-20th century, which did not go down very well: critics were sceptical – Helen Meany, writing in *The Guardian* found it “twee” and wondered if this was to historicise and romanticise its depiction of tinkers. Fearlessly – perhaps recklessly – Hynes has now changed her interpretation, and gave us Simone Kirby, Aaron Monaghan, and Marie Mullen done up unmistakably as contemporary travellers, fulfilling every stereotype that still persists about traveller culture – that they are slovenly, drunken, loud, conniving, and disrespectful of authority and cultural norms. The larger point of the play remains Synge’s stinging commentary on the venal hypocrisy of the church – and indeed, seeing a screaming priest tied up in a sack retains a visceral power, particularly when that priest is played by the brilliantly robust Morrissey. And Synge’s larger irony – that Sarah Casey does not fulfil the traveller stereotype and has, in her particular way, all the moral fibre that the priest lacks, comes through clearly in Kirby’s wonderfully gutsy performance. But still, I found it discomforting to sit amongst a contemporary, cosmopolitan audience laughing at travellers, given that the problems of bias against travellers and their living conditions persist in Ireland today. Given her commitment to all of Synge’s oeuvre, Hynes simply had to present this play in DruidSynge, and her approach seems to have been to steer directly and unapologetically into the fray of political incorrectness. I understand the logic – but I still protest the stereotypes. A framing device or some other form of directorial commentary would not have gone amiss, to acknowledge and distance the production from the stereotypes it replicated.

Given the political and artistic questions raised by of some of the plays, then, Hynes’ approach – to suggest through DruidSynge a meta-story about the playwright and his sadly premature death – makes canny sense. Our attention was drawn away from the sometimes dodgy contemporary mes-



THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD



RIDERS TO THE SEA

EXPANDING THE COTTAGE WALLS

For me, it was
more than just
DruidSynge
that was being
ruptured
when Francis
O'Connor's set
collapsed.
Seeing her
long-held dream
of staging the
Synge canon
fulfilled,
is Hynes
perhaps
signalling a
larger finish -
the end
of the country
kitchens?

sages sent by the play's characters and themes, and towards the safer (and less contestable) area of Synge's sad biography. Seen consecutively on the same day, the plays trace a moving narrative of a Synge haunted by mortality, primarily via the powerful theatrical symbol of a pair of white boards propped against the back wall of the set, which in the text of *Riders to the Sea*, the first play presented, are to become a coffin for Michael when his body is recovered. The boards remain on stage in the same position throughout the plays, and are only displaced in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, which Hynes transforms into a requiem for Synge via some spectacular theatrics, most significantly the controlled explosion of Francis O'Connor's single unit set, which up to this point has provided a reassuring sense of continuity to all the plays. When O'Connor's set bursts open and then elevates several yards above the stage, making way for female mourners who also featured in *Riders*, this becomes a climactic gesture for the day as a whole: we realise they are keening not just for Naisi and his brothers, but for Synge himself, and the sad, romantic imperfection of his final, unfinished play – and life. Given how clearly Hynes' direction makes this point, having a child actor appear on stage with Synge's portrait seems an oddly mawkish gesture, which blocks some of the other potential meanings of this very dramatic finale.

For me, it was more than just DruidSynge that was being represented and ruptured when O'Connor's set collapsed. That same country setting of three rough walls, wooden doors, and jagged windows has been a consistent background not just for Hynes' productions of Synge, but for most of her substantial work of the last eight years – the revelatory productions of McDonagh, her heroic recovery of J.B. Keane. The set's presence underlined the Druid part of DruidSynge, reminding us that, even when the plays headed off into strange or difficult directions, there was a larger and controlling theatrical framework to recover and attempt to contain those errant meanings. Now, seeing her long-held dream of staging the Synge canon fulfilled, is Hynes perhaps signalling a larger finish — the end of the country kitchens? There is no doubt that DruidSynge has confirmed her position as our most potent and skillfull stager of plays; now, we await what is next for her and Druid, and hope that her future provocations will be met with the debate they deserve. 

Karen Fricker writes about theatre for The Guardian and is a researcher at the Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin.

FRINGE TICKLES PINK

Brand New presents **Dublin Heads** by Shay Linehan Mon 12—Sat 24 Sep > 6:15pm

Venue Bewleys Café Theatre **Tickets** €10/€12.50/€15

THEATRE: A riveting show of monologues about the lives of different Dubliners.

Lonesome Crowd Theatre Company presents **Propelled Upright** by Darren O'Donoghue Mon 12—Sat 17 Sept > 7pm

Venue Andrews Lane Studio **Tickets** €6/€8

THEATRE: Abandoned in a landscape of objects, a woman struggles for her place.

Earthfall presents **At Swim Two Boys** Tue 13—Sat 17 Sept > 8pm **Matinée** Sat 17 Sept > 1pm

Venue Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College **Tickets** €10/€14/€16

DANCE: Love affair between two young men set against political turmoil in Ireland.

Siamsa Tíre – The National Folk Theatre of Ireland presents **rEVOLUTION** Wed 14—Sat 17 Sept > 1:15pm

Venue Round Room, Mansion House **Tickets** €6/€8

DANCE: Irish dance goes contemporary with its head held high.

Fallen Angels present **The Fallen Angels Cabaret** Wed 14 September > 9pm

Venue Spiegeltent **Tickets** €17

MUSIC: An evening of cabaret and comedy on the raw, subversive side of respectability.

Attic Studio presents **Spoofed** Mon 19—Sat 24 Sept > 6pm

Venue T36, The Teachers' Club **Tickets** €10/€12.50/€15

THEATRE: A hysterical, energetic and witty improvisational look into the acting process.

Attic Studio presents **Womb** Mon 19—Sat 24 Sept > 6:15pm

Venue Andrews Lane Studio **Tickets** €10/€12.50/€15

THEATRE: Raw, hilarious and honest, exposing the dark underbelly of opiate addiction.

Tardy Lasso Productions present **Getting Attention** by Martin Crimp Mon 19—Sat 24 Sept > 9pm

Venue Players Theatre, Trinity College **Tickets** €10/€12.50/€15

THEATRE: A gritty, disturbing minimalist drama.

Coiscéim Dance Theatre presents **Knots** Tue 20—Thu 29 Sept > 8pm

Venue Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College **Tickets** €10/€12/€18

DANCE: Extreme text-meets-dance exploring thin line between love and madness.

Beehive Theatre Company presents **3 Plays: Butterfly Fairy** by Mike Venner;

Spiked by David Mc Call & **Bookworms** by Mike Venner Mon 26 Sept—Sat 01 Oct > 1:10pm & 6:30pm

Venue Players Theatre, Trinity College **Tickets** €8/€10

THEATRE: Three super-short audience favourites from Dingle.

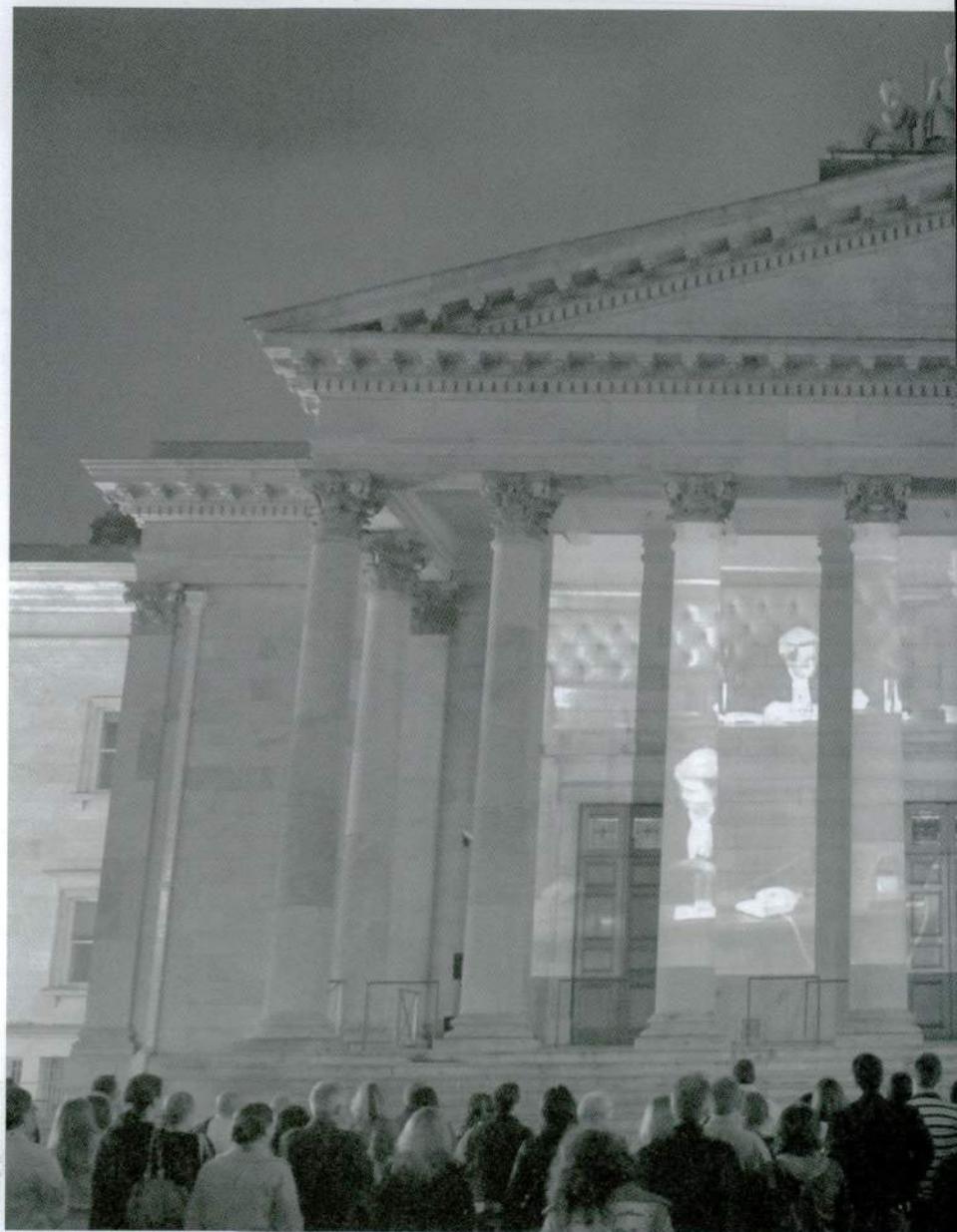
Bridgman/Packer Dance NYC presents **Under The Skin** Thurs 29 Sept—Sat 01 Oct > 6:15pm **Matinée** Sat 01 Oct > 2pm

Venue Project Upstairs **Tickets** €10/€14/€16

DANCE: Riveting dance theatre from New York. "Spectacular...funny...magical" – New York Times.



Book by phone on
1850 FRINGE (1850 374643)
or online at www.fringefest.com



The Word on the Street

The highlight of Cork's Midsummer Festival was **RELOCATION**, a series of free, site-specific productions programmed by the city's native open-air fiends, Corcadorca. **LYNDA RADLEY** took to the barricades to watch theatre being brought out to its audience.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MICHAEL SWEENEY/PROVISION



PUBLIC TRIAL:
Audiences get their pound of flesh at The Merchant of Venice

SUMMER IS HIGH-SEASON FOR CULTURE IN CORK, due in part to the off-site work Corcadorka has produced over the last ten years. Central to the company's success is its ability to connect with an audience through evocative spaces in the city and surrounds. *A Clockwork Orange* was originally produced in the now-defunct Sir Henry's nightclub, site of many evenings of teenage angst. Conal Creedon's *The Trial of Jesus* transformed St Patrick's Hill into a believable Calvary on Good Friday, 2000. Last summer a warehouse at the site of the old Dunlop and Ford factories was adapted to Raymond Scannell's play about the failure of Cork's motor industry: *Losing Steam*.

It sometimes seems that to get people to experience theatre you have to take the theatre building out of the experience. Taking its cue from the work of other off-site practitioners, and learning from experience, Corcadorka has built a remarkably strong reputation, as evidenced by the popularity of its offering in the Relocation festival: *The Merchant of Venice* (reviewed on page 79) In Cork, where playhouses are often half-empty, there is a demand for theatre in non-traditional venues - a fact which the Cork 2005 (European Capital of Culture) administration recognised in its decision to commission Relocation, marketed as "the most ambitious theatre event in the history of Ireland". While this claim may be disputed, what is certain is that Relocation was a valuable showcase of quality, international, off-site production - the type of work that inspired Corcadorka to embrace the form. While off-site work seems popular with audiences and, when offered free of charge, is accessible and inclusive, it is also difficult to get right. So, from my perspective as a young theatre practitioner, this opportunity to learn from the work of three lauded European experts was not to be missed.

Teatr Biuro Podrózy (Travel Agency Theatre) from Poland brought an adaptation of *Macbeth* entitled *What Bloodied Man Is That?* to the foreground of Collins' Barracks. Directed by Paweł Szkotak, the piece took place after nightfall with the stone-built barrack walls forming an appropriate backdrop to an exploration of the cyclical nature of power politics. One of the principle lessons to be learned from this company derives from its capacity to make meaningful spectacle out of a few key production elements, repeatedly and simply employed to cumula-



tive effect. The witches were made remarkably eerie through the use of veils, stark black costumes and skilled, other-worldly stilt-walking. Motorbikes, side-cars, leather jackets and handguns contributed to a Second World War aesthetic which linked the themes of the play to Eastern Europe's brutal political past. A crown of bullets passed from ruler to ruler, later becoming the plaything of a beautifully-played Fleance; as an emblem of totalitarian rule it was simple but affecting. The action was underscored by live singing and the overall starkness of the set focused our attention on the disturbing themes, superbly summed-up in the closing image where Fleance rescued Macbeth's crown from the still-smouldering ashes of his castle.

From the audience's perspective, *What Bloody Man Is That?* was a stationary, if intimate, off-site experience. Standing on three sides behind waist-high metal fences, we were positioned in proximity to the action and the set-up had a market-square atmosphere. The use of actual barriers (obvious health and safety requirements) created a tangible 'fourth wall'. Rather than presenting a difficulty, this dissection of the space was in keeping with the atmosphere of the production, which sought to present the company's physical and visual interpretation of the text rather than to implicate the spectators in the action, as

THE SHADOW OF ANTI-SEMITISM

*Jerzy Gralek as
Shylock in The
Merchant of Venice*

is frequently the case in outdoor performance.

This is a piece which could, with a few adjustments, operate in a traditional theatre space. Yet, it would then lose its essential nature, which is that of 'meeting' theatre: a piece of work which is brought to an audience and which challenges us to bear witness to its message and to recognise its relevance. However, in this physical rendition of Shakespeare's work, fidelity to the *Macbeth* text presented problems. The acting lost its momentum as the actors struggled with radio mikes and a language not their own. I wondered if the sections of spoken text would not have been more powerful if presented in Polish or, if the occasional textual elements were needed at all.

Almost immediately we were soaked by water cannon, reminding us that we were about to have a sensory experience and underlining the fact that we were no longer in charge - it was best just to give ourselves up to the event.

By contrast *Victor Frankenstein* by Compagnie Jo Bithume of France was a huge-scale piece of street-theatre, performed on Cork's Grand Parade to audiences of thousands. A non-verbal version of a literary text - the company presents Mary Shelley's novel faithfully - this pantomime-like production revolved around an impressive set comprising stationary and moving stages, excellent physical performances, mask work, a playful original score performed live by a two-man band, slick video projections and other technology. Suitable for all ages, this was theatre *as* and *in* social space, stirring a great sense of occasion among the crowd.

The company designed their work to provoke an embodied experience in the audience-member. Almost immediately we were soaked by water cannon, reminding us that we were about to have a sensory experience, forging our group dynamic and underlining that we were no longer in charge; best just to give ourselves up to the event. Compagnie Jo Bithume sought and received a level of commitment from their audience, who had to move together to get out of the way of fast-approaching set pieces or to allow actors to travel through the space. We moved because we had to, but this was not distracting. It focused our attention and contributed to a palpable sense of a shared experience.

Yet, considering the technical expertise which went into the making of this vast work, I was distracted and disappointed by the fact that the height of some of the stages, when combined with the distance from the audience, made it impossible to see. Disregard for the perfect sightline is part of the outdoor experience and one fully expects to have to move about to find the best vantage point but, in this instance, no matter where I put myself, I missed chunks of the performance - sections large enough to remind me that I was wet, cold and footsore - making it more difficult to tune back in once it was possible to see the action again. Despite that reservation, this French company are vastly experienced in presenting street theatre. Their employment of video



**TECHNICAL
EXPERTISE:**

*Compagnie Jo
Bithume's Victor
Frankenstein (top)
and Teatr Biuro
Podrozy's What
Bloodied Man is
That?*



projection as an aid to telling a complicated story in outdoor performance was impressive. The style of acting they have hit upon - incorporating impressive ensemble work and *commedia dell'arte* technique - is perfectly suited to the task of communicating to large crowds. They know how to wow an audience but, while *Victor Frankenstein* was an exciting and generally impressive experience, it has not stayed with me.

In contrast, I am haunted by images of food since seeing Grid Iron's *The Devil's Larder*: by far the best executed of the Relocation productions. In a run-down building which once functioned as a morgue, this Scottish company delivered a masterclass in how to truly integrate performance space and theatrical meaning. Adapted from Jim Crace's evocative novel, this exploration of food, its associations, social functions and visceral delights was split into seventeen sections. Four actors played a myriad of characters in an impressive display of range and focus. They were aided by the rich language of the text and the superb lighting, sound and costume design, which deftly and unobtrusively contributed to the experience, enabling many shifts in tone. The use of music - composed and sung by David Paul Jones and played by Catriona McKay on harp - exemplifies how this piece was conceived as a total theatre experience. Not confined to the sidelines, the musicians became powerful presences in the work: costumed, playing characters, engaging with the audience and pointing to a true convergence of art forms rather than the lashing of one to another.

Grid Iron knows how to use a building. Old hands at what they call "on location" work, they recognise the potential in every nook and cranny, add only what is required and use what they discover on-site in imaginative ways. The key to Ben Harrison and Judith Doherty's ability seems to lie in the integration of three elements: they know what they want to say and how they want those themes expressed; they have thought through how to place the action in the site to maximum possible effect; they have fully considered how to move their audience through the site. As an audience-member you are aware that during every moment of the work's design your point of view has been considered. Imagine the delight in being led into a room that you have already been in earlier that evening, and realising that, somehow, it has been carpeted with grass...

The episodic nature of the piece was reflected perfectly in the manner in which we were led up and down stairs, through narrow corridors and in and out of the building. Harrison, who directed the piece and adapted the text, notes that the piece reflects only "17 chapters of the 64 in the book". On our travels through the space we sometimes passed by rooms with doors

continued on page 40

Grid Iron
recognises the
potential in
every nook and
cranny. Imagine
the delight in
being led into a
room that you
have already
been in earlier
that evening and
realising that
somehow it has
been carpeted
with grass.

Grid Iron Up Close

RACHEL
ANDREWS
takes notes
from the
site-specific
experts

"WHY GO BACK INTO THE THEATRE WHEN YOU can use the city?" asks Grid Iron's Ben Harrison. During a discussion on site-specific theatre held at the Theatre Forum's annual conference in Cork in June, Harrison was one of a selection of speakers asked to articulate their perception of the value of site-specific work. Director of one of the most recognised companies in this field, with at least fourteen awards to its name, he had a clear vision.

The choice of location can say almost as much as the performed show: "The political resonances of spaces are interesting", he said, explaining how the company once chose to do a piece in an abandoned hotel and shopping centre in Beirut. "Scenes have different resonances, depending on where you place them in the world and against what backdrop."

Grid Iron has been working with site-specific theatre for about ten years. Although the company weaves in and out of mainstream theatre spaces, sometimes using theatre buildings in promenade style, it has built up a reputation for exploring the possibilities inherent in unusual spaces.

This means shifting between the large-scale and the intimate. Although many of us assume that site-specific work has to be big and dramatic, Harrison insists it can also harness the immediate and personal possibilities of the theatrical experience. "It's important to make a distinction between spectacular shows and intimate spectacle. The notion of close up is also important."

Grid Iron's show in Cork, *The Devil's Larder*, was a study in close-up. Performed in the city morgue, attendances were limited to twenty per show. Audiences were confronted by one-on-one interaction, with actors no more than five feet away singling out one or two individuals and holding their eye, while the performers also found themselves challenged, without any crutches.

"There is nowhere to hide when you are acting on location," says Harrison. "Acting is in 360 degrees in a location space. There has to be a heightened sense of reality."



THE DEVIL'S LARDER



**PROMENADING
ON HOME
GROUND:**

Corcadorca's The Merchant of Venice
(review: page 79)

slightly ajar from which we could hear music played. Contributing to the sense of play, those moments served as reminders of the stories not told, which, Grid Iron seem to say, could well be happening in the spaces the audience doesn't see. Even absences were made present in this way. As the last piece performed, Grid Iron's work brought Relocation to a triumphant end.

The huge popularity of all these events has certainly confirmed that Irish audiences are eager to explore the theatrical possibilities of a transformed city. With regard to the project's artistic legacy, it is worth noting that this year's Midsummer Festival was an unprecedented triumph and that its programme contained a number of small-scale, home-grown, off-site and site-specific events in addition to *The Merchant of Venice*. These included Hammergrin's hilarious *Trying Jokes*, Playgroup's promenade look at the rich past of The Everyman Palace Theatre in *Dark Week*, and Crux Dance Theatre's *The Beach Project*.

Corcadorca's Relocation project points to the continued value of investing in companies willing to explore the audience/space dynamic. It also shows that there is much to be gained by encouraging companies from abroad into a dialogue with the city, its spaces, its citizens and its theatre practitioners. If the Cork 2005 administration can manage to harness this summer's re-invigoration of interest in culture due to the convergence of the Midsummer Festival and the Relocation project, then maybe a capital of culture that came in with a whimper might go out with a bang... Here's hoping.



Lynda Radley is a writer and performer based in Cork. She has an M.A. in Theatre from Royal Holloway, University of London.

Eye dee dee deedle eye
Eye die die dee-dee-dum
Doo Doo Doo Dooby Do
Da da da dum da dum

Dee dee dee deedle-do
Eye tie di doodle dum
La la la ha-ha-ha
La la ti pom pom pom

La eye ti mo-beel
La hee ta hoo hah
Oo-bey doo-bey tee haaaaaaaaaaay!!
Dydle dee dum dum

Oh yeah! yeah yeah!
Dydle-dee dum dum

**"LA DONNA È MOBILE"
FROM VERDI'S RIGOLETTO**

As performed in his bath by Brendan Dolan in Navan after hearing it on RTÉ lyric fm.

You hum it, we play it.

RTE lyric fm

96 - 99fm www.rte.ie/lyricfm

Home Truths

In this book reviews special feature, **THOMAS CONWAY** examines two new publications that look at Ireland's arts practitioners from illuminating perspectives – local and international.

THE EVIDENCE PUT FORWARD IN THE first of these two new books, *An Outburst of Frankness*, suggests that the boundaries of community arts on these islands seem unstable – and the volume seems to reflect a struggle with definitions and perceptions. Its editor, Sandy Fitzgerald, attempts to give his book a three-part structure – history, theory, practice. He bookends it with transcripts of a “historical forum” and a “contemporary forum” on community arts from October 2003, and concludes with a chronology. In truth, the structure is loose: the historical essays prove tangential; the theoretical essays are in effect surveys of policy and funding; and the empirical discussions prove by far the most concerned with theory. The two framing discussions show not fractiousness but vigorous debate.

**AN OUTBURST OF
FRANKNESS: COMMUNITY
ARTS IN IRELAND – A READER**

Edited by Sandy Fitzgerald

Dublin: tasc at
New Island Books, 2004

**IRISH THEATRE ON TOUR:
IRISH THEATRICAL DIASPORA**

SERIES: 1

**Edited by Nicholas Grene
and Chris Morash**

Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005

What constitutes community arts? This is a vexed question, particularly for contributors from the Republic, but less so for those from the north (these are, in each case, key players – artists, advocates and policy advisors – in community arts on this island). In each forum discussion, we hear that it is futile and undesirable to arrive at a fixed definition. “Community arts” itself proves unstable, with many contributors from the Republic dissatisfied with the title. In the most recent Arts Plan, it had migrated to “participatory arts”. “Participation” is indeed the touchstone for all the contributors. But policy-makers make reference to “cultural democracy” and artists to “collaborative art”, or “socially engaged art”. We discover in this volume that community arts have known a continuity of practice in

Ireland for thirty years or so. It has evidently yet to settle.

A tension exists in the term "community arts" – "community" pointing to the social dividend and "arts" to the artistic dividend – which sets up oppositions in the south. Funders pull strongly in one or other of these directions. And you do get the sense that, so long as "community" and "arts" are set at odds, things will continue to be unsettled. The voices from the south show the frustration of being held back. The establishment is variously threatened by or disposed towards community arts, with results that are either inspired or which occasion a standoff. Contributors find themselves having to "re-invent the wheel" each time they begin a new project. The funding climate is unreliable and crowded with agendas that tend to cancel each other out. Voices here accuse the Arts Council of failing to give leadership (indeed, I'm at a loss as to why a key recommendation from the ACE report, 1989, by Ciarán Benson, that the Arts Council lead the effort to co-ordinate funding structures, has yet to be implemented: incoherent funding structures, more than anything, distort practice here).

Northern Ireland presents a different case history insofar as the interested parties have agreed on a working definition: "access, authorship, participation and ownership". Funding inadequacies still prevail, but funders and practitioners at least have a common language. The climate is not as sanguine as this implies, however: community arts are still well down the priority list when it comes to Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) funds.

Core values do emerge across the

spectrum of contributors, and these revolve around ideas of recognition, validation, and change. A consistent model of best practice also shows its outlines. Ailbhe Murphy summarises simply her experiences of collaborations involving a team of artists including herself, the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), and groups from the Family Resource Centre, St Michael's Estate, Inchicore: "We tested each other and learned a lot from each other." Indeed, she suggests what elicits best practice, which may be summarised as follows: initial negotiations "largely determine" what comes after. But first the artist must establish her responsibilities in order to be responsive from within that framework. A strong organisational framework must also exist at community level.

An Outburst of Frankness in part articulates the need for a supportive environment and a frame of reference for community arts, and in part provides it. The field of community arts here is asserting how it is to be read – as an area of artistic endeavour unto itself, with autonomous lines of legitimacy, where good practice holds in equal tension "community" and "arts". It is telling critics, not least those of us in *irish theatre magazine*, to track and enter into their process and shelve our fixation with product. It is determined to be underpinned by theoretical rigour, and is developing organs of exchange – journals, newsletters, websites – to this end. It is helping practitioners to share in each other's work. It is enabling contact with good practice abroad. It has been peripheral to begin with and still unashamedly positions itself antithetically towards the status quo. At its best, it represents a radical and far-reaching

book reviews

challenge to aesthetic and cultural norms.

The essays in *An Outburst of Frankness* have a polemical edge, straining against prevailing conditions to articulate a future. The essays in *Irish Theatre on Tour* have, in contrast, a sensitivity towards the ironies and contradictions in Ireland's touring history.

of companies touring post-1920s.

Irish Theatre on Tour is the first publication from The Irish Theatrical Diaspora project, and all the essays except one originate from that group's inaugural conference in April 2004. The volume therefore presents the first fruits of research and provides a window into what animates the project. No formal



Irish Theatre on Tour is made up of microstudies that complicate the received picture of touring as it refers to Ireland. The intention is corrective and the vantage point is very much post-nationalist. At its fulcrum is Yeats's notion that a national theatre needs to tour within the national boundaries in order to be a National Theatre. It is a notion the volume tests, somewhat wryly. It is consequently divided into two parts, the first looking at Abbey-related themes, the second at aspects of pre-Abbey touring and

statement emerges in the volume, but it is clear the editors want to shake up commonplaces about Irish theatre from the angle of vision that touring provides - and not only Irish theatre but Irish nationalism itself. We hear from one of the editors, Chris Morash, that "to accommodate the theatre, Irish cultural history had to find room for a non-indigenous art form, that had not only arrived in Ireland no earlier than the seventeenth century but was continually arriving in the on-going process of the

IVAN KHOYI

atrical touring." This volume navigates between "authentic" and "playful" Irelands, as disseminated by Irish theatre on tour.

The Abbey wielded a double-edged sword when promoting itself, in its dramaturgy, scenography, and acting, as bearing the hallmark of the "real" Ireland. Richard Cave draws attention to

distinctly uncomfortable, however, touring to those Irish provinces where it gained its material, notably slow to tour to Galway in 1908, as Anthony Roche points out.

The Abbey was judged against the standards of a "real" Ireland nesting in the received notions of its audience when it toured abroad. The ex-pat audi-



POST-MODERN REALITY Garry Hynes' direction of the work of Martin McDonagh (left) struck a chord with non-Irish audiences

a souvenir programme produced for the Abbey's third UK tour in 1906 that aggressively lays claim to the "real". The Abbey directorate, in bringing the "peasant" to a metropolitan audience, was achieving its artistic and political aims. It was on sure ground consequently when touring the UK. It was

IVAN KINCZYK

ences were invariably unforgiving. Even so, the Abbey earned, according to John Harrington, a "brand identity" for the "real Ireland" in the US. Peter Kuch reveals by contrast how a breakaway company in 1922 failed to impress in Australia by those standards of authenticity. And the sword of the "real" was undeniably one on which Barry Fitzgerald fell when his "Abbey style" ossified into fixed caricature once he settled for Hollywood, to which Adrian Frazier testifies.



Marina Carr: challenging U.S. audiences

Eighteenth century fit-ups in rural Ireland occasioned cultural exchanges that had ripple effects in two cultures, according to Helen Burke. Boucicault's *realpolitik* is exposed by Deirdre McFeely when he failed to sing *The Wearing of the Green* in Dublin but found every means to evade censorship and so sing it in London in performances of *Arrah-na-Pogue*.

In the 1930s the Gate is seen by Richard Pine to trade away its identity as a Dublin theatre company when touring to exotic locations: Egypt and the Balkans. Appropriation of Irish cultural exports by theatre organisations abroad is a theme that subterraneously runs through many of these essays. It surfaces in a discussion of the US reception of the work of Marina Carr by Melissa Sihra (at the expense of the focus of the volume: the essay is distinctly about the reception and only tangentially

about touring Carr's work).

Druid's touring profile is examined by Patrick Lonergan for the ready-made frames of reference it gave to the reception of Martin McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy*. And so, if critics here decried that McDonagh would be taken "at face value" abroad, Lonergan reveals how it was precisely the unnerving, postmodernist play of the cast-iron real against the simulacra – due as much to Garry Hynes's directorial line and dramaturgical influence as to the writing – that critics abroad responded to. The "real" had evolved into something to mess around with. Lonergan's critical practice is an avid exploration of the variables of writer, director, company, venue, audience reception, media spin, and critical reception. He does however leave uncontested the identification of McDonagh as an Irish writer, a variable in itself that brings meltdown to such terms as "Irish" and "English".

In reflecting on these two volumes, I imagine that two separate constituencies will want to read them. And this would be a shame. *An Outburst of Frankness* should be compulsory for anybody who has a bearing on or an interest in community arts. *Irish Theatre on Tour* will satisfy a specialised readership interested in nationalism as refracted through the touring policy of Irish companies but, since touring is such a hot topic in Ireland now, the wider theatre community would do well to pay attention to it. Even so, the editors have room to do yet more in the next volume to meet practitioners' interests in the touring of the past. ©TM

Thomas Conway is New Writing Manager with Druid Theatre Company.

OUR REVIEWERS reflect on the most recent theatre productions around the country

COLD COMFORT**by Owen McCafferty**

Prime Cut at the Old Museum

Arts Centre, Belfast.

5-14 May 2005, and on tour.

Reviewed 7 May 2005

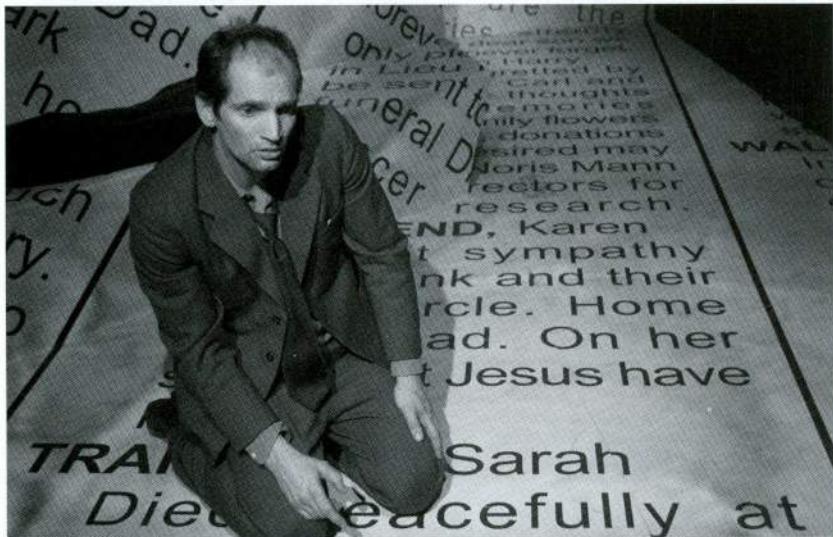
BY BRIAN SINGLETON

CRITIC HELEN MEANY RECENTLY TOLD a class of Drama students at Trinity College how she had seen so many father/son relationships in Irish theatre that she had begun to imagine she might have had one herself. Owen McCafferty's new play fits neatly into this "tradition" with its familiar working-class male anti-hero

*Patrick O'Kane in
Cold Comfort*

caught up in a web of self-loathing, self-pity, and nostalgia. Kevin Toner (Patrick O'Kane) has returned from a Kilburn building site to Belfast for his father's funeral. He is alone on stage with the comfort of a whiskey bottle, the contents of which loosen his tongue. O'Kane cuts a dashing and yet tragic figure, torturing himself with memories of his childhood, punctuating and toasting his memories with a swig. He is dressed in one of his father's old suits, just as he bears his father's name. It is quickly revealed that both father and son have led similar lives

after the break-up of their marriages, both seeking solace in alcohol, both with a predilec-



reviews

tion for violence.

McCafferty's first twist in a masterful narrative is to reveal that the character is not addressing the audience, but talking to his dead father. He challenges his imagined father about the past in a torrential narrative of rhythms and repetitions that conjure up a whole gamut of emotions for both him and the audience. But one quickly gets the impression that he would not be so loquacious in real life as we discover that neither father nor son could articulate emotion. Given his emotional injuries, Toner would fit fairly well into McCafferty's earlier work (such as *Closing Time*), but had he appeared in that play he might hardly have uttered a word. In *Cold Comfort*, however, he is freed from his inhibitions to challenge both his father and himself. The irony, of

course, lies in the fact that it is all too late.

McCafferty's next shift in the narrative unsettles us again, as Toner conjures up his mother in order to interrogate the failed relationship between his parents. Later, his own wife Theresa appears, a point where nostalgia is replaced by invective railed at his own failed marriage. Like all monologues, damaged thought processes are unable to be challenged because of the form. Thus Toner weaves his way around one-sided characterisations that support his own sense of self, making it difficult to have any sympathy for him, save perhaps for the cycle of the past repeating itself from which he is unable to escape. And that is where the tragedy of this piece lies, as McCafferty gives his narrative one final twist to reveal that his character's baby son, another

crooked house theatre company
room rage
after *Hippolytus* by Euripides

12th - 17th Sept
T@36 Parnell Square
Tickets €10/€12.50/€15
6pm - 7.15pm

Dublin Fringe Festival 2005
September 12th - October 2nd
Booking 1850 FRINGE (1850 374 643)
Book online at www.fringefest.com

df DUBLIN
FRINGE
FESTIVAL

Kevin, is also dead, presumably from neglect. Reliving the moment of discovering his dead son in his cot, Toner's articulacy dissolves while O'Kane crashes to the floor and delivers a series of very painful primal screams. He holds them to the expiration of the breath and continues with more until it almost becomes unbearable. McCafferty, who also directs the play, does not let us turn away.

The bleak one-hour monologue is played against a set composed of a large newspaper obituary ripped in two. One of its columns has the death notice of a Kevin Toner. I immediately thought that this was his father's death notice, but as the play proceeded, it became clear that it was his son's. It was a pity that this interesting idea and impressive backdrop to O'Kane's performance should reveal so vital a clue and indeed upstage McCafferty's plot twist. I was also further confused by the "tear" of the page that conflated two obituaries, seeming erroneously to suggest that the son had died of cancer. Nevertheless, Tina McHugh's lighting turned the page into a flaming inferno of rage, a yellowed page of nostalgia, and a cold reality of discovery.

O'Kane charted the destruction of his character with consummate skill, largely through his densely layered vocal range. He had at once the smile and charm of a rogue, more sinned against than sinning, and also the involuntary rage and scary physicality of the drunk. Had he stopped at the breakdown I would have left the theatre with enormous sympathy for the man trapped in an emotional embryo. However, McCafferty pulled the rug out from under his appeal to us with a final line of expletives, presumably directed at Toner's imagined family, but also pointed at us. As the rain fell in the final

moments, it washed away my sympathies for a man who had experienced catharsis but could not move on or give us any glimmer of self-realisation. This was an unremitting production of a clever narrative that entrapped us for sixty minutes in one man's self-torture and trauma.

Brian Singleton is Head of the School of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

CONSPIRACY THEORY

by Bodily Functions Theatre Company

Bodily Functions Theatre Company

Granary Theatre, Cork

18-23 April, reviewed 22 April

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

BODILY FUNCTIONS' DEVISED WORK

Conspiracy Theory, directed by Tony McLeane-Fay, initially seems like a good choice for a double-bill with *The Self-Obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone*, reviewed in the last issue of *Irish Theatre Magazine*. The publicity material describes the work as a "hilarious mind-blowing, multimedia theatwerk" exploring the prevalence of the conspiracy theory in contemporary life. The audience enters on a scene with four women and two men chained to a white-covered table. Some of these characters are distinguished by their costumes into recognizable types: the grungy girl who will later speak emotionally about Kurt Cobain; the professional woman; the vamp, and the angry repressed man in a buttoned-up shirt and tie. The music is loud and harsh, apparently aiming to create a sense of discomfort and confusion, which seems suited to the subject matter.

The nature of the dramatic world is never clearly established. Although



there is some dialogue between the characters, their main focus is on the preparation and delivery of a monologue on their favourite conspiracy theory. The monologue is supported by a couple of still projections onto a screen behind the set, and at the end of each speech, marks out of ten are projected onto the screen. These scores apparently relate to the credibility of the presentation. The theories suggest that Kurt Cobain and Pope John Paul I were murdered, that electromagnetic waves are killing us, that George Bush is the anti-Christ, and so on. Between presentations, the main interaction between the characters relates to anxieties and jealousies about each other's performances.

Despite the publicised description of the play as a "multi-media theatrework", the technical effects never progress beyond loud harsh sound, flashing lights, and some still images on the backdrop. The action is occasionally amusing, but it is never clear why these people are making these presentations, and the characters are not developed enough, or intriguing enough, to invite speculation. Nonethe-

Bodily Functions
Theatre Company in
Conspiracy Theory

less, there is nothing unpleasant about the work until a flirtatious exchange between two of the characters turns abruptly into a rape scene.

The violence of the action, and the distress of the victim and other characters, is completely out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the performance.

The scene seems set to raise a number of issues about relationships between power, dispossession, and physical strength that would be germane to the production, but this never happens. Instead, the recital of conspiracy theories recommences, while the victim shivers and weeps at one end of the table. The rapist meanwhile is presented as an apparently sympathetic character, whose psychopathic outbursts towards his victim later in the play are greeted with audience laughter.

The inclusion of the scene without comment, and without integrating the violence into an overall narrative, raises the obvious question of why it is included at all. Given that the publicity material promises eating, breathing, defecation, lust and sleep, it may be that this scene was considered daring and challenging.

In the end, however, it is a cheap and distasteful.

Conspiracy Theory could be an imaginative and humorous presentation on conspiracy theories and an exploration of their meaning for contemporary society. Instead, it is unstructured, underdeveloped in terms of plot and character, and unremarkable in its design and "multi-media" effects. 'Whatever happened to alec, barbara, bob, may and sylvia?' the publicity flyer asks. Frankly, it is difficult to see why anyone would care.

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

A CRY FROM HEAVEN

by Vincent Woods

Abbey Theatre

4 June -16 July, reviewed 9 June

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

VINCENT WOODS' RETELLING OF THE STORY of Deirdre of the Sorrows takes the form of classical drama, a tale of the tragic folly of those who oppose the Fates, built around larger-than-life human archetypes, who share weighty exchanges in sombre tones. It is an appropriate approach, if a relatively straightforward one, eschewing the kinky postmodernism of Paul Mercier's *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, but perhaps also unwisely pitting Woods against Seamus Heaney's recent *The Burial at Thebes*, and the Druid production of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

Written in blank verse and built around consistent symbols, metaphors, and vocal cadences, the play uses the story of doomed romance to articulate concerns with the exercise of power and the consequences of choice. It wears its

poetic credentials upon its sleeve and, with good vocabulary choices, never veers into abstraction. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to see how this script could be staged without reducing the audience to peals of inappropriate laughter at the po-faced approach, were it not that Woods developed the play with director Olivier Py in mind, having worked with him on the eleven-hour Centre Dramatique National d'Orléans production of *The Satin Slipper*.

What Py delivers is an assault on the senses. Like the unearthly cry from her mother's womb with which the ill-fated Deirdre marks out the destiny of Ulster, the production is literally drenched in ominous sound and vision. From the almost constantly rain-soaked stage (upon which actors frequently slip) to the ghost-white make-up worn by all but constantly smeared by physical contact, the production has a visceral, almost tactile quality, akin to productions by Calixto Bieito, even if it is not quite so confrontational. The audience can virtually smell the evisceration with which the Druid Cathach (Barry McGovern) smears his face at the outset, and the stage seems to drip and seep with the sweat and blood of lust, envy, greed and hatred as the beleaguered lovers try to find a peaceful space.

Py makes full use of the Abbey stage to introduce massive, black-painted, movable sets upon which his actors climb, crawl, leap, sit, and stand as appropriate. Blood-drenched props are picked up from the ground, used and dropped, then picked up and dropped again later by yet another character with an audible clatter. Huge tubular bells are suspended at the rear of the stage and are beaten by the company in time with the sonorous,



oppressive score which pummels the ears from beginning to end. In short, the audience is invited to immerse themselves in discord and disharmony, knowing that the lovers' story will not bring resolution to this state of unrest. As Py himself says "this is what Deirdre herself embodies, the heritage of war that cannot be escaped."

Arguably, the staging threatens to overwhelm the material, which is not quite as radical or as emotionally involving as the strident approach suggests. There is a definite risk of sound and fury signifying nothing here in spite of Py's conviction that "popular theatre is not about entertainment, but about meaning." Yes, there is a sense that the play's concern with conflict somehow transcends the specifics of Celtic myth, but then Woods and Py have chosen to address an Irish story in the

Gabrielle Reidy, Alan Turkington,
Kelly Campbell, Ciaran Taylor
and Olwen Fouéré in **A Cry
From Heaven**

Irish National Theatre. How does Ireland fit on the world stage in the era of global terror ("war that cannot be escaped"), and what is to be drawn from

this tale that will affect how we see ourselves in this context? Might an intra-European venture by two artists from protestor nations have found a clearer line through metatheatrical obfuscation? It is perhaps a problem of perception and of expectations of the reach of the material, amplified by the dumbfounded response of certain sections of the Abbey summer crowd. Infanticide, rape, full frontal nudity and disembowelings don't go down too well if you're expecting twee light Celtic entertainment.

There is, nonetheless plenty to enjoy here, not least of all the full-bore performances from a game cast. Kelly Campbell makes a strong, lusty Deirdre

ROS KAVANAGH

and Alan Turkington conveys quiet strength as Naoise. Ciarán Taylor does a comic turn as the foolish Conor, caught between the polar forces of his wild, ambitious mother Ness (Olwen Fouéré in a scary performance) and the reasonable, diplomatic Fergus (Denis Conway). Conor's struggle to wield a series of increasingly large swords becomes an ever-more explicit metaphor for his impotence, but also, perhaps, symbolises the struggle of this production to overcome its obviousness, as if being conscious of going over the top excuses doing so. Just because the meaning of a symbol is clear does not mean that its deployment is effective.

Harvey O'Brien lectures in Film Studies at UCD and NYU/Tisch Dublin. He reviews theatre for www.culturevulture.net

DARK WEEK

**Devised by the company,
with Lynda Radley as dramaturge**

Playgroup, Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork.

Tues. 21 June - Sat. 25 June

Reviewed 24 June, 2005

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

"IS THIS A DEAD END?" ASKED THE man behind me, as we made our way in through the stage door and up a flight of concrete stairs. His words haunted me for the next two and a half hours as I struggled to make sense of the most chaotic – and the most radical – piece of promenade theatre I have ever experienced.

Playgroup are a young company with a good reputation, best known for *Soap!*, also first staged in Cork's Midsummer Festival back in 2003, in which four actors played over forty characters in ten instalments. Their co-production with the

Granary Theatre of Sarah Kane's austere and demanding work, *Crave*, showed the company's commitment to staging important works of contemporary theatre.

Set in the 1920s, *Dark Week* was billed as "a creative response to aspects of the Palace Theatre's past", specifically its past as a music hall. Playgroup's Director Tom Creed and Associate Director Hilary O'Shaughnessy worked with choreographer Cindy Cummings and composer Irene Buckley. Ciaran Fitzpatrick and Siobhán McSweeney from *Soap!* were in the 42-strong cast, while *Soap!*'s co-writer Lynda Radley was dramaturge. The company, we were told, believed in "the power of singing, dancing and having a laugh". Expectations were high.

The audience was admitted in groups of about a dozen from 7.30 p.m. onwards, and encouraged to explore the theatre. The main auditorium was occupied by cleaners in black and white uniforms (actors were distinguished from audience by their heavy make up). The lighting rig was down on the stage, the curtain up. In the foyer, three patrons in evening dress were approaching the doors of the auditorium in ultra slow motion. The rehearsal room was empty, but the bar (which remained open throughout the performance) was occupied by a woman in curlers (Annette Buckley) singing 'God Bless the Child' to a piano accompaniment. Upstairs in the dressing rooms, Brendan (Walter Mansfield), the producer's youthful assistant, was laboriously making a pot of tea, while various performers chatted and joked.

Everyone in the audience would experience a different performance, depending on where they went and when they got there. I kept on the move constantly,



fearing that it was all happening where I was not, an apparently widespread suspicion among an increasingly incredulous – and bored – audience. By 8.20, still nothing of any note had happened. My search for the drama resembled Gertrude Stein's reaction to Oakland, California – when you get there, there's no there there.

Smaller dramas, difficult to see and hear, were acted out in the cramped dressing rooms and around the auditorium. The former were difficult to see, the latter hard to hear. Eventually a run-through began in the auditorium. Mr. Dillon, a producer of music hall (played by Mike Finn, who was too young and too wholesome-looking to convince), sitting mid-stalls, gratefully received a cup of tea from the gofer, Brendan. "In fairness to the boy, he makes a nice cup of tea", said Dillon. The banality of this episode was typical.

The music hall acts, to piano accompaniment by the hard-working Elaine Guinane, ranged from mediocre to bad. Each act was preceded by bad-tempered

Angela Newman, Agnes Barnes,
Evelyn Quinlan Lucy Roche,
Kathy D'Arcy in **Dark Week**

shouting from the producer's assistant (Siobhan McSweeney), a joke which soon wore thin. It was painful to

watch good actors – Cindy Cummings, Ciaran Fitzpatrick, Julie Kelleher – trying to look second-rate – and succeeding, but to no cumulative effect, due to the lack of a unifying script that would provide a sense of purpose.

Playgroup's apparent assumption that all music hall acts were terrible and/or kitsch was puzzling. Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin played at the Everyman. At its best, music hall had an energy and inventiveness that made it appeal to anyone who loved theatre: Samuel Beckett, for example, was a fan, as was TS Eliot.

The dance troupe, wittily choreographed by Cindy Cummings, consisted of plump, enthusiastic young women in skimpy satin costumes (design and costume by Deirdre Dwyer) who went through their routines with admirable verve.

It was a relief when Mr. Dillon called a halt with a heartfelt plea: "How can I compete against the pictures?" Suddenly a screen descended in front of the actors, and scenes from a Charlie Chaplin film were projected, the actors still visible behind it. Buckley's ominous score filled the theatre, and the stalls were covered in plastic wrapping. It seemed, for an instant, that the theatre itself was playing a role in its own story.

But it was the only exciting moment in two and a half hours. The vast space available to the audience diluted the impact of an already feeble dramatic impulse. With no focal point, and no collective experience to share, the audience wandered about, seeking to be entertained. *Dark Week* will be remembered chiefly for its astonishing waste of talent and energy.

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

DOG SHOW by Garrett Keogh

Peer Pressure Productions
Bank of Ireland Theatre, NUI, Galway
12 – 16 July, 2005; reviewed 12 July
BY DIARMUID O'BRIEN

ALL SHEEPDOGS ARE CALLED SHEP. No one is exactly sure why but I expect it's a union thing. A farmer by trade, I have worked with several incarnations of Shep and have found them to be, to a dog, a highly intelligent and capable breed, if somewhat reserved with strangers. They are also the most consummate professionals I have ever encountered. While there have been a great many plays about the Irish farmer,

never before has there been one about his long-suffering colleague: the stalwart Shep.

Initially I was disappointed to discover that there were no actual canines involved in *Dog Show*, their roles instead outsourced to human actors. Writer/director Garrett Keogh's inspired way around the whole animals-can't-really-act-or-even-talk issue is to present the play in the form of a radio drama; one that would comfortably fit an hour slot on Radio Éireann. What we actually see resembles a public broadcaster recording studio, probably built back in the Fifties. When the unseen director gives the word, the red recording bulbs light up and Shep's tale of woe (ahem) comes delightfully and naturally to life. The four voice actors read freely from their scripts, find pages for one another, and whoever is not speaking will create appropriate sound effects using the myriad household items at their disposal (my absolute favourite effect being the sound of a tractor door shutting, shrewdly simulated with an actual tractor door, from an old 7810 I'd say.) This strange remove somehow defers our disbelief and we rarely question the story's integrity or even the fact that the two star crossed lovers are, well... dogs.

Added to this is the realisation that Shep himself (Luke Griffin) is a fairly deep and brooding individual, a misunderstood romantic icon - James Dean meets Heathcliff, with a sensitive, loyal side. Having worked with sheepdogs, I find this characterisation pretty much spot-on. I'm serious. Shep is also the narrator of the story and so it falls upon Griffin to sustain the drama throughout, a task at which he gamely succeeds. Justly enough, Shep's bipedal avatar is the voice

reviews

actor most visibly moved by the work. There is also your classic class struggle. The neighbour's dog Molly (a playful and versatile performance by Lisa Lambe) is a purebred Labrador, you see, while Shep is a working dog. His coat is rough and matted with the dirt of an honest day's work. If pressed on the matter, experts could probably narrow his exact breed down to 'mostly a Border Collie.' To further torture our hero, Molly is rumoured to be seeing another dog, and things are only going to get worse.

This isn't *Babe* I'm afraid. There's no happy ending, and I don't think this play is meant for younger children. This is *Lassie noir*, further stylised by Shep's curiously expressionist narrating. I had hitherto no idea that sheepdogs had such a command of the magical realist style, but there you go. Of course, I would have gone and chanced naming the play *Life's A Bitch* instead, so I'm probably not the best judge of these matters.

But what absolutely sells this ceaselessly resourceful little play to anyone

who has spent any time on or around farms is the loving attention to detail.

Garret Keogh
and friend in
Dog Show



The world of the farm is unerringly authentic, and tangible. Independent of visual artifice, yet we recognise everything instantly, from the tiresome banter of the old farmers (voiced with an expert ear by Pat Laffan and Gerry O'Brien) to that inexplicable old digger bucket that has been rusting in the yard for as long as we can remember. It's all there, but from a perspective closer to the ground than we're used to.

Diarmuid O'Brien has recently completed an MA in Writing at NUI Galway

A DOLL'S HOUSE

by Henrik Ibsen;

in a version of Frank McGuinness

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

16 April - 28 May, 2005

Reviewed 15 May, 2005 BY FINTAN WALSH

PERFECTLY GROOMED, IMMACULATEDLY dressed, flighty and flirty, director László Márton's Nora Helmer (Hannah Yelland) could have walked straight off the set of *Desperate Housewives* and onto the Abbey stage. Her living room, complete with sinking sofas, an upright piano and a rocking horse for the children, would surely

upstage even Brie Van De Kamp's elegant abode. And what Lynette wouldn't give for children like these, well-behaved and snap-happy in Gap like there's no tomorrow. Even Mrs. Solis wouldn't say no to a man like Torvald (Owen McDonnell) - the dim, absent, but committed provider that he is. And yet, despite her potential to be the envy of



Wisteria lane, Nora is unhappy. For unlike her astute soap opera counterparts, this pastel-wearing desperado has much to learn about men. At the play's outset, the married mother of three only thinks that she wears the trousers in her marriage. By the end of the play, however, Nora comes to realise just how powerless she actually is in her relationship. And it is this dawning which spurs her to abandon her home, her children, and her husband, in order to become "completely free".

When Nora Helmer first left her home in 1879, she made theatrical history. Her departure was an unprecedented protest against the social oppression of nineteenth century middle-class women. 126 years later, the same action, even in McGuinness' version, strains under the test of time. Nora's exit no longer seems to be as transgressive as it once may have

Hannah Yelland in
A Doll's House

been: nowadays, the same middle-class Western woman could quite readily divorce her husband, get custody of

her children, go back to college, get a job, remain single or remarry, as she pleased. In addition to the difficulty of carrying Ibsen's story into the present, the play's experiment in realism is a little hard to take: the writing is more embarrassing in its obviousness than it is radical in its innovation. Together, these restrictions do not mean that *A Doll's House* has no contemporary value. However, they do emphasise how any rewriting or performance of the play, that wants to be relevant to the present rather than reverent to the past, has its work cut out for it.

It is not that Marton gives us a bad production here. Production values are high and the cast give some fine performances, such as those by Yelland and

reviews

McDonnell. Unfortunately, the piece lacks clarity of purpose: it hovers somewhere between a museum piece and a contemporary adaptation. The canonical allegiance is notable in that most characters wear period costume, with only Nora and the children dressed in contemporary clothes; a gesture presumably directed at underscoring the relevance of the mother-child relationship to the present. A similar disconnect is seen in the overall playing style.

The performance opens naturalistically with a heavily furnished living-room dominating the Abbey stage. As the plot unfolds, however, the style sporadically shifts. A teddy bear seems to fall, or (perish the thought) jump off the piano, and the lighting (designed by Thomas C. Hase) frequently dims to forewarn the eruption of what lies beneath the veneer of respectability; much like the holes in the set walls signal the fragmentation of the family structure. While these devices seem reasonable in themselves, traditionalism and invention, naturalism and expressionism ultimately grate off each other, so much so that it hard to see exactly what Marton is trying to say about or through this play, or indeed, if there is anything to be said at all.

Aside from a writer altering the smug middle-classness of the play to reflect a more genuinely restrictive marital situation (which may be impossible to do), or a director tearing the script to shreds to work in a completely non-naturalistic mode, perhaps *A Doll's House* has little to offer the present. That is because, for the most part, desperate housewives like Nora have more options now than they had in 1879. If *A Doll's House* is to be performed as is, it seems to me that what must be foregrounded is Nora's arduous

decision-making process - not that she leaves her family, or that she is forced to leave, but that she chooses to leave. The kookiness of Marton's Nora, who leaves so abruptly and without any convincing build-up of aggravation or frustration, in word or action, presents her final exit as more of a tantrum than a final gesture. In understating the decision-making process, which may be the play's only link to the present, the production throws away a trump card.

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

EXIT 2. SURVIVING A.

Conceived by Kate McLaughlin

SlaughterHouse Theatre Company

7-11 Jun 2005;

reviewed 11 Jun at Project Cube, Dublin

BY PETER CRAWLEY

BEHIND AN ABSTRACT JUMBLE OF images, costumes and texts; beyond fragmentary associations of science, medicine and torture; beneath a textual mash-up of fairytales, Greek classics and 20th century drama, SlaughterHouse makes an intriguing proposition.

The creator and director of *Exit 2. Surviving A*, Kate McLaughlin, envisages a family where Arthur Miller's Proctor (adulterer and witch-hunt victim of *The Crucible*) plays daddy; while mum is none other than that Euripidean harpy Medea. Yet, for all the ensuing mutilations, shame and recrimination, their domestic dynamics are only half as horrifying as Eugene O'Neil's autobiographical anatomy of kith and kin in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. Truth, it seems, is still stranger than fiction.

McLaughlin's exercise in archetypes and the avant-garde instead resembles a long night's journey into a daze, in part because her company's aesthetic is calibrated to disengage your critical faculties, to assuage or assault you with dissolute moments of movement, sound and sensation, ultimately allowing you to reassemble and interpret the results as you will.

Invited to remove your jacket and shoes before entering an ice-white Project studio, one can either flop back on the large pillows provided or sit down on chairs (even if this confirms you as a buttoned-down reactionary). Slaughter-House assures us, however, that this will be no normal theatre experience.

Daylight spills into the venue as three figures in protective white suits and visors enter the space from outside; a troupe of alien beekeepers. Two of them help each other to disrobe and are revealed as a couple – man and wife, it seems. Heavy with child, she reads to her besotted partner from Rapunzel, and the fairytale carries all the comfort and precipitous rupture of any Grimm Brothers recitation. Meanwhile the third figure – at times resembling a doctor, at others a stagehand – wages a one-man war against easy interpretation, sticking crow feathers into a raw chicken breast before skewering it on a jack knife and embedding it in the rear wall (another chicken breast spits and crackles on a griddle at the extreme end of the stage – waste not, want not.)

Well, you can probably guess the rest. Proctor (Will Irvine) falls in love with a mannequin, dancing with the inanimate floozy before the relationship sours – she breaking apart at all the most interesting joints, while



he performs a dialogue with a Dictaphone, tracing the adulterous highlights of *The Crucible*. One can understand the anger of Claudia Schwartz's Medea then, following a bizarrely intrusive ultrasound, when the historically affronted sorceress airs her classical grievances: "In other things a woman may be afraid—in watching battles or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love, her marriage violated, there's no heart more desperate for blood than hers".

Against the unsettling build of David Lacey's music, all metallic screeches and portentous white noise, Medea's act of infanticide is manifested instead as a

Molly Finn in **Exit 2. SURVIVING A**

reviews

playfully gruesome abortion, a stack of doll parts disinterestedly basted in blood by Castellucci-style squeezable bottles. Proctor then endures an unending torture sequence, the audience readily identifying with his ordeal: "I have given you my soul, leave me my name".

For all McLaughlin's semiotic libertarianism, one suspects she would be disappointed if the only message her audience took from *Exit 2* is that a barbarian witch and an unjustly accused warlock don't make for very successful parents. Rather, in the deracinated archetypes and borrowed performative and visual grammar – where bodies convulse arbitrarily à la Loose Canon's experiments, or blood spatters casually over a set of Castellucci-style sterility – SlaughterHouse want to communicate their scepticism towards narrative conceit, their abhorrence towards the imposition of literal meaning and their boredom with naturalism and stale theatrical conventions. This would be fine if they could find a fresher alternative.

Some may be bemused by the alienating aesthetic of SlaughterHouse, others may find their attention snagging on the jagged edges of the textual collage, but the deeper concern is that while the company appear to be disciples of the European avant-garde, they lack a voice of their own.

"I am interested in the human digestion of human constructs and in exploring the human capacity to create through a process of reconstitution," writes McLaughlin in her director's note. And, though you admire McLaughlin's fascination with humankind and her freedom to experiment, until SlaughterHouse move beyond dry schematics and random signifiers, their

work seems uninterested in establishing actual human contact.

Peter Crawley writes on theatre and music for a range of publications including The Irish Times and is news editor and web editor of this magazine.

FAMILY STORIES

by **Biljana Srbljanovic**

b*spoke Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre

22 June- 02 July 2005

Reviewed 27 June, BY **FINTAN WALSH**

EVERY FAMILY HAS ITS STORIES, BUT thankfully, not all families have stories like Biljana Srbljanovic. The household that this young playwright depicts, which was first presented on stage in Belgrade 1997, has been torn apart by years of violence, suffered under the brutal regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Following their corrupt leader's precedent, these characters also resort to violence to express and defend themselves, from each other and from the outside world. Mummy and Daddy hurt each other and the children imitate what they see. And so the circle twists and thwarts until the last grain of humanity has been thrashed from the family's tragic bones. All the more tragic, of course, because of the tale's recent historical basis.

Rather than portraying a family's experience in a naturalistic fashion, Srbljanovic's dramaturgy is comprised of some distancing techniques. The most prominent of these is the filtering through of the turbulent world to the audience, as if it was perceived and re-presented by children. Accordingly, the four adult performers all play children who pretend to be variously adults and children. In this

fictive context, they enact myriad scenes of brutality which they have presumably been part of, witnessed, or embellished. While such a strategy prevents the audience from chancing a direct glance into the dark heart of 1990s Serbia, it also allows us to gain insight into the inter-generational effects of extreme violence – and national violence in particular – in tones which are often comic.

Under Rachel West's direction, the head of this family is Vojin (Andrew Bennett), a cruel patriarch who rules his wife and children with an iron fist. These are the expectations of men in this 'man's world', and these qualities are dutifully cultivated in the family's only son Andrija (Rory Nolan). This training involves the youth being subjected to violence at the hands of his own father so that he might harden up and carry on the family traditions (and by association, those of the nation). The process runs smoothly until the son is taught a little too well and he turns to kill his father, priming the family for implosion. Inevitably, within such an economy of power relations, women are represented as either servants or animals. Vojin's wife Milena (twitchily played by Pauline Hutton) is no more than a cook to her husband, and she is forced to give up her job when her position threatens to injure Vojin's pride. This misogyny is most



Rory Nolan, Pauline Hutton, Mary Murray, Andrew Bennett in
Family Stories

vividly manifest in the character of Nadezda (impressively played by Mary Murray), a disabled girl who is chained in the home like a dog, and abused by everyone.

Each scene of the one act play involves the family attacking itself in a variety of different ways, to the point of at least one death. And as the "children" repeatedly beat, shoot, and stab each other, the lines between playful mimicry and actual violence frequently blur, to such an extent that it eventually seems as if the children are actually executing violence themselves. There are also moments when the actors' adult presence aggressively materialises through the veil of the child-persona, mapping in the additional message that ancestral violence continually revisits future generations, in some form or another, as not only Serbia, but even Ireland, can appreciate.

reviews

The play's themes are effectively highlighted in Paul Keogan's set and lighting design. As if a child's messy playroom, the stage is scattered with random objects, like boxes and bins, which also signify the debris of military destruction. Naïve sketches paper the walls, showing images of aircraft overhead, which suggest that the young artists may have witnessed the scenes documented first-hand. The subtle tension which characterises Denis Clohessy's ethnic musical score suggests that the family could be crushed at any moment, while the clashing colours of John Bergin's costume design capture the invention of youthful expression.

When receiving the Ernst Toller award for *Family Stories* in 1999, Srbljanovic wrote; "I present the world as it is: garbage". That may well have been her intention, but under West's direction at least, the play exudes a kind of structured exuberance, which points to the challenges for future generations, and for theatre as play, in the working through of history's tragic legacies. If a criticism is to be made of the production, it is that the playfulness of the acting often overshadows the savagery a little too much. As if cautious of its own perkiness, the play ends by turning the glaring lights on the audience, compelling us to stand in the line of fire, so to speak, if only for a moment.

THE FEVER by Wallace Shawn

Mangiare Theatre Company
The Factory Performance Space
On Tour, reviewed 27 May
BY DIARMUID O' BRIEN

THE FEVER IS NOT AN ENJOYABLE PLAY. Of course it's not meant to be a bundle of fun or anything, and I appreciate its intent: an uncompromising wake-up call

to all us privileged westerners, no matter how enlightened, informed and politically aware we purport to be, that our very way-of-life perpetuates the misery of the world's poor. It is so goddamn provocative that it puts us, the gentle audience, on the defensive; which tends to happen whenever a work seeks to expose us all as passive holocaust deniers who have conditioned ourselves to ignore the inhumanities raging in third world countries. This is very heavy (handed) stuff for even the most left-leaning, doomsaying punter to take in. And worse yet, it's probably true.

A kind, sensitive and well-off cultured type (Jamie Carswell) has taken to subjecting himself to literal guilt trips. He journeys from poor country to poor country, at first out of interest. This traveller, a wryly self-deprecative mouthpiece for Shawn himself, initially finds the simple inhabitants charming and is given to gushing naiveties like "these shy smiles are like a garden for me". But increasingly he travels out of some masochistic compulsion to witness first hand the way in which his life has ravaged the third world. He falls dangerously ill one sticky night in a decrepit hotel and in the throes of a (remarkably introspective) fever, his guilt takes over. By contrasting little anecdotes from his refined life back home to the horrors of the countries he visits, he implicates us all in an unspoken conspiracy to enslave the majority of the world's population.

When not moonlighting as a Hollywood character actor, American playwright Wallace Shawn travels widely, and in 1990 he wrote *The Fever* while visiting such "undeveloped" regions. He originally performed the bare monologue to small select audiences in friends' apart-



Jamie Carswell in **The Fever**

ments. Apparently, this is the sort of thing intellectuals do for kicks in Manhattan. When he actually staged it at more conventional venues in 1991 *The Fever* was met with harsh and even condescending reviews. Now it was officially a play, and plays tend to invite the opinions of theatre critics. These critics promptly dismissed it as a spel of rampant "liberal guilt" with a doe-eyed view of socialism. Shawn's fans retorted that *The Fever's* questioning of western values had clearly touched a raw nerve in those who hitherto considered themselves highly enlightened and compassionate beings (such as theatre critics). Though it is Shawn's intention to unsettle us, to cast unflattering light on our highly-strung conscience, the method he selects is far too blunt, and ultimately uninvolving, for its own good.

The Fever more resembles a protracted

anecdotal sermon than a play. While you could politely listen to it for nearly two hours in Wallace Shawn's apartment – he would have invited you there after all, and there would more than likely be some exciting *hors d'oeuvres* on offer – but to sit down in an auditorium for 90 minutes (Mangiare trimmed it a bit) is a trial of patience. The writing itself is generally a monotonous hybrid of urbane, singsong prattle-of-consciousness and heavy handed "shock" imagery that only seldom leads anywhere (delightful designer coffee tables running red with the blood of the innocent, and so on; over and over again). Whether this is to emulate the thoughts of a delirious man failing to justify his privileged status in an unfair world, or designed to personally annoy me, I do not know.

Mangiare have succeeded in staging about as kinetic a production as you

reviews

could hope to wring from the clumsy source text. The set is minimal, a tight square of tile and a toilet bowl are all that denote the bathroom, and the traveller's towel stands in for various props (table cloths, coats and so on). The similarly low-key sound design (by Blue Raincoat's Joe Hunt) is, along with Nick McCall's ever-shifting, psychosomatic lighting, an impressive feature of the show. A barely perceptible violin *leitmotif* is particularly haunting.

Jamie Carswell is generally mind-mannered as the traveller but it is during the delirium's more desperate, and paranoid, moments that his performance really engages. What if the poor really did rise up, and everyone everywhere was equal? The comfortable delusion of dinner parties and theatregoing would be destroyed. These moments are heightened through shrewd use of lighting and sound to a menacing grotesque of our baser survivalist nature. By appealing to the audience's mutual shame, Nick McKeon's perceptive direction finds genuine shock and revelation amongst all the preachy frustration.

THE GLORY OF LIVING

by **Rebecca Gilman**

About Face Theatre Company

On Tour

reviewed 15 July BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

LISA (VICKY BURKE), TEENAGE BRIDE OF abusive criminal lowlife Jim (Alan Howley) sits with her attorney, Carl (Daniel Costello), in a detention centre in Alabama. She has been found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. She calmly explains to Carl that she simply had no choice but to kill the girls her husband had ordered her to kill, usually after

he and she had both had sex with them in a series of seedy motels. She feels no remorse, no anger, and her guilt seems to have been purged by her confessions, made more out of concern that the bodies of her victims should be found and treated decently than any feelings of wrongdoing for killing them.

Lisa has led a life of abuse and neglect, the child of an alcoholic prostitute, raised in a trailer park, and whisked away from that 'home' as a minor by her then husband-to-be, whose penchant for underage girls does not abate with their marriage. In any classic liberal reading of this familiar scenario, her personal responsibilities should be abrogated by the circumstances of her environment. Yet she seems unconcerned, accepting her fate and that of her victims with the casual remark that these people were dead the minute they accepted her invitation to get into her car. She could blame her mother, she could blame her husband, or her absent father; she could blame the rundown white-trash world and the capital culture which produced it, and the jury would probably listen. "I can't even begin to understand you," says Carl, dumbfounded by his client's unwillingness to pursue this line of defence. "Yeah," she replies, "but I appreciate it that you try."

Playwright Rebecca Gilman's refusal to offer a pat socio-psychological explanation for the actions of her central character is by far the most interesting dimension of this play, but it is also, in some sense, a bit of a cop-out. Lisa's refusal to provide catharsis by either proving herself irredeemably evil or acknowledging her victimisation is a neat way to disturb an audience seeking redemptive identification, but it also leaves them wondering



what the point of her story is.

Gilman evokes a familiar world of sleazy Southern yokels and spins a yarn of sexual abuse and serial killing that we have heard told many times before, realised by director Erin Murray and About Face Theatre Company within a more or less realist if low budget aesthetic. The pace is quick and the settings suitably anonymous and interchangeable to suggest the endless meaninglessness of the world in which the play is set, yet the rapid set changes and occasional doubling-up by cast members doesn't amount to actual stylisation. The realist mode suggests social relevance and invites close reading not so much in terms of dramatic motivation or classic character arcs but more in the mould of dispassionate observation in the *In Cold Blood* tradition. Events are observed and reported with the same

Alan Walsh and Vicky Burke
in *The Glory of Living*

kind of calm and dispassion Lisa exhibits throughout. But though the details of these characters' lives are portrayed with convincing clarity and the narrative trajectory is as mundane and unsensational as murder often is, the conclusions that can be drawn from all of it seem obvious to the point of not bearing repeating.

One of the music choices in an array of cheesy Country ditties struck me as particularly intriguing, not least of all for its ultimate inapplicability. Johnny Cash's throaty re-working of Nick Cave's *The Mercy Seat* is one few who have heard it will forget. Though the tale of a convicted killer burning to death in the electric chair certainly seems appropriate, the song is replete with paradox and rich religious symbolism, exploring notions of guilt, rage, and pain, suggesting depths of self-awareness and disturbing social

reviews

and psychological uncertainties that *The Glory of Living* cannot hope to match.

A production can't be damned on its choice of incidental music, of course, and that's not what I'm doing, but in refusing psychological depth and failing to draw meaningful conclusions from its subject, *The Glory of Living* gives its audience very little to take home. About Face have presented a sincere and well-acted production, with Butler managing nicely to capture her character's deliberately inexplicable sangfroid in the face of everything that happens around her. Unfortunately though, her character's appreciation of our failure to understand her is small compensation for our ultimate indifference, which, in spite of a touching finale, is all that Gilman succeeds in generating.

THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA?

By Edward Albee

Landmark Productions

Project Space Upstairs, Dublin

9-28 May 2005; reviewed 24 May

BY HELEN MEANY

EDWARD ALBEE ALMOST WROTE A PLAY about a highly successful, happily married doctor, at the height of his career, who decides to inject himself with the HIV virus in order to understand his patients' suffering. Another playwright got there first, so instead he wrote a play about a happily married, award-winning architect at the height of his career, who has sex with a goat, because ...

Because he wants to design goat farms and needs to empathise with his clients? Because he's self-destructive? Having a breakdown? He just fancies the goat?

In *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* the architect, Martin (Brian Murray) initially seems as perplexed as the rest of us by his

own behaviour as he tries to explain it to his oldest friend, Ross (Philip O'Sullivan). On his 50th birthday, having just won a major architectural award, he is being interviewed by Ross in the elegant apartment he shares with his wife and son, for a series called "People Who Matter". He's a little absent minded and distracted, but otherwise there's no hint that anything is seriously awry. He jokes with his wife Stevie (Susan Fitzgerald) about an affair he's having with someone called Sylvia. The tone is arch, suggesting drawing room comedy.

Between the levity of this opening and the meltdown of the play's end, Albee has to bring his audience on a journey into tragedy. Landmark Productions has dropped the somewhat pedantic subtitle of the play that appeared when it was premiered in the US: "Notes towards a definition of tragedy", but the high-pitched chanting with which this production opens immediately strikes an unsettling note and lets us know that the Eumenides are not far away. Director Michael Caven's programme note emphasises the importance of the goat in the rituals surrounding ancient Greek tragedy, and gives us the etymology of the word tragedy in *tragodia* (goat song). The play's structure too has the tightness of the Aristotelian model, with the action taking place in a single location over 24 hours. Whether having sex with a goat constitutes a "fatal flaw" remains an open question, however.

One of the obstacles Albee has set himself, actors and audience is his presentation of the tragic through a layer of comedy. "Some things are so awful, you just have to laugh," Stevie says, as she tries to get to grips with the nature of her husband's infidelity. And she continues to



Tadhg Murphy and Philip O'Sullivan
in *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?*

laugh, or at least to generate laughter, through her stream of witty one-liners, urbane banter and the blackly comic commentary she exchanges with Martin, even in the depths of her pain. Susan Fitzgerald is perfectly cast for this, capturing Stevie's sophisticated intelligence and comic timing with ease. Their shouting match, reminiscent of the long night of wrangling in Albee's best-known work *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, is punctuated by their delight in each other's wit, registering verbal sallies as if keeping score in a tennis match.

Even as she smashes vases around Joe Vanek and Rupert Murray's austere and beautifully lit set, Stevie is watching herself from the outside, underlining the problem that Albee's writing poses: how can highly articulate, hyper-analytical people confront their emotional and sex-

ual impulses and deepest desires? At what point does detachment fall away?

When father and son exchange an unexpectedly erotic kiss in the last act, Albee's themes of transgression and the limits of moral judgement emerge fully. By now it's clear that the goat is, if not quite a metaphor, at least heavily symbolic rather than literal – although that introduces a different set of difficulties, potentially jeopardising the work's dramatic viability. The final scene is a superbly graphic tableau in which the true savagery of the feelings seething beneath Stevie's cool exterior is laid bare. It hits a thrilling theatrical note but doesn't quite manage to harmonise the whole.

Despite the impressive conviction brought by Michael Caven and his cast to this production, there remains something unsatisfactorily sketchy about the play:

reviews

the character of Ross is merely a plot device to reveal the truth to Stevie - by the creaky means of a letter - and precipitate the crisis. (Philip O'Sullivan does his best with this unenviable role, making the most of the humour.) Stevie and Martin's gay son Billy (a goat by another name?) is also a one-dimensional character to whom Tadhg Murphy brings as much emotional depth as possible, but who seems to exist mainly to point out the contradictions between his father's hostility to homosexuality and his own zoophilic behaviour - which he likes to dignify with the term "affair".

This is risky and provocative work, in which Albee seems to be flinging down elements of theatrical form like a challenge, but defiantly refusing to knit them into the conventional, well-made play. Perhaps the subtitle "Notes Toward ..." would have been useful after all.

Helen Meany is the Editor of this magazine.

HERE LIES by Operating Theatre

Meeting Room, Imperial Hotel, Galway
22 – 24 July, 2005; reviewed 23 July

BY DIARMUID O'BRIEN

IN 1937 THE INFLUENTIAL FRENCH ACTOR, director, and essayist Antonin Artaud, a theatrical savant with a history of severe depression, undertook a journey to the Irish Free State of all places – probably the last historical setting one would prescribe to a fragile mind. Armed with a dispatch assuring his good character from the Irish plenipotentiary in Paris, Artaud was apparently researching “a very ancient tradition” and he wished to visit the “country where John Millington Synge lived”. After a string of misadventures and a traumatic psychological

breakdown, Artaud was deported (and straight-jacketed) from Ireland a “destitute and undesirable alien”. Seeing as Synge spent much of his early career outside Ireland, Artaud could have avoided the trip, and perhaps the nine years of detention in various mental asylums that followed, had he only known better.

Here Lies is a “theatrical installation” devised by Operating Theatre which compels us to share in the turmoil of a fallen genius. An actual performance of the play lasts only ten minutes, but leaves more of a vibrant impression on the mind than most of the longer plays you’ll attend. While awaiting their turn (twelve shows are performed over a period of three hours,) a small audience of about a dozen people are invited to sit down and examine supplementary material, which includes an amusing, but wholly factual, epistolary (first compiled in the literary quarterly *The Dublin Review 1*, Winter 2000-1) wherein sundry diplomats and officials fall over one another to smooth over the fallout from Artaud’s visit. There was a French campaign to recover Artaud’s misplaced walking stick, as well as various letters he claimed to have had in his possession, and conversely the Free State sought fiscal satisfaction for an Inis Mór islandman to whom the unfortunate Frenchman owed £1 7/6. Artaud also never paid for his week long stay in the Imperial Hotel, Galway (the venue of *Here Lies*) following his abscondment from the islands.

The audience are next ushered into a darkened room by a security guard whose flash lamp strobos erratically. Almost filling the room, an oblong glass box, exhibiting a shabbily whitewashed institutional bedroom, lights up to reveal a dishevelled figure on the bed. Through



the audio headsets provided, a recursive, bluesy composition disjointed with drum beats is now

accompanied by a voiceover (recorded by the actor) paraphrasing Artaud's letter from this cell in a Rouen asylum, petitioning the French Legation for help in retrieving those effects lost in Ireland, as he relates the heinous conspiracy which resulted in his current interment. Though the language he employs is formal and unassuming – he repetitively refers to the gardaí as "honest" and makes pains to assure that only a small faction of them were in the employ of his enemies – the extent of Artaud's madness is nevertheless conveyed. He insists, for example, that he is a Greek subject and that a false identity has been forced upon him. However it is the corporeal plight of the patient before us that wholly illustrates his disorder.

Olwen Fouéré in *Here Lies*

In a mesmerising display of her craft, Olwen Fouéré enacts Artaud as he agonises around the confines of his quarters. In deference to Artaud's own doctrine of a Theatre of Cruelty, her performance could truly be described as a gestalt of thought and gesture. Artaud also strove to liberate theatre from the tyranny of the written word. Though there is a text (the letter) performed in *Here Lies*, it is at some remove by being a recording. Fouéré's movement is leisurely, deliberate and slightly embroidered. It evolves like a sequence of painful tableaux, and yet retains a degree of her own grace, informing each action with an intriguing androgyny. (She wears some sort of wig as well.) Selina Cartmell's direction gives the ten minutes a persuasive momentum.

In the guiding attitude of Operating Theatre, music is as central to the perfor-

reviews

mance as blocking and text. Pioneering musician Roger Doyle (who also plays the security guard) provides a persistent score which affects to be more accidental than incidental, and also, through harsh synthesised "skips", cleverly evokes Artaud's later sense of displacement resulting from repeated (51 times) electroshock therapy.

A study in confinement, paranoia, and loss of self, *Here Lies* is a remarkable event and a highlight of this year's Galway Arts Festival, rendered all the more accessible by its central Eye Square venue, relative brevity, and free admission (short and free happen to be two of my preferred theatrical modes). Multiple viewings are possible in the course of the same evening. Even the most jaded of theatergoers would find this option difficult to resist.

LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

By Oscar Wilde

Gate Theatre, Dublin

17 May - 23 July 2005

Reviewed 13 June

BY LOUIS LENTIN

OSCAR WILDE STARTED HIS OPENING night curtain speech to *Lady Windermere's Fan* with "Ladies and gentlemen I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given us a charming rendering of a delightful play and your appreciation has been most intelligent." What would he have said of the Gate's recent production? "Lovely to look at, delightful to know and a Lady Windermere undoubtedly heaven to kiss"? But why, why, transpose the play from its natural Edwardian England society, riddled to the core by the mores of "social prestige", to 1947, a time when "anything goes"? What was gained? Nothing, I fear.

Elements of implausibility of the plot, even for its time, were more exposed, forcing actors to overcome the difficulty of playing situations right for 1892 but totally unreal some two years after the carnage of the second World War.

Despite a programme note setting out his understanding of the play and its depiction and mockery of the morals of Edwardian English society, could it be that director Alan Stanford was really asking us to accept that upper-class rigidity even on the unfashionable side of Grovesnor Square still pertained in 1947, that the upper classes never change? Yet he writes "Wilde, the very Irish satirist knew that nothing ever remains the same." Why then provide a production in which nothing has changed but the visual? Nothing about the characters' behaviour would have been out of place in 1891, and that posed the production with problems it failed to solve.

Stanford's staging, Eileen Diss's beautifully ingenious three in one set, glorious women's costumes by Peter O'Brien: if one missed the men's lounge suits, could have lulled some into mistaking the time as Edwardian and not '47 when clothes rationing still existed and women couldn't wait to lower their skirts by two inches. A society sapped of its strength, yet seemingly having ne'er a thought but who is charming and who tedious.

It says a lot for both staging and the performances by this super cast that none of this greatly weakened my enjoyment. Nevertheless, unreality prevailed, plot and time out of joint. Was this invariably astute director wilfully expounding a "political message"? If so, what? The more things change, the more they remain the same? Was I really being asked to accept, at a time when a Labour



Govern-ment was taxing the British upper classes almost to extinction, that a diabolically clever woman could say, "I have never admitted that I am more than twenty-nine, Twenty nine when there are pink shades, thirty when there are not?"

Lady Windermere's Fan is in many respects analogous to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Rooted to a time when Puritanism and principles still ruled the waves, Wilde was fully aware of the weakness of this unbending society, pithily answering his own question – "What sort of lives do these people lead, who pose as being moral?...My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite."

Into this land of the born hypocrite, he replaces Mrs. Erlynne, once dissident, now without illusions, a lonely hunter with "heart", and a young wife of inbred principles, Lady Winder-mere. who

Conor Mullen and Katie Kirbie in
Lady Windermere's Fan

despite her principles, in a wildly precipitate but understandable action, behaves exactly as Mrs.

Erlynne, unknown to her as her mother, did twenty years ago. To survive she must change, acquire a heart, as she does, accept that people are seldom what they seem, men and women more than either "charming or tedious" and more often than not, there can be just a slim almost indiscernible difference between right and wrong. That is Wilde's case: change and survive or go under. Contraries in art he believed are equally true. It is a pity then that the contrariness at the Gate emphasised the delightfully charming at the expense of the intelligent and radical.

The success of any production of this play hinges on having a wonderfully clever Mrs. Erlynne and a fine Lady Windermere. Ingrid Craigie was indeed gloriously knowing as the first, working

reviews

both role and evolving situation with ease. Katie Kirby emphatically knowing almost all of the time, superb in Act 3, but just failing to fully convince that by the end of the twenty four hours of the action she had made the essential transition from puritanical "child" to a "woman of heart". Conor Mullen attractively and skilfully concealed the possibility that Lord Darlington might indeed be a wicked man. Mark O'Halloran elegantly convinced that Lord Winder-mere was anything but wicked. Caitriona Ni Mhurchu's self-appointed guardian of morals, Lady Berwick, was a joy, as were Michael James Ford's tubbily marriage-lorn Lord Augustus and Alan Smyth's bitingly witty Cecil Graham. Indeed everyone in the cast played off each other with the panache of a finely tuned string orchestra.

Louis Lentin is a theatre director and independent television producer-director

A LITTLE BIT OF BLUE

by Alan Archbold

Passion Machine Theatre Company

in association with Andrews Lane Theatre

Andrews Lane Theatre

Reviewed July 15, 2005

BY BELINDA McKEON

WITH HIS FIRST PLAY, ALAN ARCHBOLD has wisely ticked a number of boxes marked "tried and tested": sporting drama, check; musical elements, check; gritty comedy, check. And appeal to a wider audience than enjoyed by many plays: check, check, check. Yet, while recent house-fillers such as *Alone It Stands* and *I, Keano* may have paved the way for Archbold's depiction of the long, lonely summer of a Dublin supporter, a play

with the subject matter and approach of *A Little Bit of Blue* was always likely to hold firm to its own ground. After all, its metaphorical home ground – Croke Park – is just a few miles away, ensuring an audience sympathetic to the sporting struggle at the core of the play. And the timing of Passion Machine and Andrews Lane in staging this co-production could hardly be better; even if Dublin's chances of an All-Ireland end in disarray, hopes and passions are heightened around this time of year. It's a smart ticket.

And, as summer fare, *A Little Bit of Blue* works well; it dares to dream on a number of levels, without venturing too far into the darkness which could edge its audience's grateful laughter with traces of guilt or discomfort. Though a little too aptly named, its protagonist, Sam Maguire, is well-drawn in his blend of indolence and anguish, and played with sensitivity and humour by Pat Nolan. Meanwhile, as his best friend, wife and teenage daughter, the efforts of Joe Hanley, Catherine Byrne, and Rebecca Grimes respectively, do much to flesh out the vicissitudes of Sam's life beyond Hill 16. Rooting much of the play's exposition in chants and flashbacks which take place on the Hill, Archbold has given his players, and director Paul Mercier, a trickier structure than is faced by many a GAA manager. Faced with the challenge of pushing a convincing life story out of the buzz and the brawl of the football stands, they succeed as well as they can.

It's a pity that Archbold's script prevents them from going further with this quest, as Sam's private woes, though not unusual, possess considerable dramatic potential. His wife has left him; he has lost his job in a factory; and Clare, the spirited daughter he adores, is not only



embroiled in a bitter row with her mother, but stuck in an abusive relationship – and, we soon learn, pregnant. Archbold moves Sam's story along quickly, managing, for a time, to steer clear of crippling sentiment – except, of course, where his love of the Dubs is concerned. An entertaining foray into life as an aging bachelor in contemporary Dublin ensues, complete with Croatian sidekick (a fine comic turn by Hanley), corporate bores in the best seats at Croker, and lusty middle-aged women.

The writing out of which these scenes grow has a fresh wit, but when the predicament faced by Clare lurches from the troubling to the desperately tragic, Archbold's grip on his story weakens to the point where it seems no longer his own.

It's not that this grave turn of events

Members of the cast including Pat Nolan and Catherine Byrne in A Little Bit of Blue

seems too harshly at odds with the cacophony of terrace-inspired song and motion into which Mercier's cast frequently

bursts. Given, the musical numbers are of the upbeat variety, but there's no reason why the high voltage of these ensemble performances should not sit interestingly, even affectingly, alongside the downturn in Sam's fortunes. The problem is, rather, that they are allowed to take priority over true exploration of Sam's psyche, of the deepening mire in which he finds himself, so that satisfying knowledge of Archbold's central character is never really a possibility. Sam may pretend to us, and to himself, that nothing matters to him more than football, but the play itself should not fall into this same syndrome of displacement. What results when it does just that are underdeveloped characters, crises that are merely suggested

reviews

rather than depicted, and a frustrating rollout of clichés. I may have been the only non-Dub in the audience, but this latter tendency was particularly damaging in Archbold's simplistic and almost offensive portrayal of football fans from counties other than Dublin, when the play veers dangerously close to the sort of shallow sketches familiar to anyone who has sat through a local talent show. Local it may be, but there's no excuse for *A Little Bit of Blue* to settle for tunnel vision in characterisation or plot. Much like the football team it keeps so close to its heart, what Archbold's script needs is patience – not just passion.

Belinda McKeon is a journalist and critic who writes for publications including The Irish Times

THE LITTLE MERMAID

Created by Zoë Seaton and Paul Boyd

Big Telly Theatre Company

Touring; reviewed 7 June 2005

at Omagh Leisure Centre

BY PAUL DEVLIN

REGULAR COLLABORATORS ZOË SEATON and Paul Boyd's latest production for Big Telly, *The Little Mermaid*, is a significant milestone in a long-term creative partnership. Like earlier projects, *The Thief* (2004) or *McCool XXL* (2002), this aquacade-drama is ambitious in terms of scale, visual inventiveness, and, in relation to *McCool XXL* at least, in its intention of capturing the imagination of younger theatregoers. Arguably, *The Little Mermaid* succeeds where earlier projects failed because it manages to draw disparate elements of music, choreography, puppetry, and illusions into a unified theatrical event.

Based on Hans Christian Andersen's short story, this retelling loses some of the subtle complexity and narrative drive of the original tale. Seaton and Boyd's abridged theatrical version, performed entirely without dialogue, does retain the essential charm and warmth of Andersen's story, however, and gains much from the novelty of having the production staged in a swimming pool. Stuart Marshall's vibrant and colourful set design creates a simple but effectively realised mermaid's kingdom in the centre of the swimming pool, surrounded on one side by an elevated platform representing the kingdom of mankind, and on the other by a dank Sea Witch's lair. On the night I saw this production, an audience made up almost entirely of younger children entered the swimming pool gallery, fixed their gaze on Marshall's cartoon-like *mise en scène* and watched rapt as the Little Mermaid rescued the Prince from a shipwreck, fell in love with him, and made a bargain with a Sea Witch to exchange her beautiful voice and mermaid's long-life for a chance to become human and win the Prince's love.

Seaton, who also directs, has clearly developed a confidence and expertise in multimedia theatrical storytelling. Her use of theatrical illusions, inflatable monsters, and carnival masks is at once plentiful and selective. Every device is chosen because it either advances the story or adds significant depth to the overall experience – and Seaton orchestrates the various elements with accuracy and clarity. Claire Mullholland, who choreographs the many synchronised swimming sections of the performance, lends Seaton's cast an elegance strongly



reminiscent of MGM's lavish synchronised swimming-inspired film musicals of the 1940s. The cast here are most successful as an ensemble. Together they are a well-rehearsed, physically impressive, synchronised swimming team. Individually, sometimes the chlorine-heavy atmosphere of the Leisure Centre swimming pool tended to negate any attempts to reach subtlety in performance. This is a production that works best when it is being a big ensemble show in a big unusual space.

Boyd's original musical score is more problematic. When it works it animates the play and galvanises the ensemble. At its best it adds resonance. For example, Boyd cleverly assigns the Little Mermaid a signature melody which at first she uses to beguile the Prince. However, when she later exchanges her voice to become human, the bathetic

*Synchronised swimmers
in The Little Mermaid*

irony of the Prince's failure to recognise her as his one time saviour and one true love (as in Andersen's original story) is emphasised: the Princess of a neighbouring kingdom picks up the mermaid's melody and in doing so convinces the Prince that *she* is his true love. However, this said, Boyd's arrangements do also lean towards over-indulgence, are sometimes overlong, and venture too far into the murky waters of "adult orientated-rock" for my own personal taste.

Admittedly more Disney than Danish folk tale, this is nonetheless strong family entertainment from Big Telly. Seaton and Boyd's joint artistic reasoning has clearly developed into a style.

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

reviews

MADAM T. by Johnny Hanrahan,

Meridian Theatre Company
Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork
21– 30 April 2005,
Reviewed 27 April
BY LISA FITZPATRICK

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JOHNNY Hanrahan, with musical direction by John O'Brien, *Madam T.* is adapted from Guy de Maupassant's cynical short story *The House of Madame Tellier*, in which the Madam of a brothel closes for a day and night, and brings her "girls" to the countryside, to attend her niece's first communion. The very ornate Victorian Everyman Palace theatre, with its highly decorative red and gold proscenium, is the perfect setting for the decadence of this bordello opera. The set design, by Colin Falconer, plays upon this, setting a contrast between the theatre architecture and the higgledy-piggeldy interior where the prostitutes fight, pose, and flirt.

This production blends a number of different styles and genres. In an expressionistic gesture, Madame T. and her lover, the Judge, are split into two personae, a Public and a Private. The Private personae are played by soloists, who appear upstage at moments of heightened tension and emotion. Hanrahan also makes use of a full spectrum of performance, mixing dance, song and music with acting. The physical division of the stage into a number of areas gives a physical expression to this layering of performance elements. A thrust stage, raked and bare, extends beyond the curtain, which rises to reveal a Works Chorus upstage, semi-visible behind a scrim, and bathed in red light. In the main playing area, silhouetted against the screen, a rig descends with items of women's clothing

hanging from it.

As the choir sing, half-obsured, four actresses enter. They cavort and pose, beckoning to four men who stand with their backs to the audience. One by one, the men (Kieran Ahern, Dave Coon, Myles Horan, and Frank Bourke) move downstage to narrate expositional fragments. Gradually, the narrative dominates, as black curtains close on the choir, and the actresses are left on stage for the first brothel scene. The women fight over clothes and men, under the stern but kindly eyes of Madame T (Billie Traynor). Traynor brings a nice energy to the part, giving a calm focus to the scene as she soothes her "girls", who address her as "Mama" – lending the brothel a homely air. Her sober costume and tightly pinned hair contrasts with that of the other female characters, and links her visually to the men. Teresa La Rocca, Fiona Condon, Tracy Harper and Julie Sharkey perform the parts of the prostitutes.

Cormac O'Connor's musical composition and sound design blend song with spoken dialogue, building a rich soundscape with choirs, instrumental music, and solos by Sonya Keogh and Richard Wiegold, who play the private personae of Madame T. and the Judge. The Judge's public persona is performed by Diarmuid Fehily. This splitting of the central characters is further elaborated with the introduction of two tango dancers in the final scenes of the play, whose dance expresses the passion that binds them. Paul Denby's excellent lighting design marks the entry of each of the men with a blue light, which marks the passage of time, and prompts the actors to freeze and rearrange themselves into new tableaux. The brothel becomes a scene of homosocial entertainment and male-



bonding, as the men drink and talk to each other. The second scene juxtaposes two spaces on the stage: the train, on which the Madame and her prostitutes travel to the countryside, and the darkened brothel, where the men shout and clamour for admittance.

In the countryside an azure sky is created by blue light on the scrim, bright green grass and poppies form the background, and the lighting recreates bright sunlight. A scarecrow is decked with flowers, and the prostitutes romp with Madame T's small niece. And the first communion scene, with the Cork Children's Chorus dressed as communicants and carrying candles, is a spectacle of innocence that brings tears to the eyes of the Madame and the prostitutes. Yet the story confounds audience expectations. Immediately after the communion, the women hurry back to the city. The

*Meridian Theatre
Company in Madam T*

countryside has not been a redemptive influence. The silence at night frightened them, keeping them awake and tormenting them with memories of their own childish dreams, while the white gowns of the children causes them to grieve for their own loss of innocence. They return to their old lives with a sense of abandon and sadness.

Although the individual elements of this piece are often excellent, it does not quite cohere. In particular, the device of the Public and Private personae for the Judge and Madame T, expressed through song, dialogue and dance is confusing in performance, although imaginative in its conception. It mirrors other dualities of countryside and city, innocence and experience, but in this already complex production, the meaning does not emerge clearly. The music, which creates an atmosphere of foreboding that

reviews

reminds the audience of the darker reality behind the often lively and colourful stage images, seems sometimes to emphasise the bitterness of the tale over the comedy. Overall, a greater simplicity in the staging would bring out the beauty of what is already there.

MEG'S HEAD by Karen Pennefather

Replay Productions

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

15-30 May 2005, reviewed 26 May

BY DAVID GRANT

AIMED AT A YOUNGER PRIMARY SCHOOL audience, *Meg's Head* was one of the pieces of new writing developed as part of Replay's Script Lab project in 2003. In its published form, it reads like a conventional storybook, giving it a life beyond its original staging, and on the page it is hard to imagine how well it was brought to life by the three actor-storytellers who

embodied its various characters on stage. The ever-vivacious Niki Doherty represents the central character, Meg, who provides the audience with a child's eye perspective on dyslexia. Sharon Morwood and Maclean Stewart represent her mum and dad, her teachers (Mr Long and Miss Medium), and Crinkum and Crankum, the cupboard-dwelling learning-refuseniks whom Meg helps confront their fear of letters and numbers. Richard Croxford's direction deftly weaves a seamless relationship between storytelling and characterisation, so that each role is clearly evoked without interrupting the flow of the narrative.

At first the "he says" and "she says" seem a little intrusive, but a playing style emerges which fuses the spectacle of performance with the intimacy of storytelling, and this clearly

Sharon Morwood and
Maclean Stewart in
Meg's Head



JON BAUCHE

engaged the predominantly young audience at the Lyric. The performance I saw was a showcase event as part of the Belfast Children's Festival, and the scale of the venue was sometimes at odds with the style of the production. It was clear, however, how effectively the piece would work in its normal school setting.

The writing is perfectly tailored to the target audience, allowing them to feel a certain superiority to the adults present, who are foolish enough to think that "cutiewootie babywaby" language can be understood by anyone. Meg's parents delight at their daughter's rich imagination contrasts sharply with the teachers' preoccupation with formal education, and Meg's slow withdrawal into herself in the face of her increasing confusion with letters and numbers is gently but vividly evoked.

When finally she retreats to the safety of the cupboard, Crinkum and Crankum explain that what she is hiding from is the Binkum. Once her fear is named, she seems better able to confront it, and courageously leads her new friends against their common foe with the courage of a lion, the cunning of a fox, and the craziness of a carrot. Between them, and one step at a time, they marshal the recalcitrant letters and numbers into some sort of order and the story concludes on a constructive note: "Once there was and once there was not a girl called Meg... She was brave and clever and sometimes she made mistakes".

The "once there was and once there was not" formula reprises the start of the narrative and encapsulates the power of Meg's story to stand for the real experiences of other children. Karen Pennefather and Replay have worked closely with the Northern Ireland

Dyslexia Association in the development of the production, and an accompanying note points out that "along with the difficulties (of the condition) can be found real strengths, including problem-solving skills and enhanced creativity". *Meg's Head* succeeds in bringing this statement to life.

David Grant is Head of Drama at Queen's University Belfast.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

by William Shakespeare

Corcadorca Theatre Company

Old Irish Distillery, Cork, and promenade

15-25 June, reviewed 17 June

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY *THE MERCHANT of Venice* challenges directors and dramaturges to remain faithful to the vicious, vengeful Shylock of the script without sliding into anti-Semitism. Post World War II, the play is often considered impossible to stage, and when performances are attempted the tendency is to stress Antonio's maltreatment of Shylock, and Shylock's moving defence of his own humanity. The problem with this interpretation is that it provides us with a human Shylock in the first act, but cannot adequately account for his later insistence on his pound of flesh.

Corcadorca's promenade production, staged as part of the company's ambitious Relocations Project, finds innovative and thought-provoking solutions to this problem. Director Pat Kiernan and dramaturge Jocelyn Clark boldly emphasise the scripted references to Jews and Christians, and use details of the set, acting, and performance to draw out the Christian-oriented nature of the work.

reviews

Rather than portraying Antonio as the lone anti-Semite, this production brings the audience into a world where both characters and audience are implicated in the destruction of Shylock. The tragedy of the Jewish merchant is given a weight that unsettles the romantic ending of the comedy, casting a shadow over the final scenes which, in other productions, usually distract the audience from the broken figure in the courtroom.

The performance begins at the Old Irish Distillery on the city quays, then travels though the streets and across the river to the courthouse, then on to a church on Francis St. The audience initially gathers in an open courtyard in front of the warehouses. Musicians and a cast of community players mingle with the spectators. The pathways outside the warehouses represent the streets of Venice. At one end, the façade of a two-storey house represents Shylock's home. Small details suggest the cityscape: there is a menorah in one window; a ticker-tape screen on the side of the building reads "7.5% on 3,000 ducats", and an unobtrusive, official-looking metal sign bolted to the wall announces "Pork Trucks Right of Way". Salanio and Salarino, played by Sean Duggan and Damien Devaney, yowl and scamper and paint swastikas on Shylock's front door.



Eileen Walsh in *The Merchant of Venice*

To represent the voyage from Venice to Belmont, the audience is led through an empty warehouse, where

gigantic projections of waves and water images cover the surfaces of the space, and the musicians supply the loud clanging sounds of the ship at sea. Portia's home in Belmont is a large cage, luxuriously fitted out, foregrounding her lack of freedom. Eileen Walsh plays Portia as a sexually aware, adult woman, rather than a virginal girl, heightening her frustration and lack of choice, and subtly and humorously emphasising issues of gender and power. After her betrothal to Bassanio, when news comes of Antonio's arrest, the action moves to the courthouse. The spec-

MICHAEL SWEENEY/PROVISION

tators are led though the streets behind banners that read "Jewish Dog", and "Revenge", attracting curious attention from passers-by. The effect is to both heighten audience discomfort, and to implicate the spectators in the anti-Semitism of the dramatic world.

The play is performed by a large multi-ethnic cast that includes Jerzy Gralek as Shylock (on the cover of this issue of *itm*), Niamh Linehan as Nerissa, and Kieran Ahern as Antonio. David Ogochukwu and Enrique Fonseca play Portia's rejected suitors, and Bassanio is played by Moscow-trained Mark D'Aughton. Betti Jewiarz plays Jessica and Ryszard Radwanski plays Tubal. The community cast are similarly multi-ethnic. As a result, Shylock, Jessica, and Tubal all speak with strong foreign accents. Their exclusion in Venice is therefore reiterated in their "foreignness" before an Irish audience. Similarly, casting Ogochukwu as Morocco gives an edge to Portia's interaction with her African suitor. In the text, Portia hopes Morocco will not choose her, but in this production she recoils from him, turns her back, and flinches when he comes near. The gestures express disgust, as does her dismissive comment "May all of his complexion choose me so". So often understood as the romantic heroine, whose role in Shylock's downfall is motivated by her love for Bassanio, Portia is here represented as fully complicit in the racial hatred that drives the other Christians in the play.

The community cast who mix invisibly with the audience laugh at Shylock's speeches, seeming to mock his heavy accent, and laugh at Morocco. In the courtroom scene, they cheer and jeer at Shylock's humiliation. This is

remarkably effective and very discomfiting, forcing the audience to respond to the action in the immediate context of their own society.

This is an excellent production, exciting, imaginative, sensitive, well acted and brilliantly staged. By asking the audience to consider how the anti-Semitism of the play speaks to contemporary concerns, it sets the benchmark for any other company planning to produce it.

MOUTH

by John Dawson and Andy Crook,

Articulate Anatomy Theatre

Project Arts Centre

25 April - 07 May 2005

Reviewed 6 May BY FINTAN WALSH

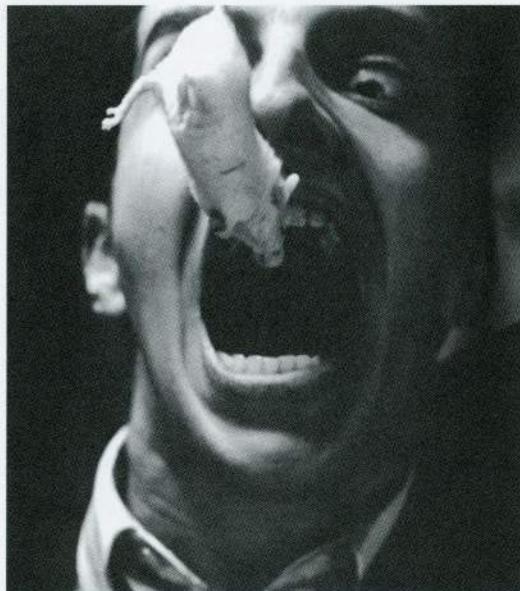
THE PROMOTIONAL IMAGE FOR Articulate Anatomy's *MOUTH* compels its viewer to stand up and pull back in rapid succession. The first thing to demand attention is the large face which lurches forward from the darkness of the black and white poster, as if hazarding an impossible escape from its two-dimensional confines; the mouth agape as if anticipating its first breath. Immediately following this initial shock the eye shifts upwards, where a white mouse dangles in the air, and it quickly becomes apparent that the only thing the mouth is reaching for is the vermin within inches of its bite. *MOUTH*: a show that promises to be as captivating as it is hard to swallow.

Written by John Dawson and Andy Crook, *MOUTH* is Articulate Anatomy's first completely original work. Performed by five actors, the piece explores the role of myths, fairytales, and urban legends in the structuring of reality and the delicate relationship between fact and fantasy in a heavily narrativised world.

reviews

These complicated binds are teased out in the play's central, triangulated relationship comprised of a lecturer on classical mythology; a secret society that deliberately creates and circulates urban legends, and a renegade college student, intent on challenging the beliefs of everyone involved.

The play begins with the young academic, Cindy Riding (Gillian McCarthy), advancing her anthropological understanding of mythology to an undergraduate class at UCD, a theory she justifies on the basis of myth's cross-cultural recurrence. When Riding is lured, under pretence, to an old sweet factory by her student Dianna (Jody O'Neill), these beliefs are all held up to challenge. Here she meets a group, of which Dianna is a member, that meet to 'invent' urban legends - a practice which flies in the face of Riding's scholarship. From their unlikely base, the group's other members - Sam (Mal Whyte), Jake (Anthony Morris) and Patrick (Mark D'Aughton) - gleefully fabricate and recite tall tales of semen-contaminated pizza, spider-filled boils, and kidney harvesting - each person declaring original authorship over the story told. Such claims of authenticity conflict with Riding's own beliefs, and she dutifully asserts to having heard all the stories before. Tensions climax when Dianna turns on both groups to show them just how



Articulate Anatomy's Mouth

much of their own lives are carefully constructed fictions - whether

designed to assuage painful memories or to inject an otherwise grim future with hope. The destruction of a story, she points out, is often the destruction of a life.

MOUTH's main narrative is regularly interrupted by highly choreographed dumbshows, which enact the story being described in a distilled, stylised form. Some such instances are mildly entertaining (as in the case of the performers dancing with pizza-masked faces), and others are theatrically impressive (as when the actors creep about the set like crazed spiders), but they generally fail to grab the audience's attention, certainly not to the same extent as a belly-bound mouse. In addition to these highly phys-

GETTY IMAGES

ical interludes, which aim to fracture the otherwise naturalistic form and engage the audience on multi-sensory levels, the show is frequently punctuated by electronically produced sounds, evocative of gastric gurgles. Unfortunately, this effort in grotesquery also quickly defeats its own effect.

In this awkward blend of laborious narrative with physical performance techniques (dumbshow, dance, music), the performance is ultimately stylistically jarring. In being structured around a series of urban legends, the plot is neither well written nor interesting enough to stimulate intellectually, and the supposedly gory tales are too dullsville to seize the audience on a visceral or emotional level. Similarly, the form's spastic interweaving of naturalism and a kind of surrealism leaves one thinking that there are two distinct plays taking place here, both of which have potential, although neither tract is fully realised.

While all performances throughout this piece are sound, Mark D'Aughton, for his energy and discipline of movement, stands out. Like the rest of the cast, he shines brightest when relieved of the clodish text during the dumbshow enactments. The only shame is that director Andy Crook did not harness and fuel this spark in his cast further, by devoting more attention to the piece's theatrical and performative potential, rather than to dialogue. Such a refocusing just might have rescued the performance from the Saturnian impulse, referred to at the play's opening, of eating its kin alive.

As promised, *MOUTH* was certainly hard to swallow. That said, I'm not entirely sure it was worth the indigestion.

NO MESSIN' WITH THE MONKEYS

By Roddy Doyle

The Ark

On tour; reviewed at The Ark,
Temple Bar on 22 May 2005

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

DIRECTED BY LOUIS LOVETT, *No Messin' With The Monkeys* incorporates the use of puppets (from Púca Puppets) and colourful costumes in the creation of a series of interesting and unusual monkey characters. Aimed at 6-8 year olds, Roddy Doyle's play centres around the life of Bertie the monkey (Richie McEntee), an orphan who lives with his extended family in Dublin Zoo. The characters are extremely amusing and the cast are wonderful in bringing them to life for the child spectator.

Three actors onstage, dressed as monkeys, manipulate and voice the puppets in the creation of an entire family. The transition between acting and puppeteering is seamless and all three bring great vibrancy and energy to their roles. Through a combination of narrating and re-enacting, Bertie introduces the audience to his eccentric monkey family, all identified by their own unique characteristics. Bertie must cope with uncle Jimmy (Karl Quinn) who is obsessed with snack boxes, his over affectionate Auntie Mona, his hyper-allergic cousin Nidgy who lives in a plastic bag, and his cousin Benny (Niamh Lawlor) who likes to travel on the Dart.

The audience is presented with a series of adventures as the monkeys escape from the zoo to get snack boxes, venture into the cinema to see the latest film, rescue family members, and are chased by the Gardai. The pacing of the piece is quite fast as the characters quickly move



from one scenario to the next, with Chisato Yoshimi's excellent and innovative set design

creating an exciting forum to act out their adventures. At one point in the production, the set works extremely well in conjunction with Sinead McKenna's splendid lighting design in the creation of a cityscape that represents Dublin's bustling nightlife.

The combination of these unique characters with superb puppets, lighting design, set design, and energetic performances, creates a visually exciting spectacle for the audience. However, problems with the script and some of the directorial choices result in the production losing its momentum and merely becoming a series of repetitive gags. The chase sequences on stage and through the audience provide moments of light relief from some of the extremely static scenes, but

*Puppets seize the limelight in
No Messin' With The Monkeys*

because there are so many chases, they too become repetitive and somewhat tedious.

This primarily results from Doyle's writing. While he has initially created some wonderful characters, they are not provided with a substantial narrative forum in which to develop. The monkeys partake in many adventures - perhaps too many for such a short production - but there is limited focus on a central plot. The fast-paced nature of the production results in the action quickly moving from one scenario to the next until it feels like we are simply watching a group of monkeys running around with no particular purpose. As the monkeys are from Dublin, they tend to speak in Dublin colloquialisms, immortalised in much of Doyle's writing. However, there was a consistent repetition of the word "story" throughout - as in the Dublin slang

"what's the story"- and it became overused to such a degree that its intended function was unclear. If its incessant repetition was included in order to provoke a comic response from the audience, then it failed.

By the end of the play, the monkeys risk being sent to Africa. Appalled by the idea that they will be denied the life of luxury of snack boxes that the zoo currently offers, they hatch a scheme to send a decoy in their place. This is where the play becomes extremely controversial. With the deportation of non-nationals to Africa constantly in the headlines, the play must be read in the context of contemporary Irish circumstances. These themes are not fully explored in the text and only come to the surface at the very end of the play. The characters have specifically Dublin traits and feel at home here rather than in Africa. While introducing issues of race and difference into children's theatre may be interesting, a problem arises with Doyle's depiction of the characters as monkeys. Although presumably unintentional, such a representation cannot be viewed in isolation and harks back to racist colonial attempts to control or dominate by dehumanising those who appear different.

While the production presents interesting characters and ends with some humour, the limited narrative development of the production lacks a basic driving force to sustain engagement. Unfortunately, any positive elements are completely overshadowed by the potentially offensive racist overtones that conclude the play.

Pádraic Whyte is working on a PhD in children's literature and film at Trinity College Dublin.

POND LIFE ANGELS by Enda Walsh

Asylum Theatre Company

Granary Theatre, Cork

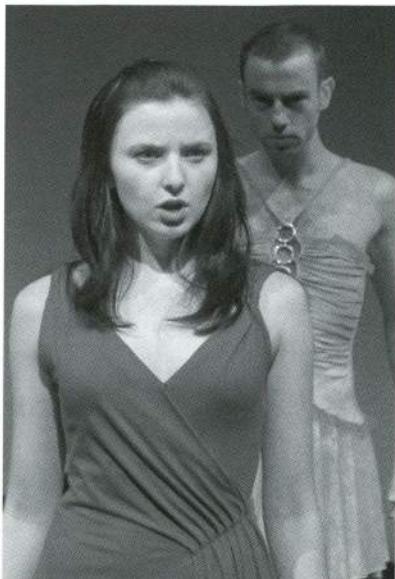
15-25 June, reviewed 17 June

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

IN A MEMORABLE SNIPPET OF dialogue towards the end of *Pondlife Angels*, between the central character Jean and her friend, the friend confides that she has just 'fucked her cousin' in the toilets, and that she will keep any baby that results from the encounter, even if it is deaf and dumb. 'Would be a quiet baby anyway, like', she explains. This exchange is typical of the grotesque and comical world that Enda Walsh creates in his new ode to Cork city.

This one-act play was commissioned by the Cork Midsummer Festival, and produced by Asylum Theatre Company. Directed by Donal Gallagher, with composition and sound design by Cormac O'Connor, the play is performed by Ailish Symons as Jean and Domhnall O'Donoghue as Him. Both performances are strong, with O'Donoghue spinning skilfully through a range of male and female roles, and Symons appealingly naïve, and blind to the passions of those who surround her.

The play recounts the last day of Jean's life. As the audience enters, she is lying downstage in a pool of blood, exactly as she will be at the play's end. The spectators therefore enter a loop of narrative, while the characters are situated in a kind of limbo, their fates already decided, even as they perform their preordained actions. Jean rises, the stab-wound over her heart already visible. She goes to work, and later returns home to dress for her ex-boyfriend Paul's wedding reception. Still obsessed with him, she fantasises



Ailish Symons and Domhnall O'Donoghue in
Pondlife Angels

es that he will abandon his new wife to elope with her. Instead, he plays a cruel trick that sends her running out into the night. Thus Jean's ordinary routine is wound through with the excitement of this daydream, exacerbated by mysterious notes that she receives throughout the day from someone who claims to be in love with her. Her pursuit of this mysterious admirer turns will finally become an attempt to flee her killer.

The set, designed by Olan Wrynn, suggests an area of bare land, fissured and uneven. At intervals marked by sound and lighting cues, the ground appears to be breaking open, as the fault-lines in Jean's world are revealed. The abstract set works well with O'Connor's sound-

effects, which give the mimed sequences with an exaggerated soundtrack. At the back of the stage the props and costumes hang from a line.

Pondlife Angels is a love-song to Cork, creating a landscape inhabited by a bizarre assortment of spiteful colleagues, moronic boyfriends, and women who fuck their cousins in toilets. But Walsh's attachment to the place is apparent, in this affectionately mocking representation, and in Jean's long, lyrical speeches on the city that surrounds her. *Pondlife Angels* is not Walsh's best work, but it is diverting and enjoyable.

THE SANCTUARY LAMP by Tom Murphy

Galglass Theatre Company

On Tour; reviewed 29 June 2005

At the Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire

BY SARA KEATING

COMMENTING RECENTLY ON CONTEMPORARY Irish Catholic Identity, Patsy McGarry suggested that the right time to be anti-Catholic was 30 years ago, when such a subversive position contained within it the capacity for change. The critical reception that greeted *The Sanctuary Lamp* on its first production in 1975, however, suggests that while society may have been ready to level criticism against the Irish Catholic Church, the Church was not yet willing to hear their concerns. Unfortunately, in this latest production of the play by Galloglass, the significance of Murphy's anti-clerical treatise is indeed located in the past; for, by failing to marry the political element of the play with its deeper human qualities, the production fails to fully realise the philosophical force that has ensured the play's continuing theatrical power, despite the dilution of its anti-clerical concerns.



The title of Fintan O'Toole's critical biography of *Tom Murphy: The Politics of Magic*, captures the problematic essence of Murphy's work, particularly as it applies to *The Sanctuary Lamp*. While institutional critique of the Catholic Church provides the surface content of the play, *The Sanctuary Lamp* is crucially dependent on magic for its execution; otherwise, it runs the risk of being weighed down by the heavy burden of philosophical and political concern. This "magic" is located in the space between text and performance, between the empty space of the theatre and the ritual enactment of performance, and is the key element in the play's successful realisation on stage. Unfortunately, its lack becomes the central problem in Galloglass' production.

The play is set in a church in England. Harry is a failed circus强man, a

Elaine O'Dea and
Douglas McFerren in
The Sanctuary Lamp

lapsed Jew, whose faded strength serves as a physical metaphor for his spiritual crisis. He has lost his job, his baby daughter has died, and his best friend has lately run away with his wife. He finds himself taking refuge in a church to which he does not belong, hoping to find physical and spiritual rejuvenation, and absolution from his sins. He is joined by Maudie, a troubled teenage runaway looking for forgiveness, and, later, in the second act, by Francisco, the interloper in his marriage, who is looking for his own manner of exculpation. Together they form an unholy trinity whose very conception renegotiates the terms on which they understand their place in the world; for the forgiveness they seek is not to be found among the Gods, but between men.

The Sanctuary Lamp of the title draws attention to the symbolic weight that the

reviews

church carries in the play and its physical conceptualisation is crucial to its successful realisation. Although designed with multiple venues in mind to facilitate the production's extensive tour, Carol Betera's set lacks the necessary sense of space, the towering iconography, the symbolic significance of the church in its particular social construction which Murphy sets about tearing apart both in physical terms and thematically. Firstly, it is just too small, and the flats that are visible to the back and sides of the set destroy the all-encompassing illusion that this, for the characters, is the last refuge on earth. Secondly, the sanctuary lamp that gives the play its title gains its symbolic power through its physical and ideological remoteness from the material needs of the characters; here, its low physical positioning on the already dwarfed stage fails to provide the emblematic significance that Murphy clearly signposts in the play.

The performances by Douglas McFerran as the desperate Harry, David Gorry as the cynical Francisco, and Elaine O'Dea as the vulnerable Maud are undoubtedly strong, making the best of Murphy's tendency towards rhetoric, which is particularly indulged in this play. There is something lacking in Caroline Fitzgerald's direction of the cast, however, that denies the actors the full expression of their roles. Firstly, Frank Kelly's cameo as the Monsignor lends the character an unwarranted importance and provides an inappropriate inter-textual reference to the popular parody of the Catholic Church, the late 1990s sitcom *Father Ted*. Secondly, Fitzgerald's direction of the plays key moment, when Harry regains his strength and lifts the pulpit, betrays her

fundamental misunderstanding of the play's concerns. This gesture in *The Sanctuary Lamp* provides the key expression of Murphy's dramatic vision; the transformational moment in which Man's despair in the Gods is replaced with a deeper faith in humanity. In this production, however, it is played with a casual triviality that dissolves the tension between Harry's struggle and defeat, diluting his magnificent mental and physical feat, as well as Murphy's astonishing dramatic feat, and the magic that holds the key to the play's success.

Sara Keating is completing her PhD at the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin, and reviews theatre and visual arts for *In Dublin magazine*.

...TANKS A LOT

Barabbas

On tour, Project Arts Centre

Reviewed 21 June BY SUSAN CONLEY

A NEARLY BARE STAGE GREETED THE theatregoer in Barabbas' *tanks a lot*, as performed in red nose by founder member Raymond Keane – nearly bare but for the ladder, the broom, and, hanging from the ceiling, a red flag. The beauty of the boards themselves, glowing in the preset light, and the boldness of making such a stark statement, gave one the feeling of safety: this is a company that have been doing what they've been doing for a good while, to a level of aesthetic that makes one feel safe.

That feeling of security, of familiarity, may in fact have been the problem during the brief hour-and-change performance: for despite a characteristically heroic collection of talented individuals convened to create this work, the narra-



Raymond Keane
in ...tanks a lot

tive lacks clarity, hampers Keane's expression and performance, and generally plays it too safe.

Red nose, while in the main wordless, does require narrative clarity, a clarity achieved via the body and through gesture and movement. The very silence of red nose speaks volumes, primarily enacted through the performer's vulnerability whilst he attempts tasks that generally grow and grow in unmanageability until some sort of catharsis occurs. Everyday objects are invested with powers not normally their own - a saucer and a feather

become a phonograph, a red flag becomes "the beloved", a broom becomes a wife - which serves, through simple means, to focus our attention on the paradox that the simplest things in life might have secret abilities or histories.

Very little is ever easy for a red nose; here, however, Raymond Clown comes up against a variety of stumbling blocks that build not so much in intensity as wear the audience down into glum acceptance of the fact that while nothing is suitably straightforward for our protagonist, very little of it is interesting or emotionally challenging enough for us to fling our hearts onto those bare boards with him.

Raymond Clown embarks on a series of endeavours that have to do with the things he likes: he likes listening to music, he likes biscuits (a lot), and tea, he would like to climb the ladder to bring the red flag down to earth, and in each instance, he is in somewhat thwarted. When Raymond courts the push broom, one is struck not so much at the poignancy of the meeting of two beings so lost in need that the inappropriateness of their union is discovered too late, but by the fact that Slava Polunin (of *Snowshow* fame) fell in love with, and parted from, a coat on a coat stand to greater effect. The awkwardness of their coupling is apparent when they arrive in to their reception, an awkwardness that never fully escalates. Raymond selfishly refuses to share his wedding biscuit, and chooses to head down the pub on his wedding night; since his bride has not been sufficiently embodied, we feel no outrage, only a certain sense of inevitability (we saw that coming). The stakes are too low - we don't believe in Raymond Clown's personification of the push broom - and

reviews

therefore the interlude falls flat.

While Keane is supported by a superb set design by Miriam Duffy, and an equally fine lighting design by Mark Gallione, the lack of emotional clarity, upon which one must assume that the narrative of red nose is best fostered, results in a lack of narrative cohesiveness. One felt at a loss at the end of the piece: his life partner long abandoned, his "beloved" shot dead by accident (it could happen to the best of us), we found Raymond Clown in his sitting room, illuminated by a biscuit-shaped lamp, reposing upon his biscuit-shaped couch. We had journeyed with him to this place, and feel little empathy: while his loneliness is apparent, one fails to feel empathetic, as it seems to be his just desserts. That's what he gets for not sharing his wedding cake with his wife, broom or not.

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

TEJAS VERDES by Fermín Cabal

b*spoke Theatre Company

Project Space Upstairs

15 Jul-23 Jul 2005

Reviewed July 19, 2005

BY BELINDA McKEON

WHEN AUGUSTO PINOCHET HELD CHILE in his grip, the seaside hotel called Tejas Verdes – Green Gables – became one of his first concentration camps. Using the monologue form with such determination that it cannot be dismissed as just another escape from the challenges of interaction, Fermín Cabal's exploration of the horrors perpetuated in this place, and in places like it, presents five stories of suffering with an often chilling simplicity. The story around which all the others

coalesce is that of Colorina, a young woman imprisoned in the early 1970s because of the Marxist leanings of her boyfriend Miguel. Though a note of hope sounds faintly at moments in the play, it quickly becomes impossible to deny the realisation that Colorina has been murdered at the hands of DINA, Pinochet's intelligence agency, and that she is not so much addressing as haunting us.

Though this much is intended by Cabal's script as well as by Róisín McBrinn's sensitive direction, McBrinn draws out very clearly the sense of a message waiting to be imparted. It is this decision, though clearly-formulated and carried through with a deep commitment to the seriousness of Cabal's writing, which opens a disquieting vacuum at the heart of the play, and presents to the audience too easy a resolution. This is not to say that McBrinn and her cast downplay the enormity of what happened in Chile and what remains to be done in response – not just there, where Pinochet remains alive and unpunished for his atrocities, but elsewhere, even here. The format is straightforward – each woman, closely connected to Corolina, tells of the events surrounding and following her arrest and disappearance. But the depths of Cabal's characters, the murky truths and half-truths that they grasp to a greater or lesser degree, are well portrayed by each of her five actors, and superbly so by Ger Ryan as the gravedigger who almost loses everything in trying to help Corolina's bereaved mother. Susan Fitzgerald as the fellow prisoner who turns out to have informed upon Corolina, Jane Brennan as the doctor who seems both villain and victim as she lies about the reality of the camps' torture regimes, and Cathy White as the lawyer

representing Pinochet, are visibly fired by the horror of the history they find themselves portraying, and their performances are the stronger for this vulnerability.

At first Sarah Brennan seems miscast as Corolina; the words, the anger, the knowledge of the torture victim seem to disintegrate to generality, even close to triviality, in her mouth, and the lightness of her touch seems to fall desperately wide of the mark. And it is true that Brennan, albeit a



Cathy White, Ger Ryan, Sarah Brennan, Susan Fitzgerald, and Jane Brennan in **Tejas Verdes**

fine young actor, is still developing the commanding stage presence required for a part like this; still honing that mixture of power and restraint which would make for an unforgettable Corolina. Yet the problem with her performance is not primarily her responsibility. Rather, it stems from her director's preoccupation with a notion that certainly exists in Cabal's script, but does so in a much more ambiguous and even ironic sense than this production would

suggest: that of forgiveness. Dressed in white and gentle, almost ghostly, tone, Brennan's Corolina is the epitome of innocent victimhood; so innocent that when she steers us, in her final monologue, towards a responsibility to forgive in order to move on, we cannot take her entirely seriously. Though little more than a child when she is thrown into the sea by Pinochet's agents, Cabal's central character is fundamentally a woman – a woman who has seen more than most, who has been murdered by acts of deception and wilful blindness, as much as by rape and torture; a woman who sees the world in greater gradations than the black and white of the redemption-or-retribution dynamic can allow. Like the burnished copper of Paul Keogan's magnificent set, Corolina's mind, her feelings, are not transparent. When she swings through a single beam of light, she sees difficult truths only momentarily. Cabal, you sense, does not expect her to do more than this.

McBrinn's interpretation of *Tejas Verdes* is confident and powerful, and its engagement with some of the most terrible stories imaginable remains in the mind long after the demise of the tiny lights which flicker in its characters' wake – in a well-judged and deeply affecting touch, they burn before photographs of actual victims. Though her confidence seems to be in a simpler message than Cabal intended, this production does much to reveal her as a young director to be reckoned with.

reviews

TINE CHNÁMH

Le Liam Ó Muirthile

Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe,

11-21 Iúil 2005

Reviewed by Roisín Ní Ghairbhí

"SIN A BHFUIL ANN DE IS DÓCHA – tamall sa teas ag ceiliúradh." Táirseach is ea an amharclann; doras idir dhá shaol. Is amhlaidh don deasghnáth pagánach ar a bhfuil dráma Liaim Uí Mhuirthile, *Tine Chnámh* bunaithe – an tine chnámh a las-taí faoin dtuath Oíche Féile Eoin agus an samhradh in ard a réime. Bhain an nós le nádúr timthriallach na beatha, a chéiliúrtáí freisin i bhfeilte séasúracha eile mar Bhealtaine agus Samhain. Dhótaí comharthaí an tsaoil a bhí caite agus léimtí thar an tine mar chomhartha athbheochana. Saghais táirsigh a bhí sa tine, a cheadaigh don phobal a racht a scoileadh agus áilleacht na beatha a chéiliúradh- dá neamhbhuaine í.

Ní leor, gan dabht, tine chnámh a chruthú ar státise le teachtaireacht fhuascailteach na tine a thabhairt le fios i suíomh amharclainne. Chuige sin, tá scéal ar leith ag leanúint thine Uí Mhuirthile. I reilg i gcathair Chorcaí atá an t-aicsean suite agus baillíonn meascán carachtar san áit: Walter Vigilans (Diarmuid de Faoite) fear seanchríonna a bhfuil a ómós do shafocht na bhfilí Gaelacha tar éis an ceann is fear a fháil ar mhianta a chroí féin, Crom (Seán Ó Meallaigh) ar mheascán de dhia na drúise agus déagóir atá imithe ar

bóileagar é, Virgie (Tara Breathnach), cailín óg aerach agus an Bráthair Austin (Morgan Cooke) fear a bhfuil a chlaonta gnéasúla á bplúchadh aige faoi chuing rialacha an oird rialta. Tagann mná eágúla isteach sa reilig freisin: Ethel Chráifeach (Anne Marie Horan), Nóra Prioscmut (Susie Lambé) agus Nano Sweeney (Lara Campbell). Ó am gochéile iompaíonn cuid de na carachtaí ina gcosáin. Tá spéis agus tábhacht ar leith ag roinnt le húsaid na gCrosán i *Tine Chnámh*, mar go ndearna Ó Muirthile iarracht chomhfhiosach anseo dráma nuaimseartha a bhunú ar thraigisiún drá-



The ensemble in
Tine Chnámh

maíochta dúchasai agus éiríonn leis an léiritheoir (Darach Mac an Iomaire) spraoi na gcluicheoirí dúchasacha a athchruthú go seoigh. Uaireanta, áfach, baineann crónán síoraí na gCrosán – agus urlabhra fabhtach chuid de na carachtaí - aird ó fhocail fhlíatea an údar.

Is í an choimhlint idir an smacht agus an fhoghlaim ar láimh amháin agus an

PHOTO CREDIT

tsaoirse agus an dearmad ar an dtaoibh eile a chothaíonn bunfhuinneamh dráma *Tine Chnámh*. Bhain Mac an Iomaire taispeántais fhuinniúla as an gclar cumasach a roghnaigh sé ach is cinnte gurb é de Faoite is fearr a chruthaigh pearsantacht iomlán inchreidte – agus a léirigh go ciúin tuisceanach an fhorbairt a thagann ar a charactar ó thus deireadh an dráma. Léiriú fhísiúil a bhí i léiriú seo na Taibhdheirce, é an stílúil in áiteanna agus chuir seit shamhlaitheach Dhara Mc Gee go mór le hatar másfear mistéireach an tsuímh, go háirithe ag túis an dráma. Bhain deacrachtáirthe le luas an dráma cé go raibh fréamha an chuid is mó de na deacrachtáir seo i laigí a bhain leis an gcoiriú a deineadh ar an mbundán is é a chur in oiriúint den stáitse. Tharla sé corrúair gur cailleadh snáthá an phlota toisc an oiread sin béisme ar an bhfísiúlacht: bhí an oiread pocleimnígh agus céiliúrtha tríd sós sa drama gur tháinig maolú ar eifeacht bhuaic an dráma nuair a tháinig sin. Is nuair a tugadh slí do na carachtaí a bhfianaise féin a thabhairt (Vigilans ag trácht go grámhar ar fhilí an seachtú haois déag is úafás air faoi easpa urraim na ndéagóirí) a nochtadh croí na coimhlinte agus croí an dráma. Níor chuir na miondeacrachtáí luais agus urlabhra bac ar an lucht eíseachta mórtreachtaireacht an dráma a thabhairt leo, áfach, bhí neomaití áille lárgais ann. Ar oíche mheirbh na hoíche oscailte, chred an lucht eíseachta go rabbadar, fearacht charachtaí an dráma “tamall sa teas ag céiliúradh”.

Roisín Ní Ghairbhí lectures in Irish at UCD and reviews theatre for Foinse. A version of this review in English is available at irishtheatremagazine.ie.

TWO HOUSES

By John McArdle

Upstate Live

On tour; reviewed at Táin Theatre,

Dundalk on 10 May 2005

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

THE COMPLICATED NATURE OF DOCUMENTING history is at the heart of *Two Houses*, which blurs distinction between “right and wrong” and questions issues of blame surrounding the eviction of tenant farmers in the nineteenth century.

As the title suggests, the play – aimed at 8-10 year olds – is based on two contrasting perspectives of the same event. Set in rural Ireland in 1841, it examines the consequences of high rents, absentee landlords, and crop failure. The production is divided into two parts, the first documenting the perspective of Miss Vanessa (Jennifer Mooney), a member of the landowning class, while the second represents the difficulties faced by Una and Alan McBride (Joanne Mallon and John Finegan), tenant farmers on an estate owned by Miss Vanessa’s family. There is also the Bailiff Mr Cosgrave (Padraic McIntyre) who acts as the go-between and principal narrator of events. As tenants fail to pay their rent and are burned from their homes, two conflicting views are established: Miss Vanessa is saddened by the destruction of tenant houses on her father’s estate and the ill feeling that it creates, while Una and Alan are forced to gather their family and flee their burning cottage. Throughout the production, such an approach introduces the private struggles of individuals into the public history of Ireland, allowing the child to understand the events in more personal terms – thus encouraging a more complex reading of historical circumstances.



While the issues that the play raises are quite interesting, at times it becomes more like a history lesson than a piece of theatre. As Mr Cosgrave contextualises the action within a specific historical moment in Irish history, he uses several approaches in an attempt to engage the audience. He encourages them to understand the complex system of tenant farming through audience participation, with groups of children forming different tenant families, each assigned a specific name. However, the description of historical terms and events soon becomes tedious and confusing. During his explanation, McIntyre gets mixed up and continually refers to groups by the wrong family names. While this may arise from a lack of preparation by McIntyre, responsibility also lies with the writer's use of lengthy explanations.

As Miss Vanessa tells the story of peace and harmony that she sees on her estate, Mr Cosgrave explains the necessity of all

*Joanne Mallon in
Two Houses*

the tenants paying the same rent on the same day so as to maintain order and justice. He directly asks whether it is fair

that some people pay and some people do not. The aim is to pose the child spectators with an ethical dilemma and encourage them to question and revise their viewpoint once they have witnessed Una and Alan's side of the story. However, Miss Vanessa's and Mr Cosgrave's arguments are somewhat weak, and the mutterings from the audience indicate that the children are not entirely convinced about Mr Cosgrave's notion of "fairness" and his decision to burn homes. This poses problems at the end of the play when he states that "Yous were right when yous agreed with me that this was the right thing to do". Such a statement makes simplistic assumptions about the conclusion the audience has reached and seems somewhat forced, as there was little indication that the children necessarily agreed or disagreed with his thesis.

While Jennifer Mooney is excellent in her portrayal of the delicate Miss Vanessa, the static nature of her scenes and the tedious explanations by Mr Cosgrave cause the first half of the play to lag significantly. Ultimately, director Declan O'Gorman fails to engage the audience to the same extent during the first half as he does in the second.

In this second section, Mallon and Finegan provide vibrant energy and enthusiasm in the documentation of Una and Alan's perspective. After Paul O'Mahony's magnificent set of Una and Alan's cottage unfolds before us, the audience are presented with a the story of a couple that begins with wild revelry and dancing at their wedding but spirals into the depths of poverty and helplessness. This storytelling approach strikes the balance of simultaneously entertaining and educating, as contextualisation is successfully coupled with the narration and re-enactment of their life story. Consequently, the audience identify with Una and Alan more so than with Miss Vanessa, and the overall aim of the play is lost. The production ends with the spectators predisposed to respond more positively to the tenants, with the result that the two sides of the story are not presented in equal terms.

UNDER MILK WOOD

By Dylan Thomas

Island Theatre Company, Limerick

On Tour April 19-23 2005 at the Pavilion, Dún Laoghaire; Reviewed 21 April 2005

BY SIOBHÁN O'NEILL

WITH LYRICAL LANGUAGE AND A LOT OF energy, the live performance of work meant for radio can challenge and satisfy our imaginations – but it's worth remem-

bering that a play for voices cannot easily make the transition to stage. Island Theatre Company takes on this challenge of moving Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* and its 57 characters from the airwaves to the theatre space – achieving some things well, but without fully convincing that the experiment was worthwhile.

The curtains rise at the Pavilion to reveal a large wooden table stage centre, with a surrounding cool wash of mood blue lights, as two men sit at rest behind the table. And with the strike of a match to light the candle resting in front of them, our story begins. The duo of Jon Kenny and Myles Breen share the daunting task of playing all 57 characters from the fictitious Welsh village of Llareggub, where the story is set. The play begins silently and slowly, luring us in to the villagers' lives behind closed doors, as well as on the cobble stoned streets. While Thomas' lyrical text speaks for itself, Kenny's opening delivery sets a sleepy tone, which fails to grab the audience's attention.

The story of the play is that there really is no story: Llareggub is a village just like any other, where the people wake, do a bit of work by day, and go to sleep again at night. To make the play work, it is necessary to bring these characters fully to life, showing their quirkiness and individuality. In Thomas' script, this is achieved through variations in voice. Kenny and Breen's task here is to achieve this distinction in performance. With a minimal set, and a costume of black shirt and trousers, the actors distinguish one character from another by using props like glasses or an apron. These transitions are not always successful, however.

The task of presenting the entire population of Llareggub is monstrous and can



only work comedically. At times, Kenny and Breen achieved moments of intense energy and hyperactivity which sent us to a Wonderland, where we were magically sitting at the Mad Hatter and March Hare's tea party. Running around, jumping over and under the large oak table, the actors brought life to the otherwise sleepy moments of this quaint little village (and production). Kenny and Breen capture the villagers' voices well, but fail to embody the characters. This was particularly noticeable with the performance of female roles: when it comes to cross gendering, high pitched voices for female characters is not enough to distinguish male from female, or neighbour from neighbour. Moving so quickly from one character to another meant that we did not have time to get to know the villagers more intimately, a problem that might have been alienated by the addition of a

Myles Breen and Jon Kenny in **Under Milkwood**

few more actors running around on the stage with Breen and Kenny. Because there is a lot to say about

the village of Llareggub the decision to give only two actors the responsibility of telling the story proves a disappointing choice.

Artistic Director Terry Devlin challenged himself and the actors to transform Dylan Thomas' poetry into a stage performance, and he should be commended for taking on a challenging project that involves a certain amount of risk-taking. The burden of embodying so many voices proves too challenging for such a small cast however, suggesting that the words of Dylan Thomas are better heard than staged.

Siobhán O'Neill is completing an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway and worked as an editorial assistant for this magazine.

A VERY WEIRD MANOR

By Marie Jones

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

3 June- 23 July

Reviewed 18 June 2005 BY TOM MAGUIRE

WHAT HAS MORE HAM THAN A DENNY'S processing plant? The answer is Marie Jones' *A Very Weird Manor*, her latest offering at the Lyric. If the enthusiastic response from a Saturday night Belfast audience and the decision to extend the run further into July are anything to go by, there is a huge appetite for just this kind of show at this time of year. Moreover, any production reuniting Jones, director Ian McElhinney, and actor Dan Gordon (familiar from the Lyric production of Jones' *The Blind Fiddler* and favourites with the Lyric audience) offered the promise of a good night out. The audience certainly felt that they had had that.

The story starts with the premise that one Enda O'Loan, having inherited a large estate and manor somewhere in Ireland, agrees a deal with an Australian television company to film a reality television show based on the weird members of staff who come with the property. When O'Loan becomes suspicious that the amateur murder mystery play that the locals are to put on might be the cover for actual killing, he is torn between the desire for self-preservation and the need to feed the demands of the production company with whom he has incurred a substantial debt. Thematically, this links the play with Jones' earlier *Stones in His Pockets* in examining the relationship between real life in contemporary Ireland and the distorting effects of the mediation of local cultures for global markets. O'Loan is a northern city ingénue

caught between the wily rural southerners and the demands of his Australian television director. This urban-rural split means, however, that the critique that the production offers is less immediate in performance than the sensation of watching a show in which *Whiskey Galore*, *The Darling Buds of May*, and *Father Ted* all come together.

Principally, this is because Jones' strengths as a writer come from her intimate understanding of the kinds of roles which actors enjoy playing – and the cast of *A Very Weird Manor* revel in the parts they take. There are a number of moments of beautifully realised theatricality, including a scene where the actors replay the preceding scene in reverse; and another where they take on the roles of locals trying to foreground their talents for entertainment for the cameras, which becomes the occasion for a parade of bizarre skills from the actors. The strength of Ian McElhinney's direction throughout is that it allows the ensemble to be sustained while at the same time giving rein to the very different strengths of Michael Condron, Paddy Jenkins, Laura Hughes, Helen Norton, and Dan Gordon. In contrast to the broad-brush stroke characterisation of these roles, Barry McEvoy as Enda O'Loan is the focus of the audience's empathy and he has an easy underplayed way of narrating the story directly.

The design by David Craig provides opportunity for switching between the live and supposedly filmed moments, with the proscenium configured as a large television screen and the action alternating in front of and behind a gauze. While the main set places the action in the kitchen of the manor in the first act, clever use of concealed doors



Barry McEvoy and Dan Gordon
in **A Very Weird Manor**

and mobile set elements allow the playing space to include a beach, the office of a solicitor, a disused barn, and an Australian hospital. One of the design high points is the staging of a car chase across a foggy bog and along the winding country roads of the county, which itself earned appreciative applause from the audience.

If there are criticisms to be made of the production, however, they are these. Firstly, the handling of the underpinning idea that reality television distorts the reality it represents is often confused, where concepts of the performance of self, multiple role-playing, actuality, and mediatization intersect but never really become coherent –due to the constant alternations between narration, performance, and the creation of multiple plays-within-a-play. In effect, Jones is fantastic in providing a sense of playfulness

which actors and audiences alike relish. However, while she is able to indicate that any sense of

reality is unstable because it is always susceptible to being reconfigured in performance, ultimately the deployment of this sense of playfulness does not form an argument in which these theatrical devices make sense as a critique of reality television or globalised media. Secondly, while offering the possibility of an exploration of performed identity, the play too often reiterates the very caricatures of Irishness that it seeks to contest. Stage Irishness, no matter how ironically played, is still stage Irishness. Yet, these criticisms pall beside the sheer sense of joie-de-vivre with which the performance is imbued: offering them is rather like criticising a soufflé for not being a steak dinner. It would be fantastic if all performances could use playfulness to make serious

points (think Tom Stoppard or Dario Fo); but in this instance, the pleasure offered by the action superseded any sense of lack. This was an enjoyable performance from an accomplished company even if it didn't offer much in the way of brain food.

Tom Maguire is the Subject Director for Drama at the University of Ulster.

WHAT HAPPENED BRIDGIE CLEARY

By Tom Mac Intyre

Peacock Theatre

27 April – 23 May 2005

Reviewed 19 May 2005

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

IN 1886, WB YEATS PUBLISHED 'The Stolen Child', a romanticised presentation of the west of Ireland, in which a child is stolen by the fairies, a changeling left in his place. Nine years later in Cork, one Michael Cleary, together with his neighbours, burned his wife Bridget alive – believing that she too had been kidnapped by the fairies, a changeling left in *her* place. It's an interesting distinction, this. For Yeats, the changeling was a legend that allowed him to create a beautifully poetic celebration of the Irish landscape. But for Cleary it was a terrible reality – one grounded in ignorance, poverty, and violence. What's disturbing about Tom MacIntyre's dramatisation of Bridget Cleary's murder is that he seems aware of the tragic brutality of his source material, but surrenders to a Yeatsian impulse towards poetisation – beautifying and sanitising the violence at the heart of this story.

What Happened Bridgie Cleary is a meditation on love and forgiveness, stuffed to the brim with intertextual references to other Irish plays. The action is set in a

purgatorial space where Bridgie (Catherine Walker) confronts both her husband (Tom Hickey) and her supposed lover (Declan Conlon) about what was done to her. This arrangement immediately calls to mind Beckett's *Play*, but it's also reminiscent of Yeats's own *Purgatory*.

The style of performance chosen by director Alan Gilsenan is also reminiscent of those works. In *Play*, Beckett had his characters trapped in urns, only their heads visible; while Yeats often wished that he could immobilise the Abbey actors from the neck downwards. Movement here is similarly restricted: each actor works within a limited zone of the stage, rarely moving out of it – and there is little movement or physical interaction between characters. Things aren't helped much by Joe Vanek's set, which locates events somewhere between a moonscape and a gothic castle, and incongruously fills the backdrop with hats resting on stands.

This means that the success of the play is almost entirely dependent on the actors' ability to carry Mac Intyre's language, a homogenised Hiberno-English that sounds like Synge being filtered through Marina Carr – there's plenty of beauty in the carefully modulated lines, but there's a harshness of tone too.

A few problems arise from this. The first is that Mac Intyre is presenting us with what could be called a poetics of destitution and ignorance. We quickly forget that there is a relationship between the conditions that gave rise to Michael Cleary's murder of his wife, and his and Bridget's romanticised use of speech, which is full of twee malapropisms, infelicities, and mispronunciations. The second difficulty is that each member of the cast seems to have adopted a different



approach to speech and enunciation. Walker attempts – not always successfully – to perform in an “authentic” Irish accent, but doesn’t seem comfortable with the rhythms and tones of the script. Conlon, on the other hand, performs the language without ornamentation, but seems uncomfortable with his rather underwritten character. Hickey gives us his usual blend of energy and conviction, and shows an affinity with Mac Intyre’s work that undoubtedly results from their many collaborations. But the performances didn’t cohere: these characters are supposed to be from different worlds, but at times it felt as if they were performing in different plays.

In the end, the greatest difficulty with this play lies in trying to establish who exactly is being addressed by this work – and what exactly it’s trying to say. I don’t

Catherine Walker and Declan Conlon in **What Happened**
Bridgie Cleary

think the intention is to cause us to reinterpret the story of Bridget Cleary, but instead to use it as a springboard for a celebration

of female individualism, sexuality, and love. That celebration is weighed down by its relationship to the source material however: what’s tragic about the burning of Bridget Cleary is not that she was heroic or individualistic, but that she died with such an utter lack of dignity. Any attempt to re-present that disgraceful incident in a positive or transcendent light risks eliding what actually *did* happen to Bridget Cleary. I found myself wondering during the performance how we’d feel if, in another hundred years, the Abbey were hosting plays set in purgatory about the Kerry Babies case or the killing of Robert McCartney. Mac Intyre’s play is beautifully written, elegantly performed, and often very interesting – but it

PAT REDMOND

doesn't seem sufficiently aware that Bridget Cleary was not a character in a play, or a symbol of anyone's ideals – but a real person.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in English at NUI Galway, and is reviews editor of this magazine.

THE WIREMEN By Shay Healy

The Gaiety Theatre

Reviewed 23 May

and

THE HA'PENNY BRIDGE: THE MUSICAL

By Alastair McGuckian

The Point Depot

Reviewed 3 June BY SUSAN CONLEY

MODERN MUSICALS, WHEN SUCCESSFUL, are money-making machines that travel the world; given the world-wide success of producer/composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, the form is one that has really hit its stride as a generator of mass appeal. Sir Andrew's insipid anthems linger in the mind—and it is truly a gift, of some stripe, to create something both insipid and anthemic, so in a sense, Webber is doing something right; the creators of *The Wiremen* and *The Ha'penny Bridge: The Musical* cannot claim the same aptitude. If Irish drama is to make the leap into the musical theatre realm, it has much to learn, especially as regards not only the challenge of creating a musical, but also as regards the performance of it.

What's the point of a musical? What does music, as a dramatic device, do that words, the mainstay of the straight play, don't do? In well-wrought musicals, words alone are not enough as songs and lyrics lift the themes of the narrative to, quite literally, new heights; orchestration, words, and the expressiveness of the

human voice lifted in song can be thrilling, moving and unforgettable. Additionally, in finely crafted musical theatrical events, dance numbers further lift the human experience out of the mundanity of everyday existence and free the body to react, enact and transcend its limitations. While story is often perceived to be the least of a musical's worries, in the best of them the dramatic arc of the libretto can be short-handed in a way that ensures the work's longevity in public consciousness (*Romeo and Juliet* set amongst the gangs of New York: *West Side Story*; singing nun heals family through music and love: *The Sound of Music*; horny Fifties era teenagers learn about the love the hard way: *Grease*).

Of the two new Irish musicals under review, *The Wiremen* fulfils the above formulae less poorly than does *The Ha'penny Bridge*, in essence because it does do its best to keep things simple. However, much of the same problems hamper both productions, problems in which essential issues such as orchestration, lyricism, musicality, and coherence are never dealt with in a sure-handed way, and in which performers rarely satisfy the necessarily three-fold requirements of musical theatre (actin', singin' and dancin').

In *The Wiremen*, the choice of the form seems a cheeky way in which to incorporate the kind of choreography that its production company has made popular across the globe. Set in 1950s Ireland, the ESB is coming to town in an effort to modernize the hinterlands of the island, in the form of huge rounds of cable and a handful of Jackeens, Charlie Peacock (Michael Sands) and Tommo Kavanagh (Simon Delaney) primary among them. The feeling in North Mayo is mixed as

reviews

the womenfolk— Brigid Foley (Brenda Brooks) and Mairín (Abbie Spallen), chief among them— laud the arrival with high hopes for electric kettles, while the menfolk, led by Paidí Foley (Rory Nolan) resent the intrusion of change and other men's, em, erections. A pitched battle ensues as Peacock and Foley go mano a mano, with sister Brigid's affections mixed into the bargain, as to whether one of the key poles will be raised in a precious corner of the Foley's field. While Fr Groarty (John Olohan) fusses about the edges, ensuring a healthy dose of Holy Catholic Ireland paddywhackery is injected into the proceedings, everything works out fine in the end, a result helped along considerably by director Matt Ryan's gift with creating atmosphere and movement.

However, the libretto sadly misses the point, choosing as it does to concentrate on the boy-meets-girl aspect of the conflict as opposed to illuminating the very real and very interesting facet of all in this narrative: that while the rest of the world was embroiled in transition during the post-World War II period, 1950s Ireland was still waiting for the light bulb. This is actually quite extraordinary, an enormous story that begged a less mundane telling. The choice of lighthearted musicality is further scuttled by the fact that the songs themselves were unremarkable, and the lyrics all but unintelligible in the mouths of variously inexperienced singers. The story itself, bland and cliché-



ridden, didn't live up to what could have been a singular, and singularly Irish, piece of theatre.

By contrast, *The Ha'Penny Bridge* is unoriginal in the extreme, with its themes reminiscent of *The Plough and the Stars* set to highly forgettable music. While the action is pushed forward to 1920s Dublin and the Irish Civil War, its genealogy is clearly traceable to the effects of the Easter Rising, during which time O'Casey's classic is set. Here, we meet Molly (Annalene Beechey), a feisty little piece with Communist leanings who falls for the cheeky George (Stephen Ashfield), who is very unfortunately English. Chaos reigns as spies abound and republican bully-boys threaten the common citizenry, with major moments of comic relief in the form of interludes in Moore Street and the Monto, in which gossip and innuendo fill in much of the exposition. Author McGuckian has loaded the book with as much recogniz-



Brenda Brooks and Michael Sands in *The Wiremen*; the ensemble in *The Ha'penny Bridge*

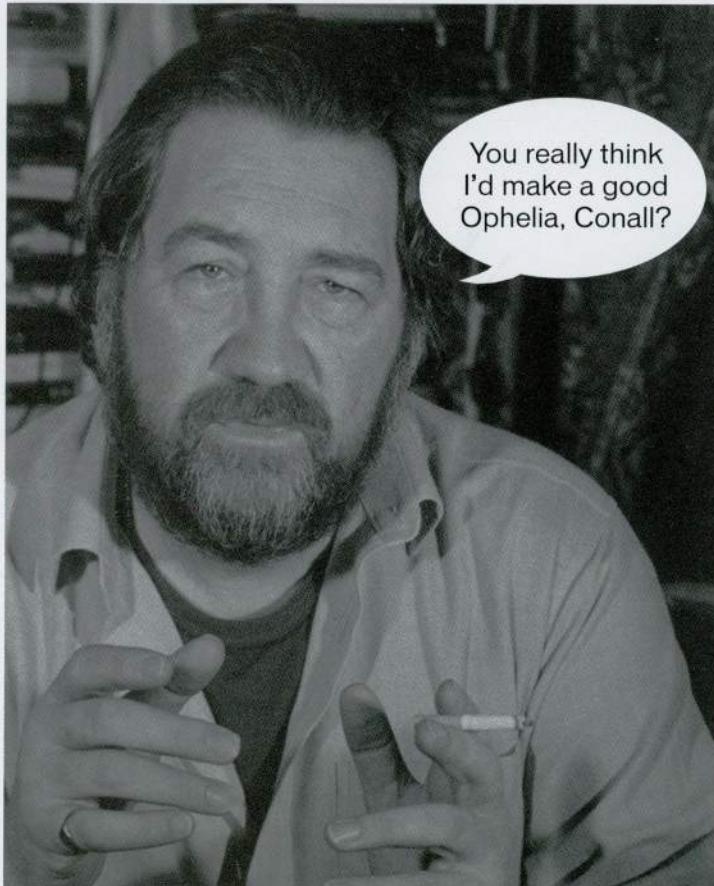
ring like bells, right up to the accidental execution of the pregnant Molly at the end.

A handful of accomplished Irish actors weave in and out of the ensemble, the majority of whom, if not all, are English imports who certainly have the dancin' portion of their duties well in hand; again, it is in their expression of the McGuckian's lyrics that the audience is left to take what they can from context. The songs are poorly delivered, and the music, again, is unremarkable in the extreme. The Ha'Penny Bridge itself has no real significance to the story; while it is Molly and George's meeting place, its real consequence is in

able and nostalgic bullet points (no pun intended) as possible, and the resonances with the action of *Plough* (or, in this case, *Plough!*)

the production's attempt to make a big, sexy, 'wow' element akin to *Miss Saigon*'s helicopter, or *Phantom*'s chandelier. A live bridge onstage, creaking forward from upstage to accompanying blurs of smoke, does not a showstopper make.

The most striking lack in both sets of orchestration is the absence of literal harmony amongst the voices. The majority of the songs in both shows are sung in unison, which seems to be a dead giveaway as regards the limitations of the composers involved. Part of the transcendence of the voice raised in song comes from an opposition of parts, of the tension between soprano, alto, tenor and bass, a tension that, more often than not, actually reflects upon the tension in the narrative. Apart from occasional bursts of harmony, both scores lack this tension - also notably lacking in the book - and result in two very unmusical musicals.



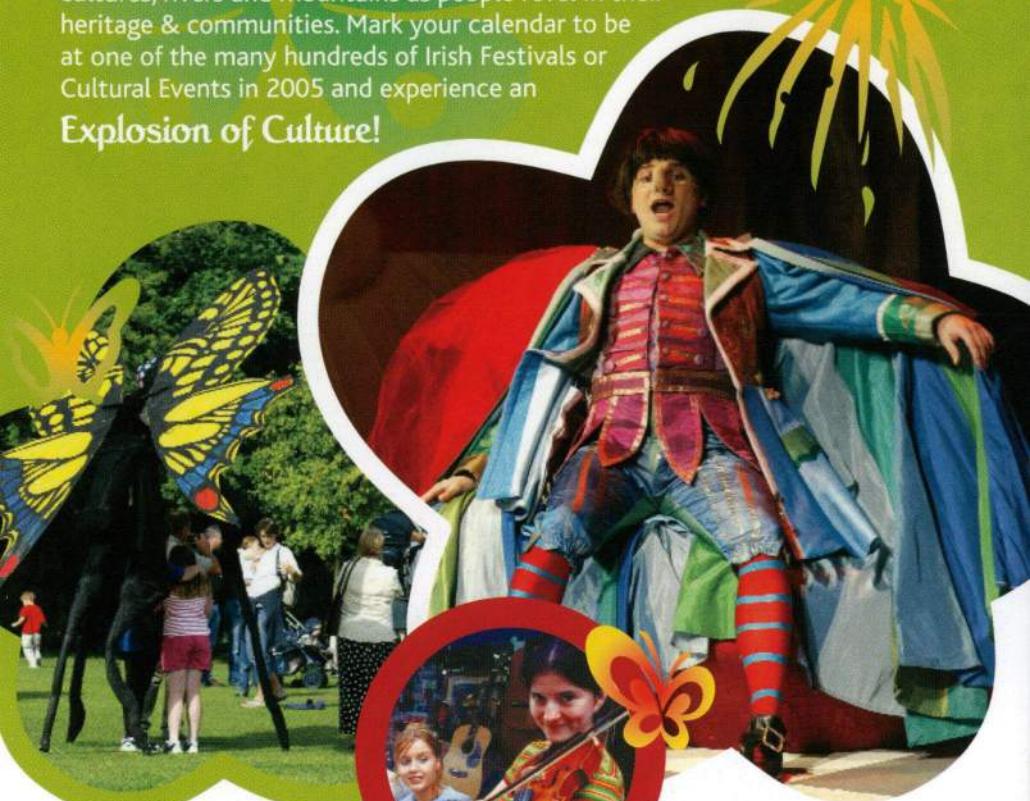
Alan Stanford considers his next corset role.

GAVIN QUINN

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

A World of Festive Culture

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





BE
PART
OF IT



12 SEPTEMBER — 2 OCTOBER 2005

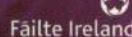
THEATRE DANCE MUSIC LIVE ART VISUAL ART

FRINGE INFORMATION & BOX OFFICE

12 East Essex St., Temple Bar, D2

Book by phone on 1850 FRINGE (1850 374643)

Book online at www.fringefest.com



ISSN 13937855



9 771393 785034

08