

irishtheatre

magazine



- **Donal O'Kelly on Farawayan**
- **Marina Carr's Unhomely Women**
- **John Crowley in Conversation**
- **Stomping in Sligo:
Blue Raincoats' theatre training**

irishtheatre magazine

Welcome to Irish Theatre magazine,
Issue 1.1

This time last year, Willie published the first issue of the magazine — a sort of test balloon, if you will, to gauge the community's interest in having a new forum for the discussion of theatre in Ireland and Irish theatre around the world. Buoyed by the enthusiasm of the response, the two of us have joined together as co-editors of Irish Theatre.

Publications are inevitably mirrors of the people who create them, and that is certainly the case here. Both of us are involved in journalism and the media, in the practice of theatre, and in academic study of theatre and drama. And both of us are fuelled by a passion for theatre and an awareness that there has not yet been an appropriate response in print to the current explosion of energy in Irish theatre.

We are thrilled with the content of this issue and extend our thanks to our illustrious and diverse contributors. We look forward to future issues, in which we plan to incorporate other editorial features including extended discussion of topical productions; reviews of Irish productions around the world; a letters column; and listings of news of general interest to the community.

What all of this requires, of course, is the response and involvement of our readers. We offer this issue up as a provocation. Please contact us to let us know what you think. Write letters. Write articles. Write polemics.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Fiach MacConghail and the staff of the Project Arts Centre for their generous and visionary support of the magazine. Without them, it wouldn't exist.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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Long Live the Fringe

In America, it's Broadway that's the Fabulous Invalid; in Ireland, it's fringe theatre — declared moribund one day, celebrated as revitalised the next. What's the state of the independent theatre sector — and the Dublin Fringe Festival — in late '98? Theatre practitioners and critics weigh in.

Declan Gorman

Every few years a thesis gains currency that "the fringe in Ireland is dead" and no sooner is it interred but a new shoot appears on the grave and we're off again with a whole new wave.

It is hard to say exactly what factors attach themselves to the peaks and dips of fringe activity. It is probably no more than a coincidence of visionary personalities all emerging from colleges or drama schools about the same time and having a go. Certainly socio-economic factors play a role as do policy and infrastructural factors within the theatre itself.

In the mid-'80s, a social movement of reaction to emigration, rejection by the young middle class of archaic moral law, and idealistic anxiety about urban poverty all fed into the birth of a first wave of modern independent theatre in Ireland — Meridian, Co-Motion, Rough Magic, Passion Machine, Red Kettle, et al. In the '90s, the first wave of trained graduates with theatre-specific education made their mark — Bedrock, Loose Canon, and the Blue Raincoats, to name but a few.

In the '80's, the open-door approach of the old Project Arts Centre in Dublin suited the uncoordinated dynamic of the young fringe of the time. In the early '90s, the City Arts Centre (where I was working at the time) attempted to create concerted links between fringe theatre development and its radical community arts activities, platforming the early work of Conor McPherson, Conall Morrison, Gerry Morgan, Katy Hayes, John Crowley, and Jimmy Fay, among others.

Recent supports given by the Arts Council to the Dublin Fringe Festival and to Arts Centres, enabling them to encourage young talent at an earlier stage than ever before, are a major plus in ensuring a future for innovative, energetic fringe theatre in Ireland.

In the late '90s, the fast-track that has opened up for some young directors to be absorbed into the Abbey Theatre's staffing and assistantship structure is felt by some to have dissipated the drive of the fringe in some ways, although the loyalty of the likes of Jimmy Fay to his fringe origins would suggest that the independent light burns, regardless of career path and salary temptations. Few would argue that the Abbey's policy is anything but welcome and long overdue. Witness the national neglect of the leading independent innovators of the 1980s.

So where is the next fringe wave going to come from? I think it will come from the burgeoning youth drama movement outside Dublin. There is already evidence of this.



The Crows Exchange's Big Bad Wolf

Blind Mirror in Waterford, the activity centred around the King's Head in Galway and — the one I know best and I believe to be the most promising — Calipo in Drogheda, all point to the emergence of a new regional Fringe. Calipo were formed by the gifted young director, Darren Thornton, and its members are mainly

graduates of the Droichead Youth Theatre. They have packed out the Driodhead Arts Centre with audiences of mainly under-25's with their stage versions of cult movies like *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Crow*. This year they have moved to devising original work.

The strengths of this new wave — if it is to be a wave — will lie in the finely honed improvisational skills which are developed in youth theatre and also in the close connections such groups have with their home communities. These young people have no hang-ups about amateur, professional or semi-professional distinctions. They just get on with making theatre. The weaknesses will lie in a lack of knowledge of world theatre traditions, since many of these guys have not pursued academic courses, nor travelled much abroad. In the short term, audiences are not going to worry too much about such lofty matters. A theatre which is uniquely off-the-stage but can tap into non-university, youth movie, and video audiences is a breath of fresh air amid some of the must and stuffiness that surrounds mainstream theatre in Ireland.

In the longer term, I hope that developments in training, travel grants, co-production and lateral mobility of young directors among companies will broaden out the experience of the new entrants and that they will bring their new audiences with them to a fresh enjoyment of great venerable traditions as well as happening new ones.

Declan Gorman is artistic director of Upstage Theatre Company, Drogheda.

Ali Curran

In my job selecting independent theatre productions for the Dublin Fringe Festival, I am very excited by the work being produced by both subsidised and unsubsidised companies. This growth in new work has much to do with the refreshing eagerness and ability on the part of individuals and companies to share and co-operate with each other. Links between individual artists, companies, and venues and the increasing Irish touring circuit are becoming stronger, providing for the first time a true feeling of a solid infrastructure in the independent theatre sector.

While the creators of this work are beginning to understand the need for communication and cooperation for the growth of this sector, my concern is the absence of training to expand the creative and artistic skills of existing companies. Theatre practitioners who want to broaden their theatrical vocabulary are not able to access training they might need. We have a number of quality educational facilities, few of which, however, provide in-depth training in physical theatre or specialised vocal training, for example, nor do they immerse their students for any length of time in a particular approach to theatre-making; it's a dip-in-dip out approach.

The explosion of growth and excitement that is happening within the sector needs to be developed and maintained through greater contact with external influences and deeper immersion in innovative forms and methodologies. At the speed things are changing, we run the risk of self-extinction if we don't expand our vocabularies and styles. It is an imperative that the independent sector adopts and embraces new ideas in its work.

Ali Curran is director of the Dublin Fringe Festival.

Jocelyn Clarke

At first glance, the Irish independent theatre sector seems in healthy form. The sector has grown enormously over the last decade, with exciting new companies, directors, and writers emerging in Dublin and around the country. But that growth seems to have slowed down over the past three years, not because there is less talent — if anything there seems to be more — but because there has been little sustained development of existing talent and very little encouragement of new talent.

The most common scenario when a new company appears is that individuals come together, form a company, produce one or two plays, and then part again; the company has really been a showcase for individual member's talent and skill, and once the desired connections and career advancements have been made (or not) the compa-

ny becomes obsolete. Those companies which do continue after their initial productions are faced with the difficult task of defining what it is they are doing and why they are doing it.

Without a clear artistic vision, it is unlikely that the company or its members will develop and evolve. The companies which have endured — of the most recent new companies, Bedrock, Corcadorca, and Loose Canon — have done so because the company members share an artistic vision. This not only allows a company to evolve a distinctive ethos and style, but also enables it and its individual members to develop creatively and artistically.

The challenge is to sustain that growth. Unless its artistic vision is both inclusive and evolving, a company will be unable to adapt to challenges from both within and without. Increasingly, companies have become dependent on an individual member's contribution — either an actor or a director — and when that person leaves to pursue other projects, the company idles along until he or she returns. If a company, *a priori*, does not develop a vision and a structure which both allows the company to grow and to absorb new talent and new ideas, and enables its members

increasingly companies depend on an individual member's contribution and when that person leaves to pursue other projects the company idles along until he or she returns.

to go elsewhere to develop their skills, then the company will stagnate artistically or perhaps even sink under its own creative and artistic inertia.

In this scenario there is little room for new, young, talented artists and administrators; unable to find a way into existing companies, they are forced to start their own — and the whole cycle begins again. The eventual outcome of this is a kind of creative sclerosis, with the arteries through which the life blood of independent theatre flows — namely its practitioners — inevitably narrowing and closing. Without the continuous development and encouragement of existing and new talent, independent theatre's present health is sure to weaken and eventually break down. It has already begun to look a little pale.

Jocelyn Clarke is the lead theatre critic of The Sunday Tribune.

Helen Meany

Having recently observed, in Edinburgh, the energetic cultivation of the Great Western Schism between the Fringe and International Festivals, the relationship between Dublin's Fringe and main festival seems easy, comfortable — even mature. The development of an official Fringe in Dublin over the past four years has been a genuinely invigorating force, complementing the main festival, challenging it and, crucially, providing the lifeblood that feeds into theatre here all year round. As the Dublin Theatre Festival becomes increasingly ambitious in scale and well-connected with the international festival circuit, the need for an outlet for small-scale, affordable, low-budget, risky, and formally adventurous productions is even more urgent.

Dublin's Fringe Festival has provided a platform for a number of talented young companies and performers whose names are now familiar to anyone interested in theatre in this country: Bedrock, Loose Canon, CoisCéim, Corn Exchange, Iomhá Ildánach, Corcadorca, Pan Pan, and Theatreworks. Some of these have won a larger audience through the Project Arts Centre, which continues to champion innovation, and some of the directors — Jason Byrne, Jimmy Fay — have joined The Abbey's young, male, team. Others, such as Iomhá Ildánach, have been struggling to survive.

Covering the Fringe Festival as a reviewer is a superb education in theatre and performance and an antidote to complacency. It's a privilege to watch people channeling their commitment and energy so unstintingly. Demonstrating the wealth of acting talent pouring out of drama studies courses, youth theatre and elsewhere, performances have been the highlight of the past three Fringe festivals. These have borne intensive scrutiny through the preponderance of one-man shows and two-handers — which, of course, require minimal staging. On the whole, performances have far outstripped the quality of writing and direction, the exceptions being the companies already mentioned, who have devised original work or taken highly imaginative approaches to established texts.

Good productions shine on the Fringe and are immediately recognisable. In the context of some 60-100 shows, many of which are hastily put together, with low production values and a lot of good will, it's not actually very difficult to have a "hit" on the Fringe. Word of mouth and reviews help to swell audiences for a handful of productions, and the fittest survive.

The atmosphere is warm, supportive, almost clubby. Audiences are sprinkled with fellow performers, and in this nurturing, bonhomous environment, critical faculties can take leave of absence. And, because it's festival time and theatre is receiving blanket coverage, a small hit on the Fringe may be given more press attention than a touring show by a regional company at any other time of the year.

The challenge for audiences and critics is to avoid well-meaning hype and the relentless search for the latest emerging company — which seems to necessitate a loss of interest in those responsible for last year's "hit."

The challenge for small companies is to follow up a success on the Fringe, to keep the momentum going and build a body of work. Making the leap from an hour-long show in a tiny-capacity venue to a more ambitious production may be beyond the resources or capabilities of many of these companies. Some won't even want to try. There's no reason why a number of talented actors, writers and directors can't come together for a few years, burn brightly and go their separate ways. But some companies do want to develop and, after a year or two, will come up against those recurring, difficult questions about money, survival, maintenance grants, all year round visibility, motivation and morale.

At least the Dublin Fringe Festival, now joined by an embryonic Fringe at the Galway Arts Festival, and the first Fringe festival in Belfast this November, gives them opportunities to connect with what they need more than anything else: audiences.

Helen Meany is an arts journalist for The Irish Times.



Debbie Leeding and Karl Shiels in Bedrock's production of Quartet.

Berni Sweeney

Dublin's theatre scene would seem to be in good shape. International Irish achievements — Druid on Broadway, the Abbey in London, Tommy Tiernan's win in Edinburgh (to stretch the point), and a general enthusiasm for all things Irish and theatrical — are matched by a vibrant programme of events in the main houses of Dublin, both year-round and for the theatre festival(s).

The work of young playwrights such as Alex Johnston is being produced at the Peacock. The controversial work of Northern Irish playwright Gary Mitchell is being premiered in Dublin, also at the Peacock, and first-time playwrights such as (actor) Pat Kinevane can have a play produced thanks to Fishamble's development of new Irish plays. Barabas . . . the company are going from strength to strength, with their version of Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* transferring from Project @ the Mint

to Andrews Lane and then to the Olympia — and after a successful run in London, an American tour is in the works. Their success is an example of the strength of Dublin's theatre outside of the main houses, and of how the independent sector can thrive and challenge the more financially secure theatres, whose positions come with corresponding responsibilities.

Irish theatre, so popular abroad at the moment, is being sustained at source. All is well. Or is it?

In Dublin, who are the new companies set to turn the theatre world on its head, with ambitions to challenge, confront, and confound the establishment? As Passion Machine, Rough Magic and Fishamble (formerly Pigsback) become pillars of dramatic respectability and Barabbas move into the mainstream, where is the controversy? Companies that might shake things up include Bedrock, Loose Canon, and Corn Exchange. The directors of the former two companies, Jimmy Fay and Jason Byrne, are currently working with the National Theatre Society — and doing very well too — but can one rail against the establishment from within? Is there any need? What happens to the momentum of the relevant companies in the meantime?

Corn Exchange recently brought the well travelled *A Play on Two Chairs* to Edinburgh, and Dublin Fringe Festival expectations for their *Car Show* are high in the wake of their excellent *Streetcar* and *Big Bad Woolf*. Artslab was founded to "explore the relationships between theatre and other art forms through collaborative projects." Their productions such as last year's The Orpheus Project with ATC, and the theatre symposia (in association with Pan Pan Theatre) add an international dimension to Dublin theatre. Galloping Cat produced the well-received *A Kaddish, Seeking the Lost* for last year's Dublin Fringe. Since then the company has experienced some flux and is, in the words of director Gerry Morgan, "looking to renew itself"; we hope for the best.

Other companies come and go, with high ambitions and hungry outlooks, only to disappear quietly, or put operations on hold for an indefinite period. Does Dublin need a succession of Angry Young Practitioners? Maybe. The trick, of course, is to keep going . . . I'll be working to perfect this trick (!) with Minc Theatre, a new Dublin company founded by myself, Kiara Downey, Peter McDermott and Ciannait Walker. Minc's first project was a seven-day workshop called "Trust and Betrayal" led by Kristin Linklater and Enrique Pardo, in association with The Arts Council and The National Theatre Society. In the course of that week we worked with many talented and hungry actors and artists. With such a wealth of talent in Dublin and throughout the country, and the Fringe Festival beckoning, it seems there is still life on the edge. □

Berni Sweeney is a founding member of Minc Theatre Ireland.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Donal O'Kelly is one of the most versatile theatre artists working in Ireland today. His plays, including *Bat the Father Rabbit the Son* and *Catalpa*, have been successes here and abroad, and he has appeared as an actor at most major Irish theatres as well as festivals and venues around the world. Here, he writes about his latest project, *Farawayan*, an investigation of the experience of exile and outsiderness which premiered in late September 1998 at Dublin's Olympic Ballroom.

I don't know what theatre is. I always go through a weird mental folk-dance every time I'm asked to write about theatre, or worse still, talk about "my vision" of what theatre is or should be.

I don't know because I'm constantly changing my mind. I don't mean changing my mind from time to time. I mean constantly. It's like being on a long voyage through mist, making sense of your whereabouts only when the odd striking landmark looms into sight before fading away again.

I might as well be honest. I find a lot of theatre boring. There's a very discernible difference between "live theatre" and "dead theatre." You feel it in your gut after about ten minutes. You're either drawn into what you're watching, or you're thinking "right, another work-night!" I've been on stage in some of it. And written some of it too.

But there are other times when theatre does what no other art form can do. It moves you from a part of the gut that you'd have to call your soul. When you can't feel

Bisi Adigun, Vedran Smailovic, and Emer Maycock in Farawayan



the seat cupping your backside anymore. When you're body's left behind. It's an assault on the senses and the intellect. It's art-sex. And it's ideas-based.

I suppose everybody remembers their first theatre-ride.

For me, it was a production in the Gate for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1980 (I think) called *Birthrate* by a Polish theatre company from Wroclaw. It was directed by Kazimierz Braun. It was in three acts. The first took place in the dungeons of the Gate — a network of cellars which is now the Rotunda pillar room. For the second act, the audience were on the Gate stage and the action took place in the seats. The third act took place in a small train compartment on the stage. It was a production from Poland at the time of the rise of the Solidarity movement. It was a perfect fusion of content and form, rooted in the real world happening around the theatre company, and expressed by a form of theatre that was aesthetically excellent while being accessible as well. You didn't need to have read Grotowski to be taken by it.

Form and content. Form without significant content is boring. And content without significant form is boring. It's when the two are skillfully combined that the thing happens. It's rare. And you can't force it. But it happens, and you find yourself saying stupid stuff afterwards. It's secular tongues of flame descending, making you babble, or making you silently ecstatic.

Theatre has a hard time competing with film on naturalistic grounds. It's a bad battleground for theatre to choose. Basically, film can do naturalism better, with its closeups, groupings, and angles, as is unquestionably shown in Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street*. Theatre's basic agreement between actor and audience is different from film's. It's a two-way relationship.

Live theatre starts like a challenge to a stranger. We come along in our mysterious new stagecoach and we say, "Step aboard, we've got a ride to take you on." It doesn't work if the audience treats itself as a passive consumer. Because the stagecoach will just disappear in a cloud of dust over the horizon to the fabled beauty of the Wetlands. The audience must rise to the challenge. They have to step aboard. Otherwise they'll be left in the dust. They've bought their ticket but they've missed the trip. In live theatre, the audience is more than a consumer. The audience is a partner in live theatre.

It's been over twenty years now since Peter Brook presented New York to us. He held up the five extended fingers of one hand, and said "there's New York." If you can find the key to unlock and free the audience's imagination, then there are no limits to where a piece of theatre can take an audience, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. The trouble often occurs trying to find that key. Sometimes it just isn't where you're looking.

Farawayan is a theatre piece I've devised over the past six months or so, for performance in the Olympic Ballroom in Dublin. It's inspired by the fusion of form and content we see in Polish, Romanian, and other central and eastern European theatre companies. As well as Silviu Purcarete's pieces, one that had an enormous impact on me was the Polish *Carmen Funebre*, performed by Teatr Biuro Podrozy, which played Galway and Waterford last year. I saw it in Edinburgh, and couldn't talk for two hours afterwards. Soul-moved. That's live theatre.

Farawayan is about the feeling of being faraway and unwelcome. In it, I want to use a non-Irish form of theatre. Or be a part by proxy of generating a new Irish form of theatre. We want to celebrate our barely-happening-but-there nevertheless multi-cultural diversity. So I want to use *Farawayan* theatre techniques.

And even if I didn't use that excuse, I just find naturalistic theatre . . . well, boring a lot of the time. It's the form — you just see too much of it. When the content is

content is boring. And content is what's significant form is bringing. It's what the two are still fully combined through the stage. It's rare.

good, naturalism can be very, very, good. That goes without saying. And I've spent many a night in the company of stage naturalism. But the form is a bit musty

at this stage. It's had its century. Now is the time to shake it off. Maybe. Leave it to the close-up focus-pullers.

Most of the plays I've written have been incredibly "wordy." Big long thick wedges of words. Well, it's not that I've done a particular U-turn, but *Farawayan* has hardly any words at all. It's image-and-action based. All these labels we use — "visual theatre," "physical theatre," "image-based" — they're used like flags that you're supposed to adhere to with some kind of fanatical loyalty. "Image-Based will arise!" or "Text-based is best!" Most of the time they're more useful for thesis-writing than for the practicalities of creating live theatre that can grip and touch an audience.

You use the tools and instruments most appropriate to the ideas/images/experience/story you want to convey. And even though I'm using few words in *Farawayan*, that doesn't mean that visual/physical theatre and dense text are incompatible. Far from it. I've greatly enjoyed using a physically expressive acting style to perform tightly-packed text in my two solo plays, *Bat the Father Rabbit the Son* and *Catalpa*. For *Farawayan*, the balance is different. There's more than one way to swing a cat. But you

need to think hard about it before you try it or it could be tragic.

In January '97, Calypso produced Charlie O'Neill's *Rosie and Starwars* in a marquee in Meeting House Square and on tour around Ireland. It was about racism against travellers, set in Clare during their All-Ireland-winning hurling campaign of 1995. It went on to win a Stewart Parker award. In December '97, we produced the *Feile Failte*, an outdoor celebration of cultural diversity. It featured a monster Celtic Tiger breathing flames and an enormous fire-sculpture of a cosy house with an open door pronounced welcome to refugees, asylum-seekers and vulnerable immigrants. *Farawayan* is the next landfall on the Calypso voyage.

As well as mounting the show in Dublin's Olympic Ballroom and then touring it to Belfast, Cavan, and Galway, we are also publishing an information pack on the Farawayan experience, and organising seminars and workshops dealing with the horrifying problems facing Farawayans in Ireland today.

Because there's more to live theatre than just telling a story. There has to be. What's the use of just blabbing? No matter how eloquently blabbed? No matter how beautifully the blab is delivered? Or lit? There's got to be a reason to utter. Apart from taking money off punters. To be live theatre. There's got to be a why. □

Marina Carr's Unhomely Women

Playwright Marina Carr offers a vision of Irish womanhood that flies in the face of expected images of hearth and home. As Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* has its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Anna McMullan examines images of woman that have emerged in Carr's earlier work.

In President Clinton's recent address to the people of Limerick, he announced that Ireland has come home to itself. The privileged image of the new Ireland may be the Celtic tiger rampant, but in Marina Carr's work, the female of the species paces a different territory altogether. While Carr's earlier work was more abstract in its settings, her recent plays have returned to the Midlands, where she grew up. The Midlands occupies the centre of Ireland, but it is often marginalised by the cultural dominance of the cities and the West. In the small communities which Carr portrays, the contemporary drive towards urban modernisation has made little impact. In her Midlands landscapes of river and bog, change gathers slowly and erupts catastrophically.

Marina Carr's earlier plays are very different in tone and theatrical genre to her more recent ones, though they also raise questions

The eponymous women in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan* do not have the resources to roam the land. They suffer from an irresolvable conflict between entrapment and "unhomeliness."¹³

about identity, gender and location. In *Low in the Dark*, Carr's second play, which was presented at the Project Arts Centre by Crooked Sixpence Theatre Co. in 1989, the setting symbolises gender difference, rather than indicating any particular place or time. The stage is split between the female space — not a kitchen, as might have been expected, but the more intimate space of the bathroom — while the male space is work-related, with tyres, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about. The characters' names are also symbolic, without surnames: Binder, Bender (both female); Baxter and Bone (male). Gender stereotypes are parodied using highly theatrical and often hilarious strategies of role play and cross dressing. The culturally hallowed role of maternity is demystified, as Bender produces babies almost non-stop, and Bone also becomes pregnant. Identity

is performative, yet for all their playing with gender roles, the desires of the male and female sexes remain poles apart:

- Bone:** I want a woman who knows how to love. I want laser beams coming out of her eyes when I enter the room. I want her to knit like one possessed. I want her to cook softly.
- Binder:** I want a man who'll wash my underwear, one who'll brush my hair, one who'll talk before, during and after. I want a man who'll make other men look mean.

The play opens and closes with a character called Curtains. She is a storyteller, and is characterised not by her body, which is entirely hidden by curtains, but by her voice. Her tale of the man from the north and the woman from the south punctuates the dialogue. They travel the length and breadth of the country, but they constantly fail to connect: "Long after it was over, the man and woman realised

that not only had they never met north by north-east or south by south-west, much worse, they had never met. And worse still, they never would, they never could, they never can and they never will." The woman, however, has the last word: "You" she said, "if you have courage get off your bicycle and come with me . . ."

The eponymous women in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan* do not have the resources to roam the land. They suffer from an irresolvable conflict between entrapment and "unhomeliness." They are placed in a setting that is specific, limited, and stifling, and yet inhabited by mythical, uncanny presences. The Mai and Portia Coughlan are situated in society; they have families and responsibilities; yet they are also dreamers, virtual vagabonds, conceiving of worlds to which they are denied access by the narrow confines of their physical location and their gender. Their society allows them little imaginative space or agency, so their repressed dreams and desires are fig-



Olwen Fouere and Owen Roe in the Abbey Theatre's production of Marina Carr's *The Mai*.

ured by the surrounding landscape which seems to possess them or be possessed by them: Owl Lake in *The Mai*, which engulfs the women in recurring myths of abandonment and literally claims the Mai; the river in *Portia Coughlan*, in which Portia drowns herself, as did her twin brother — or masculine other self — 15 years earlier.

Both plays question the idea of the "natural" mother. The Mai is much more absorbed in her hopeless love for her faithless husband than she is in her children, as her Grandma Fraochlán was obsessed by the nine-fingered fisherman: "I would gladly a hurlt all seven a ye down tha slopes a hell for wan nigh' more wud tha nine-fingered fisherman an' may I roh eternally for such unmotherly feeling." Portia is more often at the bar or the banks of the river than at home, where she is unable to care for either her husband or her children. For both these women, neither lover nor family can fill the abyss of loss or longing that leads both in the end to suicide. The French philosopher Luce Irigaray uses the term *déreliction* to describe a kind of exile experienced by women, who have not been adequately represented or "housed" within culture except through the maternal function, and can find no place within the dominant currencies of symbolic exchange. Carr gives a powerful voice to the complex crises of subjectivity and genealogy which these unhomely women suffer — where and how can they place themselves?

In *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift argue that "as the 'unhomely' becomes the norm, replacing the sovereignty of national cultures, or the universalism of a human culture, so new subjectivities are needed." However, the Mai and Portia Coughlan remind us of the plight of those whose unhomeliness erupts not in the migrant spaces of the intercultural, but in the forgotten cultural hinterlands of an Ireland perhaps too blindly embracing the modernising image of the Celtic Tiger.

While there may a danger in these plays of confirming the unhomely as hysterical who plays marginalised "other" to the norm of rational (or national) civil society, Carr's women foreground the limitations and hypocrisies of dominant gender and national identities, emergent as well as historical. In the midst of growing prosperity and cultural confidence for some, her plays remind us of the reality of those who struggle but cannot find any accommodation with or within their given world. For centuries in our national iconography, women have represented both sacrifice and nurture — a paradoxical legacy. Carr's work suggests that, for the writer, and especially the female writer, the task of tearing apart the historical fabric of our appearances, articulating our exile, our displacements and the cataclysmic force of our desires, is as important as celebrating our achievements. □

Anna McMullan is a lecturer in the Samuel Beckett Centre at Trinity College, Dublin.

Euro Theatre Shocker

Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* has played in many countries around the world, and will soon be translated into six languages. But just how much can foreign audiences get from this very Irish play? Walsh weighs the issues.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

A middle-aged man lies on the ground dying in terrible pain. His stomach is ripped open. He tries to hold in his stomach and stop the blood but is unable to do so. A poodle trots onto the stage and sees the man. It walks over and begins to lick the blood from the floor around the man. It then licks the open wound. The man gives no reaction. A young woman wanders onto the stage. She stops and looks at the man and the dog. A long pause.

Woman: Are you in pain?

Man: It's as if I've met you before. Perhaps I have met you.

Woman: I feel the same way. I've never met you though.

Man: Do you mind staying where you are? I need to be able to focus on something beautiful but close your eyes, please. I can't allow you to see me.

She closes her eyes.

Man: Is that your dog?

Woman: Yes.

Man: What's his name?

Woman: Jacques.

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Man: I've never seen a French poodle in Ireland.

Woman: They're not very common.

Man: Any moment now I'm going to die. Tell me something about yourself. Something special so I can make it my last thought.

Pause

Woman: Before now I have never seen such kind eyes as yours. I'm in love with you. Now close your eyes and think of you.

Man: How could I close my eyes?

Woman: And how can I close mine?

She opens her eyes. They look at each other in complete love as the poodle begins to eat the Man's stomach.

Myself and about 14 other European playwrights were asked to produce a text that would last one minute, and you've just read what I spat out. It seemed like a text reflecting what I had experienced in our discussions rather than anything related to my own work. It's an ugly absurd piece. "Very German, Enda," I thought.

I wrote that dark little vignette while I was in Bonn for three days this past July, while my play *Disco Pigs* was playing the Bonner Biennale Festival, which is devoted to new work by young European playwrights. I was asked to participate in morning discussions with the other writers. A thing called "Author Speak." Our discussions were very broad, but hardly broad-minded. We discussed our reasons for writing, our ways of writing, and our embarrassing fragile egos (and livers).

We also discussed each other's plays. This was painful. Think of under-rehearsed gibbering actors and you've got the picture. Because our discussions were conducted in English and only myself, Mark Ravenhill, and a visiting German journalist had fairly fluent English, "Author Speak" began to resemble that hilarious European quiz show, "Going for Gold!" Our Henry Kelly was Mark Ravenhill, who desperately tried to raise the discussions onto a higher and sweeter plane. No way, boy. I watched Mark's face

crease into pained laughter as a Romanian playwright admitted, "I used to live in an abstract world, friends. But not now!" Well, thank Christ for that.

The predominant message coming from the German practitioners was that only by deconstructing the way we see ourselves can we have any insight into the modern world. Hmmmm? And so what followed were plotless, characterless evenings of expressionistic violence. Any attempt to criticise this was dismissed as old-fashioned. Suddenly I was a traditionalist for suggesting work of characterisation sending humans perhaps on journeys which offered some relief or hope. The truth is that I've only ever been concerned with humanism. I couldn't write for style's sake alone. I don't have the patience. Perhaps I'm not clever enough, but frankly I like a good old story.

After hearing me sound off on this, I really think that many of my fellow playwrights were expecting to see a lovely little love story told simply when they sat down to watch *Disco Pigs*. How very Irish. Their reaction to my play, however, as a text and presentation, was hilarious. Suddenly I was crazy. I sat around the table watching the heads nod as I was told that my work was extremely "out there" in the expressionists' league. An alcoholic Swedish playwright slurred that I was very feminine. To this day I have no idea if I was being propositioned or not.

During all of this I was thinking about a related matter. *Disco Pigs* was performed with simultaneous German translation during its two performances. For three months, three translators had tried to translate the language of *Disco Pigs* and had given up. The fourth one finished it, though I'm not convinced that he has got there yet (nor is he). I began resigning myself to a couple of thoughts about the forthcoming German productions of *Disco Pigs* and another of my plays, *Sucking Dublin*, in Germany. The translations will be more like adaptations because the plays have to take that huge leap into another

Cillian Murphy in
Disco Pigs



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er culture. The presentations, I can only imagine after talking to my German contemporaries, may very well favour the nihilistic approach. Mark Ravenhill was telling me that when his play, *Shopping and Fucking*, was first produced in Germany, it featured a ten minute bloody fist-fucking finale that was not there in his original.

Good Christ, what's the point? I mean, *Sucking Dublin's* bleak enough, how black can black get? I imagined me hating Pig and Runt, the characters in *Disco Pigs*, and wanting to run onstage and kick the fuck out of them. I worked myself into a right little worry. I was thinking that perhaps the right thing to do was to not allow foreign translations of my plays. My work is so local — so Irish that even the Brits have to work their arses off to fully get into it. Translators readily admit to toning down language to make it less offensive, altering the rhythm of the dialogue, finding new locations, dialects, allusions, metaphors, and symbols to make a translation more saleable back home.

And this is the crux of the matter, I suppose. I know that the people who produce works originally written in English in a different language do so knowing what their country's theatre is — what their theatre audiences go for. And this is my sad impression of all these great "Euro Theatre Festivals." Essentially we are all defending our corners and none of us fully understand what it is to produce work anywhere else but in our own front rooms. How terrible is that? Pretty bad I say. Think of a perverted contortionist peering into his own arse when many different arses are happily sitting up gagging for his inspection and you've got the picture.

As for my one-minute play? The image of two new lovers holding a loving gaze appeals to me more than a poodle eating a man's stomach. Luckily, I will not have to worry about anyone's interpretations of this piece. Even by my standards it's a bit too short. And as to the future of the six upcoming foreign-language productions of *Disco Pigs*, I have to pray that at least my intentions will be shown. It will be my name under the title, after all. I think. □

Enda Walsh is the artistic director of Corcadorca with Pat Kiernan. He is currently working on two plays for next year, Misterman and Bedbound, and a couple of screenplays.

Belfast and Beyond

Sean Doran has brought a welcome burst of innovation to the venerable Belfast Festival at Queen's since his arrival as programme director there two years ago. This year's Festival, however, will be his last; he is leaving to take over the directorate of Australia's Perth Festival. Karen Fricker meets Doran to talk about this year's Belfast Festival and about his future plans.

Karen Fricker: When you arrived in this job, what was your assessment of the Belfast Festival?

Sean Doran: There was a very strong base of programming in theatre and classical music, but like any festival that's been around for awhile — this is the Festival's 35th anniversary year — you have your highs and your troughs, and I think the programming was getting a bit repetitive when I came in. The RSC was their headline theatre event for 15 years before I got there. That's fine and good and the punters came along, but I think audiences were ready for a change.

When I first arrived, I spent the first four months not programming at all, but rather doing research and putting together a strategy. I met with funding bodies, promoters, venues, staff members, and arts organisations, and I did some research into what theatregoers thought of the programming in the past and what they might like to see more of. And I found, frankly surprisingly, that there was a real hunger for something more radical — that there was room for more adventurousness. It was a great message to get — that this place was ripe for experimentation. And if any organisation should take on experimentation it's a festival; it's a festival's responsibility much more than individual venues that are programming year-round.

The Belfast Festival is part of Queen's University, as you know, and in some ways I think it's an important link to have even on a symbolic level, because one of a festival's main tasks is to educate. And if you look at my theatre programming, I think what you'll see is that I deliberately chose different kinds of theatre and different kind of production styles. I was trying to educate audiences in all of the things that theatre can be. That's why I have been so driven to bring in artists like Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group, because work like that has not been seen here before. I think audiences can have their horizons broadened when they see work like that.

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KF: Audiences might not always like what they see, though: some people might object to some of the more radical pieces of programming you do.

SD: I think that's healthy! I could only wish for picketing and tomatoes thrown. Because of the circumstances of my employment I was unable to relocate to Belfast and have continued to live in Derry for most of the year. In many ways I really regret that. I don't bump into people in the supermarket and the pub and get their feedback about the festival in that context, and I miss that. I am sure people have a lot of feelings about our programming and I am not sure I am completely in touch with that.

I deliberately chose different kinds of theatre and different kind of production styles for the Festival. I was trying to educate audiences in all of the things that theatre can be.

KF: As far as you could tell, how did some of the more experimental work go down last year?

SD: The reaction to the Robert Wilson Saints

and Singing really surprised me, in how positive it was. There were some who really didn't like it, but the majority of the audience had a great time. In retrospect, of all of Wilson's work, it was probably a good idea to have the first piece be *Saints and Singing*, which has such a youthful air to it — the cast were all students. Personally, I don't think *Saints and Singing* is his best work, but some people love it.

As to the Merce Cunningham *Ocean*, I would maintain that that is a truly great work. We did have audiences of 1,100 each night — which I think is a great achievement, and I'm really proud of that — but I think we failed to let them know what they were going to see. Half the audience left wondering what they saw, and a lot of them were angry. This was a headline event and a great work of art, but people needed some way to put it in context.

KF: How could you have let them know?

SD: Better marketing, first of all. We need to have platform talks — with work like that we need to have an enthusiast or an expert get up there in front of the audience and tell the audience about the artist's work, put it in context. This is a downside to only having three full-time staff for the Festival; we are so busy getting the programme together and selling tickets that we did fall down on the audience education side last year. It remains an outstanding issue.

KF: So tell me what you're excited about in this year's programme.

SD: I have a personal preference for American work, and that's certainly evident in our

programming this year, which has an American focus through a series called "Big Apple-First Bites." We're spotlighting the film work of Philip Glass, which is his number-one strength in my opinion. We'll be showing his new piece with Robert Wilson, *Monsters of Grace*, which has been touring for a while and had something of a rocky start on Wilson's side. Also we're showing *Koyaanisqatsi* and *La Belle et La Bête*, and Glass will be giving a solo piano concert as well.

We've got Trisha Brown's company coming over — she's a leader in contemporary dance in America — and we have the Wooster Group's *The Hairy Ape* with Willem Dafoe. Robert Wilson will be giving a lecture, and we're also bringing in *Bob*, Anne Bogart's show which is about a theatre director who is to a large extent based on Wilson — so that ought to make a very interesting combination.

From Britain, we're doing a show called *Shockheaded Peter* by Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, with music by the Tigerlillies. It's a wonderful show, very visual.

KF: It's a cross-over show, isn't it, for children and adults?

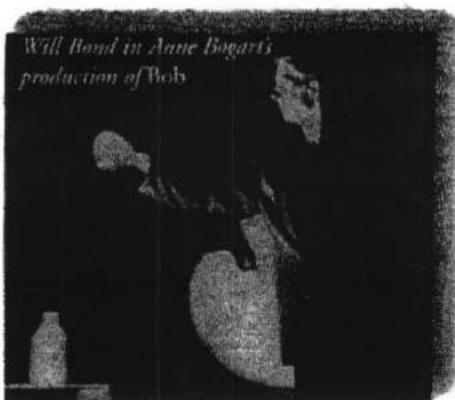
SD: Well, I like to say it's for children of liberal parents. It is somewhat scary and macabre.

A goal for us was to begin to co-produce, and we are doing that this year with Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, a co-production between ourselves and Tinderbox and Field Day, with Stephen Rea directing. We're doing that in a church in Rosemary Street in Belfast.

KF: And you have a Fringe and a Childrens Festival starting up this year?

SD: Yes — one of the things that came up last year for us was that the Festival is quite focused in the South of the city, in a very middle-class area. We felt we wanted to branch out, to bring the festival to all the areas of Belfast, and the Childrens Festival and the Fringe are very much a part of that; their programming is going to spread out all over the city. Both are fairly autonomous — they have their own programmers, and will probably go independent in a few years after they get started up under us.

Another new initiative I am very excited about is called "Only Connect" —



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which is workshops for local artists with the visiting artists including Trisha Brown, the Wooster Group, and Philip Glass. I think we get in this groove of whacking in artists and whacking them out again and we don't give enough attention to bringing the process up alongside the product. This is a major step in that direction. It's part of a closer working relationship with certain venues that we are developing this year, in this case with the Lyric Theatre, who will be managing "Only Connect."

KF: So that's the theatre programming. Is there anything else you're particularly excited about in this year's festival?

SD: Well, I think that our literature programming is excellent and it always seems to get overlooked by the press. The response last year was phenomenal — we had full houses for many of the events — but you weren't reading about it anywhere. What we try to do with our literature programme is to think of literature as a live art, through readings and other kinds of events. It's a wonderfully intimate way to experience literature. This year among others we are bringing over Louis de Bernieres, Gitta Sereny, Julian Barnes, Gore Vidal, Nadine Gordimer . . . 30 writers in all. The literature is a new development since I've arrived — I used to run a literature festival in Wales and so it's a real interest of mine — and I think it will remain part of the festival after I go.

KF: You've only really just begun in Belfast, and now you're moving on to Perth. They must have made you an offer you couldn't refuse.

SD: I truly wasn't looking for another job — Perth found me through a headhunting thing. But the offer was very attractive in a number of ways, particularly in the way the job is defined. In Belfast, my job is part-time and it's a three-year contract, and I don't have full authority nor a full support staff. In Perth it's a longer contract, it's a full time post, and I have full support staff . . . and then they did offer an attractive salary as well.

Perth is the oldest annual arts festival in the Southern hemisphere — it's 46 years old, and like Belfast it's a multi-arts festival. It has a budget of 7.28 million Australian dollars, which is about 3.5 million sterling.

KF: What would your advice be to your successor?

SD: Well . . . to do what they want to do regardless of what I have done, I guess! My concern has been that you want to leave the Festival in better shape than when you arrive, and I think I can say that's happened. There is more staff, more infrastructure, and a support system in place for whoever is going to take the Festival on. I am quite optimistic and positive about how it's going to be for my successor. I think we have built a solid base. □

Stomping in Sligo

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company are engaged in an ongoing exploration of physical theatre through a variety of training methodologies. Recently, they have begun to forge links of training and performance with New York-based Saratoga International Theatre Institute, as Blue Raincoat company member Fiona McGeown recounts here.

Today in Irish theatre, the actor seems to be evolving at a greater rate than ever before. Actors are asking questions about training and technique, getting involved in acting workshops, trying to pick up new techniques to use on stage. Our drama schools serve their purpose to a certain degree by covering a broad outline of classes, which mainly focus on stage naturalism. In the last few years, however, naturalism has sometimes seemed unequal to the task of portraying characters on stage. There seems to be a hunger among actors for methods of actor training that go beyond naturalism.

Training should not be dismissed lightly. It can be a profound experience, awakening artists to new ways of seeing the world and of approaching art. It can allow artists to tap into talents previously unknown and can develop skills which will lift their artistry to new heights.

The company I work with, Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, have always been interested in actor training. We are of the view that we can only know our art by constantly assessing what we are showing as performers. Some questions that have arisen for us include: Why when we go to the theatre, it is too easy to tell the next move an actor is going to make on stage? What has happened to the element of surprise in acting? Has the word "comfortable" slipped into the vocabulary of what an audience feels when they attend a play? Isn't "comfortable" dangerously close to "boring"? And if that is true, what do we do about it?

Over the last couple of years, Blue Raincoat have started answering some of these questions in the theatre we create and through the training we pursue. At present we practise three training methods: Corporeal mime, Suzuki training, and Viewpoints training. Our Director, Niall Henry, studied Corporeal Mime intensively in Paris, and a new core Blue Raincoat actor, Sandra O'Malley, has just finished a three-year, full-time course with Corrine Soum and Steve Wasson at the Ecole de Mime Corporal Dramatique in London.

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Corporeal mime (especially as taught by Etienne Decroux) gives us a means to articulate through the body. It gives us the ability to carve space, colour time, and three-dimensionalise thought. It enables us to make precise and disciplined physical choices down to the subtlest distinctions in texture and rhythm. A movement actor must approach his or her own body with the same egoless connection that a sculptor approaches an unformed mass of clay. Decroux's research has given us the concepts and tools with which to create our art and places us, as artists, at the centre of the creative process.

Tadashi Suzuki is one of the leading figures in contemporary international theatre.



Fiona McGeown and Liz Bracken in the Blue Raincoats' recent production of *The Tempest*.

His training, which originated in Japan, is now also practised in the U.S.A., Europe, Australia, and beyond. His work is focused on the body and specifically upon what he terms "the grammar of the feet." Suzuki believes that a performance begins when the actor's feet touch the ground, and it begins in another

sense when he lifts himself lightly from that spot. The performer proves with his feet that he is an actor. The various pleasures that an actor feels as he comes in contact with the floor constitute the first stage in Suzuki's actor training. There is an total sense of presence when one partakes in a Suzuki exercise, a power that strengthens from within.

The first time I did a Suzuki foot-stomping exercise could well have been one of my most embarrassing moments ever, on or off stage. I turned bright red, sweated like a pig, and lost all control of body and breath. I felt like an idiot. In fact, a lot of this training makes you feel that way. There is always something to work on, and physical strength isn't really one of them. One of the most important elements of this training is trying to show that the exercises are easy by keeping a straight and neutral face. It is actor training, after all, and just being able to finish the exercise isn't enough. One is always striving to do better, to hit the perfect stomp, to control the energy in the cen-

tre of the body. Since beginning this training, my body and the bodies of my fellow actors have changed. I have a strength that I never had before, an energy that comes out in my voice and my body. Through his training I am bringing something new onto a stage.

In 1992, Tadashi Suzuki and the American director Anne Bogart formed the Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI). Anne Bogart is an experimentalist, known for large-scale ensemble pieces and deconstructed classics. Her training method is called the "Viewpoints" and is the third of the trainings we practice in Blue Raincoat. It has roots in a range of sources, most notably post-modern dance. The Viewpoints are a philosophy of movement designed to develop a common language that actors can share, through which they can become collective choreographers of a play's action. They address time and space; time through tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition; space through shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography.

In theatre, the form in which we choose to communicate ideas is as important as the ideas themselves. Theatre should not merely offer an escape from reality. It should be a stimulating and provocative experience that gives the audience a new perspective.

The most profound moment when you are working with the Viewpoints is the moment of failure. In that moment of crisis, you realise that the place to go lies with the other actors that you are working with. They are the path out, and you become them in a sense. Whereas Suzuki training is ultimately an individual thing, in which you are up there struggling to stay alive, involving your whole being in getting through the event, Viewpoints is about the ensemble and relying on the people around you.

In the autumn of 1997, I went to New York to study with the SITI company, and had my first experience of both Viewpoint and Suzuki training — SITI offers instruction in both disciplines. I brought back what I had learned to Sligo and attempted to teach these two kinds of training to other company members. Fortunately, it seemed to work, and interest within Blue Raincoat in further experience became strong.

This is why myself and two other company members, Johnny Carty and Ciaran McCauley, ventured over to Saratoga, New York, in June of this year to explore the SITI training as a company. It was the first year that SITI had accepted theatre com-

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panies to study (in addition to individual actors) and Blue Raincoat were one of three groups that arrived to work with them. It was a truly enlightening experience for us both as individuals and as a company. Members of SITI have also visited us in Sligo to teach and train with us; and now there is discussion of the two companies working on a piece of theatre together in the summer of 1999.

How these three trainings work together is now the foundation of what a Blue Raincoat actor can bring into a rehearsal room. It is a constant search for answers to questions that, as actors, we need to ask. In theatre, the form in which we choose to communicate ideas is as important as the ideas themselves. Theatre should not merely offer an escape from reality. It should be a stimulating and provocative experience that gives the audience a new perspective. A successful image has many layers, poses important questions, and is multidimensional. The actor can challenge the linear structures audiences have come to accept, and the actor can provoke people to experience performance in different ways. Its now up to us now as thinking actors to create these challenging and provocative experiences for our audiences. □

Blue Raincoats' latest production, Still Life by Malcolm Hamilton, runs through October at the Factory Theatre in Sligo.

Casting A Tall Shadow

In a relatively short time, John Crowley made a significant impact on the Irish theatre scene. He directed several well-received productions at the Abbey, Gate, and Peacock, as well as devising his own work for Bickerstaffe. He is now based in Britain, where he is artistic associate of the Donmar Warehouse in London. He recently made his Royal Shakespeare Company directing debut with *Shadows*, three Irish one-acts: Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *Shadow of a Glen*, and Yeats' *Purgatory*. Crowley and Karen Fricker met in Stratford-upon-Avon earlier this year to discuss his work as an Irish theatre artist abroad.

Karen Fricker: You're directing Irish one-acts at the RSC. How did this come about?

John Crowley: Katie Mitchell, who's in charge of programming The Other Place [the RSC's studio space in Stratford], asked me to direct here, and one of the pet projects I have had in the back of my head for a long time is doing an evening of Irish one-acts. I did a production of *Riders to the Sea* in college, and I did a workshop of *Purgatory* in the National Theatre Studio in London three years ago. I've always been interested in trying to find a performance context for these plays. One idea was to do them site-specific, almost like an art installation, which is how we did *Purgatory* at the National Studio — it was in a corridor sort of near the scene dock, a very unconventional setting.

KF: Why these three plays specifically?

JC: These are my three favourites from the earlier period and the ones that have the strongest thematic link. The hope was that each one of the plays would, if you will, shine a flashlight along the others — that the sounds made in one would echo in the other, and by cross-casting meaning would also be allowed to drift from one to the other, bleed into each other. In a way, hopefully, it works as a sort of a bizarre three-act evening. This part of the job — constructing the shape of the evening — is a bit like what you do when you are devising [work]: you place two scenes next to each other, and the meaning will sort of spill over between the two. Choosing to let this happen becomes a very rich modus operandi.

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KF: This is the first time that Yeats and Synge are being done at the RSC, which is kind of astonishing, isn't it?

JC: Yes, it felt like it was so kind of left-of-centre for the RSC to be doing something like this. They do new Irish work from time to time, but they don't have a history of doing Irish classics. This production did fill a brief they have in a certain way, to do "undiscovered classics," or to "rediscover" certain classics, but usually they would do that with Spanish Golden Age plays, or rarely-performed Elizabethan dramatists, or occasionally Restoration plays . . . there is a sense that they mine through the canon of work looking for little gems that can be reilluminated by whatever time they are done in.

KF: So why is it the right time for these plays?

JC: Well, I don't think I'm being politically motivated — if you mean "right time" in terms of what's happening around us in the world. I think my response would be that it's a lot more personal. In the last year, my main emphasis has shifted to spending most of my time in England; when I was in Dublin, a lot of the brief I set myself was not to do Irish work. When I was working in the Abbey, I was far more interested in European and American drama than Irish; new, devised work was my other focus. *The Crucible* is considered an old chestnut in America, but when we did it at the Abbey it hadn't been seen on a large stage in 17 years; there were whole generations of people walking in there who had no idea what was going to happen. Similarly with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; it hadn't been seen since 1935. There is just a much

fresher connection with the audience and surely that's what it's about. I have never been interested in the kind of directing which is kind of the academic, intertextual kind — like, this is *my* take on this old warhorse, do you know? I am much more interested in a certain kind of freshness.

Owen Roe and Siobhan Miller in John Crowley's 1995 Abbey production of *The Crucible*



KF: *Here in England, the audience are coming to these three plays pretty much fresh?*

JC: Absolutely. In the middle of Warwickshire, 95% of the audience will not know what is going to happen next. So that is a big challenge in terms of storytelling. There is a great feeling when the audience goes with them . . . I think these plays are big enough to be reinvented, and rarely are. I don't mean reinvented at the whim of the director's ego; I mean actually really scraping off layers of dust to look at what's underneath . . .

Another reason for doing them here is that the whole Other Place season is being staged in traverse, with the audience on two sides of the action. It means that the plays will be tested in a slightly different way, and lifted for their original mise-en-scene behind a proscenium arch, which implies a certain world view and immediately implies a certain design solution — a sort of realistic, naturalistic approach with a cottage, three-legged stools, a thatched roof . . . it goes dead for me when I look at that. I find it hard to get beyond the stool when I see Synge.

KF: *So you share certain design elements with the other productions in The Other Place. And you're sharing actors as well?*

JC: Yes, how casting works here is that you cast with ten other directors around a table for the whole RSC season — it's a company of something like 70-90 actors. Each actor is theoretically cast in at least two productions per season. Now, I had to bring a certain bunch of actors to the table because of the specific needs of this production, and they were snapped up by the other directors — this is a fine bunch of actors who any director would die to work with.

KF: *They're all Irish?*

JC: Yes — three of them came over from Ireland, and three are Irish actors working in Britain.

KF: *It's great that you're helping Irish actors get their foot in the door here.*

JC: I don't think it's helping Irish actors. I think it's helping the RSC. The RSC is lucky to have these actors. . . . There is a big cultural issue involved in doing Yeats and Synge at the RSC, in the heart of England and Englishness. I think that is very rich, creatively, and I enjoy the contradiction in that enormously.

KF: *You've recently been named associate director of the Donmar Warehouse. How did that come about?*

JC: I had directed a production of Genet's *The Maids* there, and I have gotten to know

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Sam Mendes, the artistic director, very well. They had asked me to do more projects with them, and I was having a lot of input into planning, suggesting shows and giving advice, so we decided to sort of formalise the relationship. They didn't have an associate director before me. It's great, because it gives me a base in London, and I need that because the London theatre scene is massive in comparison to Dublin — it's just ginormous, the sheer number of theatres in London. In Dublin you can get to know pretty much everyone very quickly, and the whole leadup period to a production is much shorter if you want it to be. Whereas London is a very different monster, as I am only beginning to learn. Casting is a vast operation, or it can be, unless you know exactly who you want. If you start to open doors, you can go on forever.

KF: And the next play you're doing is an American one, Paula Vogel's How I Learned to Drive.

JC: Yes, the script landed in the Donmar, way way back when it was first a hit in the States. Sam [Mendes] knew it wasn't for him to direct but said it's a fantastic play and did I want to do it. . . it's the first new American play I've done; stylistically it's quite different from what I usually do. All the characters but one talk directly to the audience; there is this sort of Greek chorus helping the main character tell the story; there is a Brechtian thing disrupting the action . . . she [Vogel] handles the subject matter of the play extraordinarily deftly. When you say it's a play about incest, people go "yeck," and then you say it's handled with incredible wit and they *really* go "yeck," but it's true. It's a beautiful and funny play.

KF: You've been to Japan several times recently and have done some directing there. How did that happen, and what was it like?

JC: I directed a play at the National in London called *Fair Ladies at a Game of Poem Cards*, a contemporary Japanese play in verse. One of the designers, Vicki Mortimer, had been working in Tokyo with the English director David Leveaux. He has a company there that he has run for the last nine or ten years; he spends half the year in Japan and half in England. Vicki invited me to come over and do some research for *Fair Ladies*, and it was fabulous, a very stimulating time. David had been looking for another non-Japanese director to work with the company, and since the company had got to know me and since I was interested in Japanese theatre, he asked me and I jumped at the chance.

So after the show at the National I went to Tokyo and directed a play called *The Little Match-Selling Girl*. The play was first performed in 1968, in the context of all the worldwide societal upheaval, and then it was considered as being avant-garde because

it is about children calling parents to task. To us the play is mild and elliptical, but by Japanese standards it was seen as quite ground-breaking.

When I first got over there I was thinking I couldn't do this job; I couldn't direct Japanese actors in a Japanese play. But when I read the play I really saw how the playwright had been influenced by Beckett and Pinter. The connection was so strong. I saw my own family, my own aunts and uncles. So I guess the play in my head was really set in an imaginary Ireland; that they spoke Japanese didn't really distance it at all. And there were certain references in the play to the Bible and Catholicism, which is why the play has always been branded as somewhat obscure in Japan, but is why it read so clearly to me. It gave me a door into it, an angle. When I was doing it, I thought my take was an interpretation rather than about the play itself, but he, the playwright, was thrilled by it; he said it was the first real production of the play.



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KF: The actors were Japanese-speaking, so you directed through an interpreter?
JC: Yes.

KF: Wasn't that difficult?
JC: No, it was easy! Terrifyingly easy. It was scary discovering that directing isn't about language. I don't have a word of Japanese and I did not know my actors before we started rehearsal; the company cast the show for me. But in the end it was the most satisfying job I have done in a long time. It put me back in touch with directing. I was surrounded by culturally alien influences; I had to rely on instinct. I really had to look in an actor's eye and ask myself, do I believe what they are doing, based not on what they were saying but through all those notions like truth in movement and simplicity of gesture.

KF: Did you feel like you were speaking across a gulf of different languages of theatre, though?

JC: Not really. I said to them, I am going to direct this as if I were directing in Ireland, and you are going to have to challenge me and tell me when I am not communicating, and there were actually very few points when there were problems . . . and they wouldn't even be problems, more like a lack of comprehension, a point where metaphors did-

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n't match — and that's a big difficulty, because of course you spend your life directing through metaphor.

KF: What was your initial interest in Japanese theatre? Was it because of Yeats?

JC: Years ago, I saw a production of Ninagawa's *Macbeth* at the National. It was done in Samurai warlord style. I had never seen anything like that; I never knew Shakespeare could be like that. It stayed in the back of my mind, and then I started to see Kurasawa movies, and was developing an interest . . . which was fed, years later, by seeing something like [Robert Lepage's] *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, where he was really exploring the ideas of language and theatre — this idea of telling a story from the point of view of the place you're telling the story in, what novelists would call vocalised narrative.

Then I went to Japan and saw kabuki — how it's such a living tradition, not like a museum; the performers get cheered on and audiences spend the whole day. It's theatre untainted by cinema and television, and seemingly untainted by the biggest shift in Western drama, that is, Ibsen, the notion of subtext, the idea of the fourth wall and the reality of the character. There was this great ease by which kabuki moved from talking to an audience to performing. It was Elizabethan in that way. I adored the theatricality of the fact that they would stage night-time scenes in full white light, and just adopt the convention that they can't see each other.

Yeats wanted to find a form that would express his vision more clearly which was kind of a heightened reality-like couldn't-be-naturalism. He was after a bigger truth, a poetical truth.

And there is the Yeats connection. Much is made of the influence of Noh theatre on Yeats but I think people fixate on the

wrong things — they talk about the masks and the external and the deadliest things, rather than what's at the heart of it. What attracted Yeats to Japan is that which attracted so many people to that country at the end of the last century: The Japanese love ghost stories. They love the slightly nostalgic feeling of a ghost story, which is deeply reassuring in a way; I think Yeats found a connection in that. A lot of Noh drama is about a figure returning with another figure to a haunted place and telling the person what happened at that site. Yeats really plugged into that; it really connected to his ideas about the decline of the ascendancy. It's no coincidence that so many Protestant writers were obsessed with ghost stories at the turn of the century — the big house empty, and the voices echoing, and the feeling that as a group of people, the Protestants

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in Ireland were being marginalised and attacked from within the culture, by a certain form of nationalism . . . It's like they say in *Purgatory* — where are the stories of a house, where have they gone? So of course Yeats would latch on to Noh drama. He wanted to find a form that would express his vision most clearly, which was kind of a heightened reality — not naturalism. He couldn't write naturalism. He was after a bigger truth, a poetic truth. Instead of turning to the Elizabethans he looked further afield and found his model.

KF: What other directing plans do you have coming up?

JC: I'm thinking about directing *Juno and the Paycock* at the Donmar, again because it needs to be looked at in a context that is not a proscenium, that is slightly unconventional. I love O'Casey, but I think the idea of O'Casey is death in Dublin, for me. Garry Hynes tried to put a spin on it and she got loads of "don't you do that, now." It's got to be taken out of its space and placed in a different context in order to see the woods for the trees — and to drop what's dead wood and find the secret play that lurks in the shadows of the visible one. (*laughs*) How's that for a metaphor? □

*Since the time of this interview, Crowley has taken on two major projects: a staging of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods* at the Donmar, designed by his brother Bob, scheduled for later this year; and a West End production of *Macbeth* featuring Rufus Sewell and Sally Dexter, coming up in early 1999. He still plans to direct *Juno and the Paycock* in 1999.*

