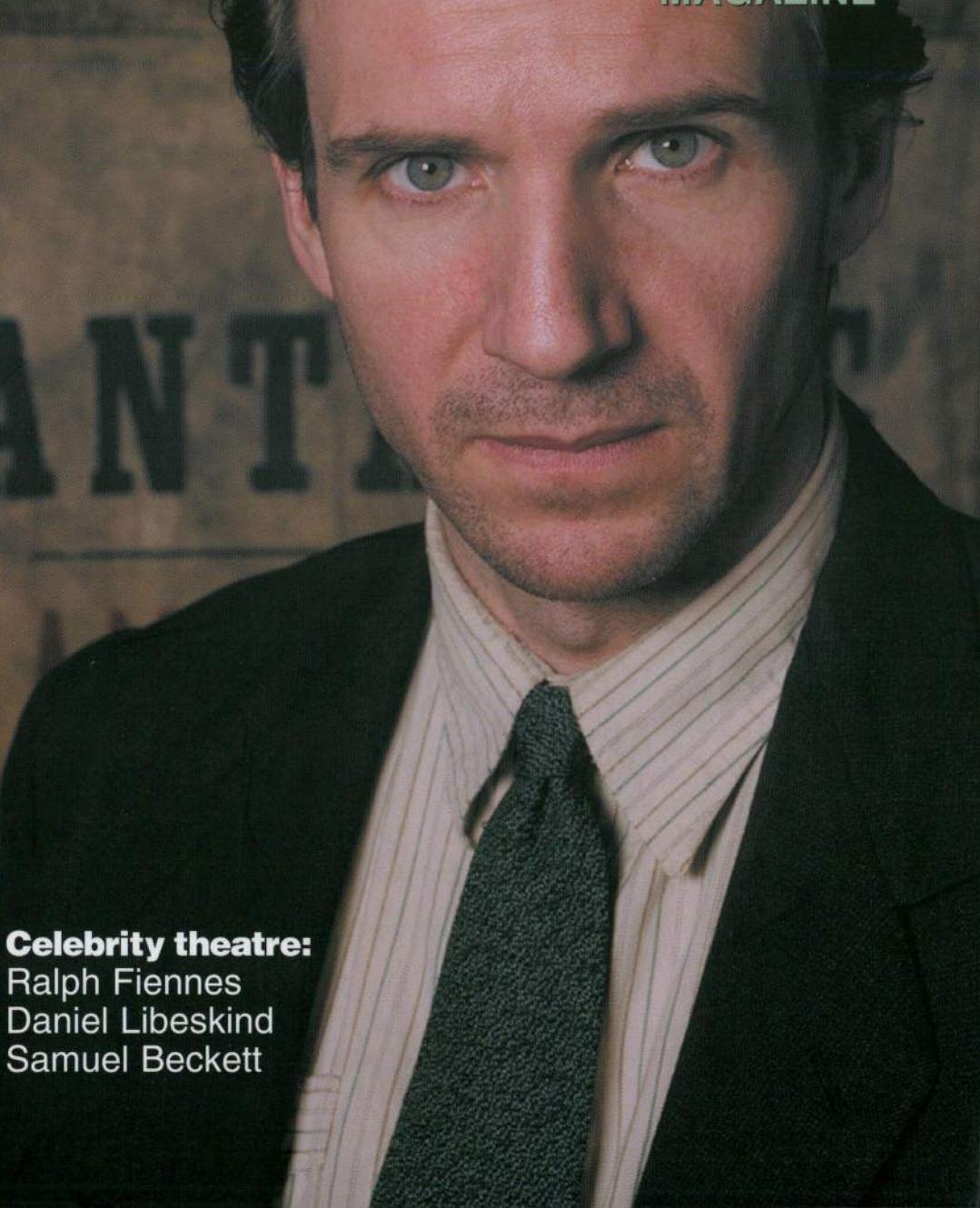


irishtheatre

€10/£7 VOLUME 6, NUMBER 26 SPRING 2006

MAGAZINE



Celebrity theatre:

Ralph Fiennes
Daniel Libeskind
Samuel Beckett

SAMUEL BECKETT

Three Novels

Now you can listen to some of the greatest prose of the twentieth century on this limited edition CD box set published by RTÉ Radio to mark the centenary year of Samuel Beckett's birth.

The box set contains almost 20 hours unabridged of the Irish Nobel Laureate's three finest novels narrated by Barry McGovern, the well-known actor and leading interpreter of Beckett's life and work.

The CD box set also contains an illustrated 58 page booklet by Beckett scholar Gerry Dukes.

Samuel Beckett: Three Novels is part of RTÉ's contribution to the 2006 Beckett centenary celebrations.

RTÉ: Ireland's Public Service Broadcaster

The CD box set will be available from www.rte.ie/shop from April 10th this year priced €49.95.

A 2 disc MP3 version will also be available priced €24.95.

www.rte.ie/shop

Molloy
Malone Dies
The Unnamable

Read by
Barry McGovern





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Photo: Anthony Woods



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REVIEWER

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EDITOR
HELEN MEANY

PUBLISHER
NIK QUAIFE

ART DIRECTOR
SUSAN CONLEY

NEWS & WEB EDITOR
PETER CRAWLEY

REVIEWS & BOOKS EDITOR
PATRICK LONERGAN

PUBLISHING ASSISTANT
TANYA DEAN

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Ciarán Walsh (chair)
Willie White

IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE
ADDRESS
74 Dame Street, Dublin 2
E-MAIL
info@irishtheatremagazine.ie



Reading Between the Lines

HERE ARE SOME SUBTLE CHANGES to *ITM* in this issue: it has expanded a little, upwards and outwards, and there's a lot more breathing space on the page, especially in the Features and Reviews sections. The magazine's identity is unchanged, though; it has merely had a face-lift.

We have design on our minds inside also, with a feature on the new performing arts centre currently being designed for Dublin's Grand Canal Basin by international architect, Daniel Libeskind. With almost everyone in the theatre world in agreement that what's needed for Dublin is at least one flexible, medium-sized venue, the usefulness of the addition of Libeskind's 2,000-seat signature building will inevitably be questioned in some quarters. But at least fans of blockbuster musicals will be happy ...

What's needed for Dublin is at least one flexible, medium-sized venue

The necessity to have a building at all has been by-passed by the fledgling National Theatre of Scotland, and in our Features section, Lynda Radley observes its first faltering steps. In a thorough re-envisioning of what a national theatre could and

should be, the new organisation has decided to take theatre out to people rather than expecting audiences to travel to an iconic home in the capital city. Acknowledging that the notion of a national theatre has been inextricably linked to the birth, in Europe, of the nation state, and that a century later, for a multi-racial society in what is a devolved polity rather than a separate state, the definition of 'national' is inevitably more porous, the NTS has taken a very imaginative step. Comments on this, and on anything else in the issue, may be sent to editor@irishtheatremagazine.ie. *Helen Meany*

what's news

Return of the exile

IT IS, IN THE WORDS OF THE OFFICIAL BROCHURE, DESTINED TO be a "unique celebration". A more effusive press release goes even further, outlining the programme for "this very unique festival". Look a bit closer, however, and the gradient of uniqueness begins to slip. Could it be that the Beckett Centenary Festival in Ireland is, at a push, only slightly unique? As pointed out by the Ambassador of France in a

letter to *The Irish Times*, the centenary of Samuel Beckett's birth will be celebrated with events this month in Dublin, London, New York, Tokyo and Paris. He neglected to mention the participation of eight other American cities and, of course, the various exhibitions, productions and a world premiere (of a novella adapted for the stage) in the Beckettian flashpoint of Reading.

Beckett, in short, is not an Irish artist. He is an artist of the world and competition for cultural tourism in his centenary year is steep. If Dublin is to claim Beckett as its son, the writer did not make it easy.

Roundly dismissive of his native country, having spent almost his entire adult life in Paris and written predominantly in French, Beckett is an artist so contrary in his ideas of home and origin that any Irish-based festival of his work seems less an act of celebration than active – and hurried – repatriation.

While preparations for the centenary of Bloomsday - a much-celebrated but fictitious date - were years in the making, the origin of the Government's support for the Beckett Centenary Festival is harder to trace.

According to documentation in the



I'LL GO ON

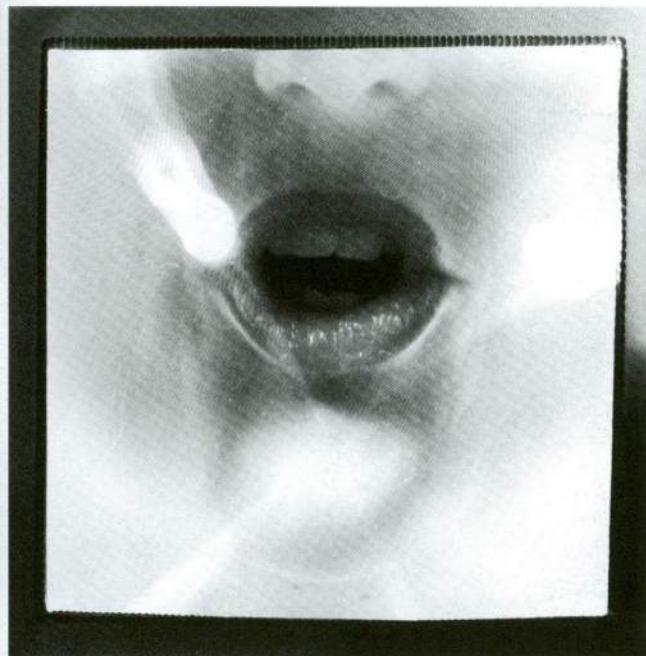


Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism, the Government first became involved officially, and held meetings, as recently as July 2005. (Another, more anecdotal, claim has it at an unspecified time in 2004.) The first official act, however, occurred when Minister John O'Donoghue established the Beckett Centenary Council (chaired by the Department's Secretary General, Philip Furlong) and the Beckett Centenary Festival Committee (chaired by The Gate's Michael Colgan) in November 2005. At this point, details of the productions to be staged jointly by The Gate and The Barbican in London were already well known, as were details

of Trinity College Dublin's Beckett symposium. But the level of funding from the Government was not.

On January 12th, 2006, the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism ran advertisements in various newspapers seeking proposals for "performances, events, activities, or publications" together with costs "to be considered for incorporation into the Official Beckett Centenary programme". The deadline for submissions was tight: January 31st – just two working weeks later, with all events to occur in April/May 2006.

The Department may have moved slowly up to that point, but it proceeded to approve funding with daz-



WHAT WHERE Come and Go at *The Gate*; Kathy Prendergast exhibition at Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin; Conor Lovett, *Gare St Lazare* Players; Not I in a new production from Bedrock

zling speed. By the programme's official launch on February 28th, Minister O'Donoghue was delighted to report that he had approved almost €500,000 in funding for the Festival. But the decisions hadn't been his alone. In fact, all proposals were approved by The Beckett Centenary Council.

What qualified for funding? Well, pretty much anything. As Programme Co-ordinator Laura Barnes explained to *ITM*, it was not restricted to new applicants to the Festival. Large

organisations already participating, such as The Gate, Trinity College, or the National Gallery were just as eligible as smaller organisations new to the festival, such as Bedrock theatre company or the Irish Film Institute.

In less than a month, the programme had swollen and Minister O'Donoghue could now say that the Centenary Festival "once again affirms Ireland as a cultural destination of quality and note".

Really? What is more immediately notable is that, of the main attractions, The Gate's co-productions with the Barbican, it is the London theatre which is clearly the dominant partner. The Barbican (to whom the Beckett

Estate awarded the performance rights to all of Beckett's works this year, allowing them to veto other productions) will stage seven of the nine co-productions first – often several weeks before The Gate – and will also stage far longer runs of each production, except for one. The Gate, on the other hand will present five exclusive performances of *Eh Joe*, an adaptation of a television play, starring Michael Gambon. In the face of such a discrepancy, one is reminded of Samuel Beckett being mistaken for an Englishman by a French interviewer: "Vous-êtes Anglais, Monsieur Beckett?"

"Au contraire," Beckett replied.

Details of who received what from the Government's extremely late offer of funding and subsequent disbursal of €500,000 had yet to emerge as *ITM* went to press, although it is understood that The Gate and the Trinity College Symposium were valid candidates. (The Beckett Centenary Festival Committee consists of several representatives of participating organisations, including RTE, Trinity and the IFI, and is chaired by The Gate's Michael Colgan. It was therefore considered too compromised to award funds. Instead, the much smaller Centenary Council, on which executives of RTE, Trinity and The Gate's Michael Colgan also sit, made the decisions on how to disburse Government



Barry McGovern and Johnny Murphy in Godot

funds. It is understood that Michael Colgan would have had to absent himself from any decisions relating to The Gate.)

Laura Barnes, the energetic Programme Co-ordinator, explained that no applicant received full funding for any project, and each applicant first had to prove that their proposal contained what she variously described as "additive elements" or "additionality" – meaning the proposals had to be for an event that the organisation would not otherwise be programming.

As to the 11th-hour timing of the

Government's commitment to the Festival, Barnes admitted, "It's a centenary. There's been 100 years to figure this out." Alas, Government departments rarely move briskly. "It wasn't intentional," says Barnes. "It's Government. It's not like the private sector. It doesn't move as quickly."

But the Beckett Centenary is a global industry, after all, and whether he is willing or not, if Ireland is to get its share of the pie and resemble "a cultural destination of quality and note", Sam must have his homecoming.

How special does his Irish party seem, in the global scheme of things? Not very. For Beckett, that seems appropriate. Only at the "Borderless Beckett" Symposium in Tokyo, for instance, can you discuss the nuances of the Japanese translation of the wordless 30-second play, *Breath* (*Iki*). And that really is "very unique".

NO FUNDING? NO COMMENT

WITH THE REVENUE FUNDING decisions for 2006 came one lucky winner, a number of disgruntled organisations, and a growing list of casualties. But where everybody knows how well The Abbey has come out of the Arts Council's multi-annual commitment to the theatre, and most people know how unhappy The Gate is with its "pittance" of an increase, the more serious casualties have not been so vocal.

While several hundred people

protested at the sudden closure of the Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast (when the Arts Council of Northern Ireland withdrew funding), and the Arts Council's withdrawal of funding to the Institute of Choreography and Dance in Cork has prompted disquiet among the dance community, the termination of funding to Dublin's City Arts organisation seems to have happened under a blanket of silence.

If it has escaped your notice that the thirty-three year-old organisation has not received funding this year – two years after it sold its Moss Street premises for in excess of €4.2 million – that seems to be how City Arts and the Arts Council prefer to keep it.

"The board of City Arts and the Arts Council are currently in conversation," says Development Director Sarah Tuck. And that is all she will say. Now based in Merrion Square, the official line from City Arts is remarkably similar to that of the Arts Council, who will not comment on withholding funding to the organisation, according to a spokesperson, "because we're in the process of meeting with them."

There are two reasons City Arts is reluctant to comment on the situation. First, the future of the organisation is at stake. (Though City Arts has been suffering from a lack of visibility since 2004, its board is not comfortable with the organisation being



HAPPIER DAYS City Arts' former home on Moss St, with a cottage juxtaposed by the artist Nathan Coley

thought of as “virtual”.) Although they continue to operate and facilitate community projects, and although the Arts Council is not their only source of funding, their reserves are hardly infinite. Much of that €4.2 million has been ringfenced for the acquisition of another premises. Second, City Arts know that their relationship with the Arts Council has deteriorated to such a point that they are unlikely to receive funding this year. But they don’t know why.

“This is an exceptionally sensitive situation that we find ourselves in,” says Declan Gorman, Company Secretary of the City Arts board (as well as director of Upstate Theatre Company). “We have been very careful to conduct our dialogue with the Arts Council in the most proper and careful of manners and not through the media, even sensitive industrial

media, in order that we can have a dialogue, because the future of the City Arts for the next 20 years is much more important to us than throwing brickbats at anybody.”

Despite the silence maintained by City Arts - the organisation where Conor McPherson, Jimmy Fay and Jason Byrne first found their artistic voices

- it has no intention of going gentle into that good night. “City Arts has not closed down,” says Gorman, “It is not planning to close down. It is focussed on restoring our relationship with the Arts Council.” Nor is Gorman able to say how that relationship has cooled. “I am unable to say – genuinely unable – because we have yet to receive sufficient clarification about the background to the [Arts Council’s] decision [not to extend funding] to be able to take a public position, and therefore we are continuing to have conversations with the Council.”

It is hoped, by both parties, that they will understand each other better by May. City Arts are certainly not confident that they will have their funding restored this year.

“Right now,” says Gorman, “we simply don’t have sufficient clarification to be able to understand upon



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what basis the decision was made."

TYING THE KNOT

LATE LAST YEAR KATIE VERLING thought her idea must be dead in the water. At the time, there had been a lot of talk about touring, or rather the lack of it, in Ireland. But the Arts Council, which had even commissioned a report on touring from Jane Daly ahead of the publication of its new Strategy, thought its budget for 2006 was not sufficient enough to make touring a priority.

It was all the more surprising, then, that Nasc, a consortium of theatres led by Verling that includes Glór, The Pavilion, Dunamaise Arts Centre, An Grianán, Siamsa Tíre, Riverbank Arts Centre and Backstage Theatre each received €16,000 from the Arts Council towards a pilot project for touring productions to each venue.

The seven venues came together almost accidentally, says the straight-talking Verling; it was the product of a conversation between like-minded arts executives. Nasc is already working out the logistics of satisfying the demands of theatres with vastly different scales – the venues involved range from a 180-seater to an auditorium that fits 500 – but they all know what they want. "We have agreed

The seven venues came together almost accidentally; it was the product of a conversation between like-minded arts executives.

that we want audience-driven theatre, produced by a quality theatre company, and by a company that is committed to touring," says Verling.

Nasc is currently seeking proposals for its first co-production to tour later this year, and for a second, scheduled for 2007. The deadline for submissions is 2 May, 2006. "It's a pilot," says Verling. "Our plan is to use part of the funds to start things off with a project

that has legs already – where we know the director, the play, the cast and company."

Nasc plans to commission new productions too, and wants to hear from companies who could go into production this autumn.

But they don't want to hear from just anyone: as well as being "audience driven" (does this mean nakedly populist?) and ready to tour, all potential productions must be of "high artistic standard" and "delivered by a reputable director/company". Disreputable companies will have to look elsewhere.

SLIPPING HIS MOORINGS

CONOR MCPHERSON WILL NOT SEE his next play open at his customary Dublin theatre, The Gate. Instead, in something of a coup, its premiere will be at the National Theatre... but not

our National Theatre. When The National in London announced that McPherson's *The Seafarer*, which he will also direct, will open this year at The Cottesloe, it jarred with an earlier report in *Variety*. In January, Fiach MacConghail revealed to the US entertainment paper that McPherson had already promised his next play to the Abbey. Apparently not.

Having named McPherson The Abbey's Writer-In-Association for 2006 – an award worth €11,000, which neither serves to commission a new work nor carries any commitment to the recipient – MacConghail seemed to establish a warmer relationship with the playwright than any previous Abbey AD. McPherson

has said in the past that he had long felt ignored by the Abbey.

However, he demonstrates no ties to it now. Far from there being any promises, a spokesperson for The Abbey says that the theatre is in tentative negotiations with McPherson to stage a production, not of an original work, but of *The Seafarer*. And that those negotiations are at "very early stages". Nothing is confirmed.

If this comes to fruition and the Abbey succeeds in staging Tom Murphy's *Alice Trilogy*, which also premiered in London, a new tradition could be established for Irish literary theatre: staging works from Ireland's most established writers second-hand.



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irish modern dance theatre



DUBLIN CITY
Béal Átha Cliath

opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks your diaries for the months ahead

To celebrate their 20th anniversary, Storytellers will be touring their adaptation of James Stephens' **THE CROCK OF GOLD**. Fresh from performances in the Olympia Theatre, Dublin and Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise, the production will tour to Mermaid Arts Centre Bray, **11 - 13 APRIL**; Siamsa Tíre Theatre, Tralee, **16 - 17 APRIL**; Town Hall Theatre, Galway, from **20 - 22 APRIL**; Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny, **25 - 26 APRIL**; Backstage Theatre, Longford, **28 - 29 APRIL**; Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, **8 - 9 APRIL**; Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun, **11 - 12 MAY**; and Civic Theatre, Tallaght, **15 - 20 MAY**.

FRESH FROM GALWAY AND CORK,
DRUID'S PRODUCTION OF ENDA WALSH'S NEW PLAY, THE WALWORTH FARCE PLAYS IN THE HELIX FROM 4 - 15 APRIL.

ORANGE FLOWER WATER by Craig Wright will be performed by Riff Raff Theatre in Smock Alley, Temple Bar from **10 - 15 APRIL**.

TICK MY BOX! by Inis Theatre continues to tour, taking in Riverside Theatre,



CROCK OF GOLD

Coleraine, **11 - 12 APRIL**; Town Hall Theatre, Galway, **14 - 16 APRIL**, Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire, **19 - 20 APRIL**; Ardhowen Theatre, Enniskillen, **21 APRIL**; Garage Theatre, Monaghan, **22 - 23 APRIL**; Linenhall Theatre, Castlebar, **26 APRIL**; Hawkswell Theatre, Sligo, **27 - 28 APRIL**; An Grianán Theatre, Letterkenny, **29 APRIL**; Market Place Theatre, Armagh, **30 APRIL**.

A co-production between the

Haymarket Basingstoke, the Lyric, the Mercury Colchester and the Northcott Exeter, **RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET**, will play the Lyric Theatre, Belfast from **25 APRIL - 6 MAY**.

Cork Opera House presents **LIFEBOAT** by Nicola McCartney in the Half Moon Theatre from **27 APRIL - 26 MAY**.

Starting from **28 APRIL** and continuing into **SEPTEMBER**, Siamsa Tíre Arts Centre will present their production **TARMON - A PLACE OF REFUGE**, written in collaboration with Michael Harding.

AS PART OF THE 3RD ANNUAL DUBLIN GAY THEATRE FESTIVAL, VERITY-ALICIA MAVENAWITZ'S THE DROWNING ROOM, PRODUCED BY THREE WISE WOMEN, WILL RUN IN ANDREWS LANE STUDIO FROM 1 - 6 MAY.

Gúna Nua and Civic Theatre present **THEESIS** by Gerry Dukes, Paul Meade and David Parnell in the Civic Theatre, Tallaght from **3 - 22 APRIL**, and in the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick from **24 - 29 APRIL**.

Chrysalis Dance will be touring with **WISHES AND WAVES**, a new production with music by Bellx1 and Paddy Casey. Performing at The Glens Centre, Leitrim, **7 APRIL**; Draiocht, Blanchardstown, **8 APRIL**; Cork Opera House, Cork **13 APRIL**; Friar's Gate Theatre, Kilmallock, Co Limerick, **20**

APRIL; The Helix, Dublin **21 APRIL**; Pavilion Theatre, Dublin **22 APRIL**.

Opera Ireland's Spring Season runs from **APRIL 22 - 29** at the Gaiety, with Rossini's **LA CENERENTOLA**, alternating with Gounot's **FAUST**.

CALYPSO'S NEW PRODUCTION, OPERATION EASTER BY DONAL O'KELLY, WILL BE PERFORMED IN KILMAINHAM GAOL FROM 24 APRIL - 20 MAY.

Victoria Thierrée Chaplin's **AURÉLIA'S ORATORIO** plays at the Abbey from **3 - 13 MAY**.

HOWIE THE ROOKIE by Mark O'Rowe plays at the Peacock from **5 MAY - 3 JUNE**.

From **20 MAY - 1 JULY**, Brian Friel's version of **A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY** will play at the Abbey.

THE ROYAL HUNT OF THE SUN by Peter Shaffer will be performed by Lyric Drama Studio from **11 - 13 MAY**.

City Theatre Dublin presents John B. Keane's **THE MATCHMAKER** at Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, from **16 - 20 MAY**, and in Tinteán Theatre, Kerry, from **22 - 27 MAY**.

THE MENTAL, a new play by Little John Nee, will première in the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun from **17 - 20 MAY**, before travelling to An Grianán



Montalvo-Hervieu's On Danse

**From 21 APRIL - 7 MAY, INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL
IRELAND will showcase national and international dance productions.
Here's a selection.**

The Abbey plays host to three international companies: from Belgium, Les Ballets C. de la B. will stage **VSPRS**, from **21 - 22 APRIL**; **RITE OF SPRING / FOLD-ING** presented by Shen Wei Dance Arts from China and the USA, **24 - 25 APRIL**; and France's Montalvo-Hervieu present **ON DANSE** from **28 - 29 APRIL**.

At Project Arts Centre, Jérôme Bel & Pichet Klunchun will perform **PICHET KLUNCHUN AND MYSELF** from **25 - 26 APRIL**; on **27 APRIL**, Nigel Charnock Company presents **FRANK**; from **29 - 30 APRIL**, Raimund Hoghe presents a radical reworking of the classic **SWAN LAKE**; Charles Linehan's **HAPPY DAYS & NEW QUARTET** plays from **01 - 02 MAY**; John Jasperse Company production **PRONE** runs from **5 - 6 MAY**. Other events at Project include **FEET**, a photography exhibition from **24 APRIL - 06 MAY**; a chance for feedback sessions with dancers like Jean Butler on **26, 29, 30 APRIL**; and in conjunction with the Arts Council's *Critical Voices 3*: a public interview with Jérôme Bel, **26 APRIL**; a public lecture by US dance writer Deborah Jowitt, **2 MAY**; and a public critics' forum, **THE CRITICAL PATH, 6 MAY**. (www.criticalvoices.ie)

Home-grown productions include: Irish Modern Dance Theatre's **CLOSE UPS** at the Temple Bar Gallery from **02 - 04 MAY**. Jenny Roche presents a performance-lecture **MAPPING THE TRACE** at Project from **5 - 6 MAY**. In the spirit of international artistic co-operation, there will be a performance of the festival-commissioned **STEPPING OUT** at Crawdaddy from the **5 - 7 MAY**, a work produced after a week-long residency of collaboration between Ireland's Seosamh Ó Neachtain and Tamango from USA/French Guiana.

www.dancefestivalireland.ie

Theatre, Letterkenny, from **24 - 28 May**.

George Seremba brings his show **COME GOOD RAIN** to Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown from **25 - 26 MAY**.

Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company's new production **THE GOLDEN BOY - A DEVISED THEATRE PIECE** runs in the Granary Theatre from **30 MAY - 3 JUNE**.

Castleward Opera, Co Down, presents Puccini's **LA BOHEME** on **2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, 23, JUNE** and Balfe's **BOHEMIAN GIRL** on **3, 9, 15, 16, 22 JUNE**.



Púca Puppets, in association with Éigse Carlow, will present **CORALINE**, an adaptation of Neil Gaiman's novella of the same name. Opening at the Éigse Carlow Arts Festival, **15 -17 JUNE**, then performing in the Firkin Crane at Cork Midsummer Festival, **23 -24 JUNE**.

BLUE/ORANGE by Joe Penhall will play at the Peacock from **16 JUNE - 15 JULY**.

Fitzgerald's Park in Fota Gardens, Cork, will host Corcadorka's new production of Shakespeare's **THE TEMPEST** from **20 JUNE - 1 JULY**.

The Beckett Centenary Symposium

Samuel Beckett Centre,
Trinity College Dublin
5 to 9 April 2006

Trinity College celebrates the centenary of one of its most famous graduates with a symposium that brings eminent scholars and artists from around the world to discuss his legacy and works

For details, see www.tcd.ie/Drama,
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entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre

STEPHEN McMANUS has become the new Line Producer of Dublin Theatre Festival, replacing **FELICITY O'BRIEN** who has left to join Druid Theatre Company as Producer. McManus previously worked with Dublin Theatre Festival as Production Manager in 2005. Also moving up in DTF is **SHAUNA LYONS**, who replaces **GEMMA DUKES** as Marketing Assistant.

BEA KELLEHER, who was Executive Producer with the Dublin Fringe Festival from 2003 until last December, has left to resume her career in advertising.

In October **KARL WALLACE** will step down from Kabosh after nine years as Artistic Director. The company is seeking a replacement, to start in November (www.kabosh.net).

SIOBHÁN CONSENHEIM has recently finished a brief stint working as Project and Development manager for the Association of Professional Dancers in Ireland. The company is currently seeking a new Development Officer. Also leaving

the APDI is Administrator **ANNE MARIE PETERS...**

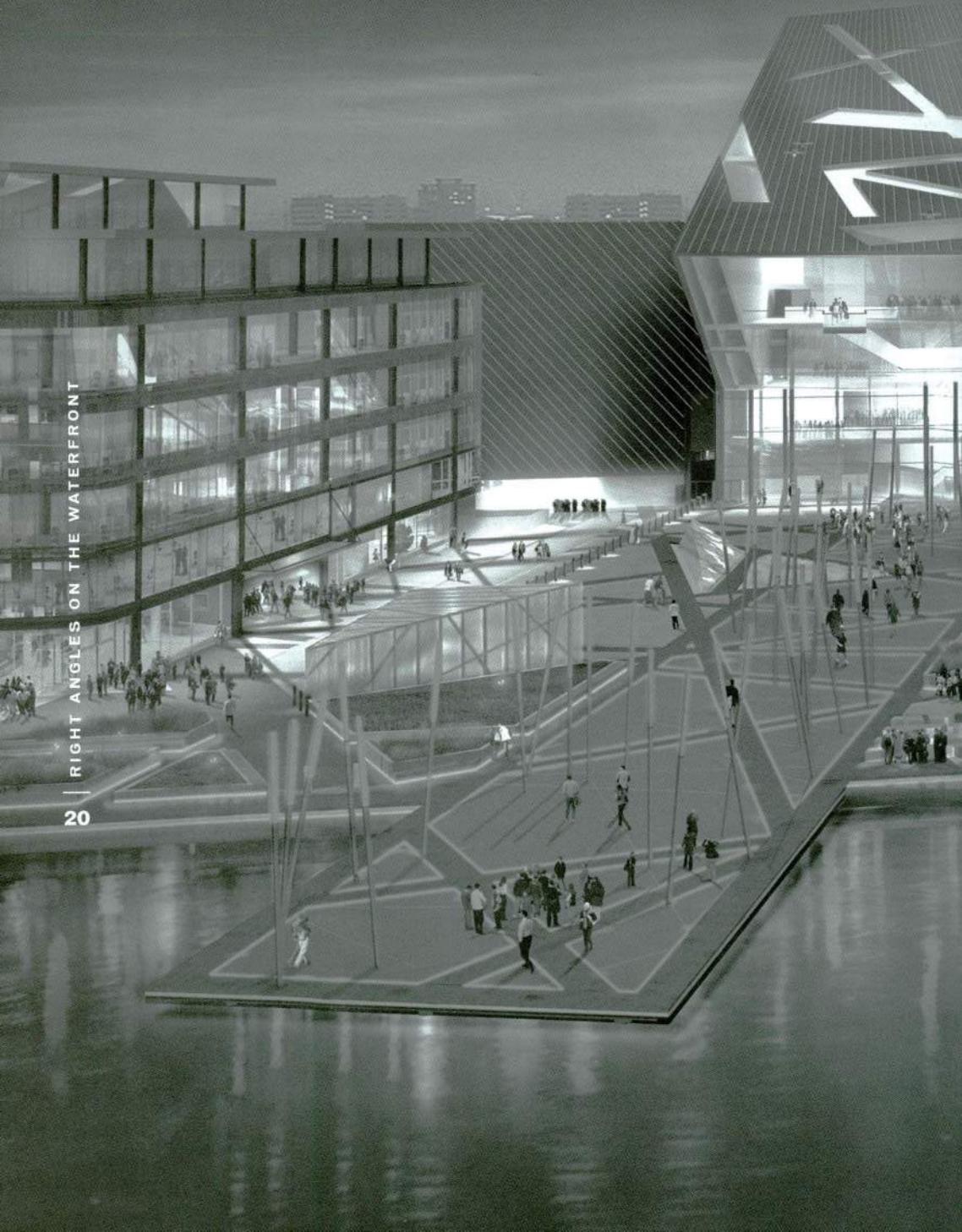
CIARA NI SHÚILLEABHÁN has recently been appointed General Manager in the Everyman Palace Theatre, following four years as Chief Executive of Cork Midsummer Festival. **DYANE HANRAHAN** has joined Cork Midsummer Festival as Festival Manager.. Rough Magic has appointed **TOM CREED** as its first Associate Director. He previously participated in SEEDS II.

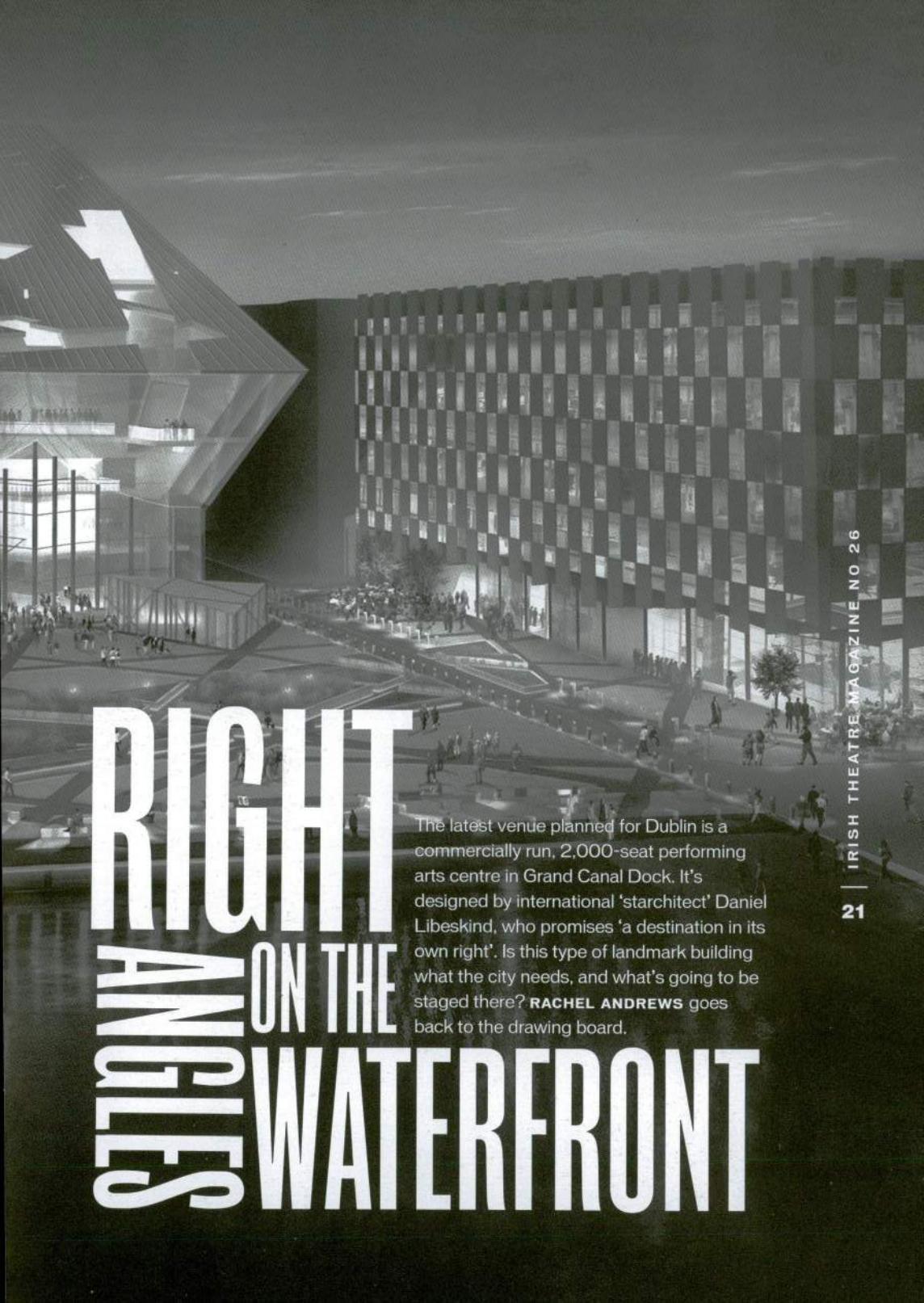
TERRY DEVLIN has left his position as Artistic Director at Island Theatre Company, of which he was a founding member. **ALICE KENNELLY** has been promoted from General Manager to Chief Executive. Working with Kennelly at Island is **GILL FENTON**, formerly of Cork Opera House, who has joined Island as the new Administrator.

CLAUDIA WOOLGAR has been appointed as the new Artistic Director of the Thurles Regional Arts Centre in Tipperary. A Venue Manager is also to be appointed.

| RIGHT ANGLES ON THE WATERFRONT

20





RIGHT ANDY ON THE SETON WATERFRONT

The latest venue planned for Dublin is a commercially run, 2,000-seat performing arts centre in Grand Canal Dock. It's designed by international 'starchitect' Daniel Libeskind, who promises 'a destination in its own right'. Is this type of landmark building what the city needs, and what's going to be staged there? **RACHEL ANDREWS** goes back to the drawing board.

WHEN THE DUBLIN DOCKLANDS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (DDDA) launched its masterplan in 1997 for the rejuvenation of Dublin's docklands – a framework for harnessing the economic, social and physical potential of the then declining waterfront area – it made it clear it viewed the arts as an integral part of the ambitious project. Under a section titled 'Cultural Uses', the DDDA stated that "philosophically, the masterplan should contribute to the blurring of a distinction between culture and everyday life".

One way it hoped to do this was by facilitating "any government initiative to locate major cultural centres or buildings in a waterfront area of the Docklands". As it happens, the first such building announced by the DDDA, an "iconic" 2,000-seat performing arts centre, is a commercial venture. It is located at Grand Canal Square, a site at the west of Grand Canal Dock, developed by Irishman Terry Devey and



his company Heritage Properties. It will be operated by corporate entertainment giant Live Nation (a spin-off of the Texas-based Clear Channel Communications) and designed by Polish-born architect Daniel Libeskind, famous for winning the competition to redevelop the Ground Zero site in New York.

The decision to turn to the market was made belatedly, after the DDDA had tried and failed to lure the Abbey Theatre to the site – a move that became the subject of passionate public debate. It was ultimately quashed by the Taoiseach's announcement of his "surprise" and "disappointment" that the institution would not be staying north of the Liffey, and followed detailed discussions with the Department of Arts and the Office of Public Works regarding the possible relocation of the National Concert Hall. (The €100m redevelopment of the hall is to go ahead at Earlsfort Terrace, where the NCH currently stands.) According to the DDDA, it had exhausted all other possibilities when it finally decided on Devey's proposal, one of three made by developers in response to the DDDA's marketing campaign for a performing



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME DDDA's vision of the transformed docklands

arts centre of "outstanding artistic merit" on Grand Canal Harbour.

Devey had joined forces with Daniel Libeskind in the past, when he persuaded the then Berlin-based architect to come to Dublin in 2001 to work on a proposal

to regenerate Dun Laoghaire's derelict Carlisle Pier – a bold undertaking that prompted the Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company to launch an international architectural competition for the pier's redevelopment. Libeskind's large-scale, wave-like design won popular

That Libeskind has immediate name recognition in this country was confirmed during the Carlisle Pier venture, and it is no surprise that the DDDA should have plumped for his dramatic, angled, crystalline design. There was great excitement at the announcement.

support – it emerged as the clear favourite when the four shortlisted schemes were placed on public display – but it lost the commission to the Dublin-based firm, Heneghan Peng, which had recently beaten over 1,500 contestants in an



international competition to design the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The Dun Laoghaire assessors defended their choice in the wake of public disgruntlement, saying it offered "an architecture of great refinement, elegance and sophistication". Many agreed. In comparison, Libeskind's design appeared rather overbearing in form and theme, with its unsubtle ship's prow metaphor and its incorporated plans for an Irish Diaspora Museum.

Nonetheless, that Libeskind has immediate name recognition in this country was confirmed during the Carlisle Pier venture, and it is no surprise that the DDDA should have plumped for his dramatic, angled, crystalline design for the performing arts centre. There was great excitement at the announcement, with expressions such as "world-class talent" and "architectural masterpiece" bandied about.

Devey's interest in architectural excellence extends beyond high profile "starchs": he provided major sponsorship for the Irish entry at the 2004 Venice Biennale in Architecture, maintaining that O'Donnell and Tuomey's exhibition of their trans-



SIGNATURE BUILDING Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin



INTERNATIONAL STARCHITECT Libeskind

formation of the Letterfrack Industrial School into a furniture college was "a story that the world had to hear". He has stated that he expects the Grand Canal Area to "become as recognisable in the 'memory map' of both Irish and international visitors, as the Lincoln Centre, the Rockefeller Centre, or the Barbican are, to their respective cities". Libeskind, too, is already confident of the arts centre's iconic architectural status. "It will attract people as a destination in its own right," he told *ITM* over the phone from New York. When

DDDA chief executive Peter Coyne was asked by *The Irish Times* if he regretted the loss of the Abbey from the site, he said: "Not now we don't."

The giddiness has tended to obscure the fact that the building will be run, according to the original press release, as a commercial West End/Broadway style theatre, rather than by a not-for-profit outfit, something the DDDA had clearly been willing to accommodate: Coyne was quoted as saying that such an organisation could have availed of a revenue subvention linked to local commercial leases, which would have yielded about €400,000 per annum over a twenty-year period. But Live Nation, which owns and operates around 150 venues worldwide – including managing the Point Theatre in Dublin – and is one of the world's largest promoters and producers of live events, will almost certainly be focused on bringing in the kind of musicals and shows familiar from London's West End. While the wide reach of such a global company will mean the performing arts centre has access to productions such as the Broadway smash-hit *The Producers*, which Live Nation co-produces, there is also some concern that the docklands building may become isolated from the wider arts community.

"It would be a great loss to the market place if it could not be accessed, part of the time, by outfits like the Dublin Theatre Festival, for a large scale piece, or maybe for a touring dance production," says independent theatre producer and arts consultant Richard Wakely.

Nevertheless, there is much goodwill towards the commission. Mary McCarthy, newly appointed Arts Manager with the DDDA, is positive about the potential for engagement with the centre, envisioning opportunities for programming outdoor performances in the space of Grand Canal Square. Asked

for its comment, the Arts Council stated that while "we understand that the space will be completely independent and funded commercially, in the ecology of the arts in Dublin it is very good to have a new performance space. We hope that the venue will provide opportunities for shows - across all art forms - including perhaps Arts Council-funded events."

Before the World Trade Centre competition, Libeskind was famous for one building: the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Although it took ten years to get built, the zigzagged, slashed-windowed museum, with its Holocaust Tower, its Garden of Exile and Emigration and its long, inaccessible, central void, which Libeskind termed the embodiment of absence, established him as one of the key figures in contemporary architecture when it opened in 1999. For the first two decades of his career, he had been known primarily as an eloquent academic and theorist, lecturing at Yale and Harvard, taking his architectural influences from mathematics, literature, astrology, philosophy and music – and seeing virtually none of his buildings built.

Layered with narrative symbolism, the Jewish Museum is the embodiment of architecture as metaphor, yet many commentators who have visited it have noted they have not felt manipulated. "It has a purely architectural force that transcends Libeskind's gimmicks," wrote *New Yorker* architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, in 2003. Still, it was Libeskind's ability to articulate the thought process behind the building that helped to draw the enormous crowds who continue to visit it today. As Ellen Rowley, lecturer in art and architecture at Trinity College Dublin, puts it, "They came because you can read Libeskind's buildings like a text."

Asked to explain the context for his design of the performing arts centre in Dublin, Libeskind was less specific than usual. He spoke rapidly about the echoes of Celtic myths, the movement of ships, the building's unusual, plough-like form, its luminosity, its location facing the canal, and its gardens running all the way up to the skyline (the roof structure is designed as a garden) which he says are reflective of the gardens of Dublin. He talked about drawing imaginative connections with the history of Dublin, with Joyce's *Ulysses*, and with the works of other great Irish writers: "By my bedside currently are two books, *Tristram Shandy* and *Finnegans Wake*."

He also acknowledged that the building was still at a very early stage of development, and that there are no plans, as yet, available for public scrutiny. Given that he reportedly sketched the initial design on an aeroplane, the poetry of his phraseology may mask a concept that has been hastily thought out, leaving the building in danger, as Ellen Rowley notes, of appearing as if "it has simply landed in from space."

The absence of plans has forced critics such as Rowley to draw their initial conclusions from the images of the building released by the DDDA and the model views available on Libeskind's website. (www.daniel-libeskind.com) She concurs with Libeskind's analysis that the building is based on the concept of

'I recognise the importance of the building's function. The acoustics are very important, as is the intimacy of the space. It's important that it should be a place for pleasure and enjoyment, a place for celebration. It is not just a series of right angles on a site in Dublin.'

cern is for the building's wider resonance: "Does Libeskind's time and interest lend itself to understanding the whole of the situation? Is any of our inheritance embedded in the building's form, or is it just an empty aesthetic?"

Libeskind is less ambiguous when he details how the building will operate as a theatre. He has worked on theatrical projects before – as a set and costume designer for a production of *Tristan and Isolde* in the Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken, in 2001, and for a production of *Saint Francis of Assisi* in the Deutsche Oper Berlin, in the same year. He also told *ITM* he had recently designed a university convention centre in Tel Aviv, a space designed for lectures, conferences, and performances.

"I recognise the importance of the building's function, of its backstage infrastructure. I know performers need easy access. The acoustics are very important, as is the intimacy of the space. It's important that it should be a place for pleasure and enjoyment, a place for celebration. It is not just a series of right angles on a site in Dublin."

The challenge for Daniel Libeskind is to build a building that will actually become the icon he says it is. The challenge for the DDDA is to prove that its selection of him instead of an Irish architectural firm - the best of which are engaged in forward-looking, culturally rooted work - was not just an example of stargazing. The wider challenge is to prove that this new space is a fundamental addition to the landscape of the arts in Ireland. Broadway already exists in New York. Something different needs to happen in Dublin.



Rachel Andrews is a journalist and critic.

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NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The new National Theatre of Scotland was launched last month with ten site-specific shows in ten locations, from the Highlands to a Glasgow tower block. Rather than setting out to define notions of Scottishness, it aims to encourage a public sense of ownership. **LYNDA RADLEY** traces its gestation.

HOME: GLASGOW *a towerblock under surveillance,*
written and directed by John Tiffany

WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORDS "NATIONAL THEATRE" what's the first thing that pops into your head: "deficit", "drain on resources", "management reshuffle", "emergency board meeting", "nationalism" or perhaps "not again"? Now, what if I were to say "national theatre of Scotland" and what if I followed it up with two magic words: "no building"? Considering the activities, significance and programme of the new National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) from an Irish point of view, its most immediately noteworthy aspect is the decision by the Scottish Executive to form a national theatre and not place it in any theatre building. The idea is that this non location-specific body can truly engage with the whole country by working in existing theatres and with established companies throughout Scotland - thereby overcoming the geographical difficulties and perceived divide between the central belt (including Glasgow, Edinburgh and the other major cities) and the rest of Scotland (including the Highlands and islands).

In addition, this enables the NTS to connect with a wide spectrum of theatre companies in a host of venues – each with their own audience demographic and established image - thereby reaching as inclusive an audience as possible. This is reflected in NTS's inaugural season, which features new work from innovators such as Grid Iron and Improbable as well as a touring revival of the popular *Elizabeth Gordan Quinn* and a production of *The Crucible*, the latter involving a strong outreach and community cast element. In particular the NTS is free to make site-specific work, a strategy it has flagged as central to its aspiration to reach new audiences, make inclusive theatre and engage with Scotland's various and varied communities. A wise decision when you consider how, for so long, renderings of Irish rural life were presented on the Abbey stage while the National Theatre itself remained remote from those communities it claimed to represent.

As the many ages of the Abbey have demonstrated, the artistic director of a national theatre is a key figure. Speculation was rife as to who the successful candidate would be when the position was first advertised in 2003. There were a few notable grumbles about her nationality when Vicky Featherstone was appointed. However, the Scottish Executive pulled a master stroke in appointing Featherstone, the former director of Paines Plough. Though she has been a keen supporter of Scottish theatre and a prominent contributor to the Edinburgh festival, she is not embroiled in the Scottish theatre scene, holds no previous alle-

HOME: EDINBURGH



giances, is suitably young, enthusiastic and energetic, undeniably qualified for the job and therefore somebody behind whom the various clans of Scottish theatre can unite. Featherstone's appointment also signals a firm commitment to new work, considering her excellent endeavours with Paines Plough, where she championed writers such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill.

The challenge the NTS faces is how to maintain a comprehensive and clear artistic vision while remaining inclusive and open. It is already clear that the NTS will have enormous influence over Scottish theatre from now on.

Scottish Arts Council's funding priorities. The latest casualties include 7:84 of Glasgow, a company which has been making political theatre and facilitating related workshops for over thirty years. However, its work is no longer seen as reaching the appropriate quality standards. 7:84 is now fervently fighting the 100 percent funding cut - and subsequent end of the company - which the Scottish Arts Council has levied.

In this climate it has been difficult to galvanise support for a new national theatre. The most prominent concern among Scotland's arts community seems to be that smaller companies could find themselves struggling as funds are redirected into a national theatre. Featherstone and company argue that this won't happen: firstly because the 7.5million pounds the NTS received was an independently found sum and has not therefore impacted on Scottish Arts Council funding to the theatre sector; secondly because the NTS will have the resources to commission, and therefore foster, young, small and struggling companies. Detractors counter with the argument that this just makes the NTS another rung on the slippery funding ladder, another commissioning body to write proposals for; another set of criteria with which they hope their work complies.

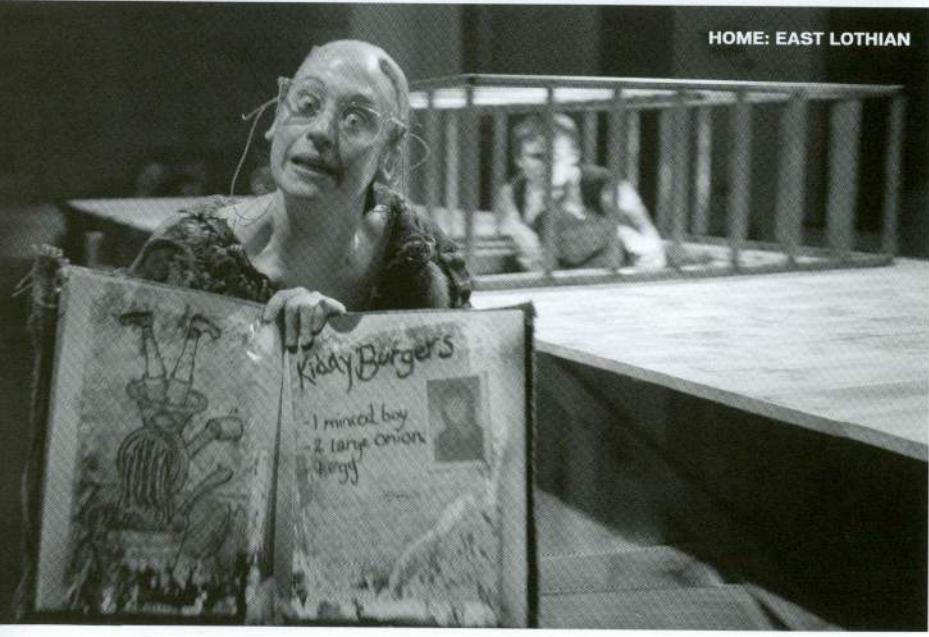
The challenge that the NTS faces therefore is how to maintain a comprehensive and clear artistic vision while remaining an inclusive and open body. It is already clear that the NTS will have enormous influence over Scottish theatre from now on. It is, after all, an organisation with the ability to devise projects, commission, co-produce and tour work, both nationally and internationally. Judging by the breadth and quality of their first season's collaborators, the cream of Scotland (and beyond) are already clambering over each other to earn the national theatre's

continued on page 38 >>

However, the decision to form a national theatre in the first place is not fully or unquestionably supported by all. Chief among concerns is, as always, money. Some companies have been hard hit by changes in the



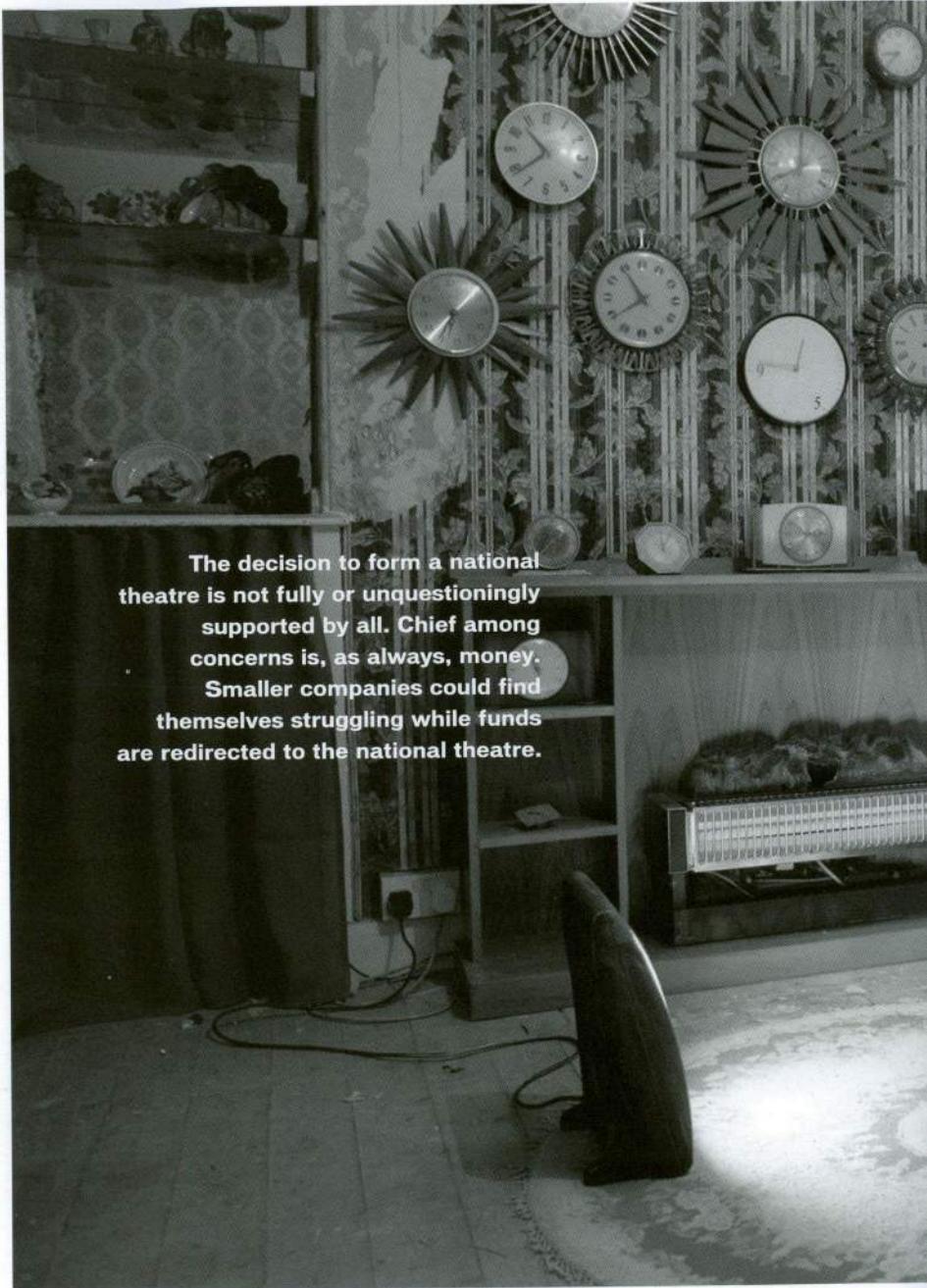
HOME: DUMFRIES



HOME: EAST LOTHIAN

The decision to form a national theatre is not fully or unquestioningly supported by all. Chief among concerns is, as always, money.

Smaller companies could find themselves struggling while funds are redirected to the national theatre.



HOME: ABERDEEN



<< continued from page 34

seal of approval. But what will this mean? What nation will they represent?

When Ireland's national theatre was established it had clearly stated ambitions to assert and define a national identity. Over the decades the Abbey has espoused a number of visions of the Irish nation and, from the opening production onwards,

few have ever been totally happy with the results. The position of the new NTS is complicated by the pluralism of contemporary Scottish society, something that Featherstone has repeatedly acknowledged in pub-

The position of the new NTS is complicated by the pluralism of contemporary Scottish society.

The role of the NTS is to showcase the quality and variety of work available and open this up to as many people as possible.

licity relating to her new role. She seems keen to stress that rather than trying to define "Scottishness", the role of the NTS is to showcase the quality and variety of work available and to open this up to as many people as possible, both within the country and beyond. The ambition seems to be to encourage a public sense of ownership of the national theatre. Judging by the well rounded programme they are about to present, the NTS appear to have struck a balance between taking risks on difficult or ambitious projects, presenting revivals of popular works from the past and – crucially - running an accessible outfit, keen to source new writers, give workshops to the public and truly engage with community arts.

So, how do you open a contemporary national theatre? Wisely, the decision was made not to place this responsibility into the hands of any one director but to commission ten young, exciting British directors to make ten one-off, site-specific works in ten locations all over Scotland, collectively titled *HOME*. All were performed on the 25th of February. They included a performance revolving around a doll's house in Stornoway and a children's enactment of prime minister's question time in Edinburgh. In Glasgow, *HOME* was written and directed by John Tiffany, the NTS's associate director for new work, and took place outside a tower block in Easterhouse. It explored the issue of government surveillance and featured three masked men abseiling down the building who filmed the happenings within. These images were then projected onto an "MI5" van outside and thus relayed to the audience.

Though I have been informed that the *HOME* performances in other parts of the country were thoughtful and well orchestrated, *HOME* in Glasgow was a huge disappointment and possibly one of the worst pieces of site-specific theatre I have seen. It told the story of two brothers brought up in Easterhouse: one who stayed



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HOME; DUNDEE

kids who made up the community cast. Kids from Easterhouse may be tough but I don't think even they are a match for the secret service. It was amateurish, patronising, poorly scripted and the site-specific element seemed like an afterthought rather than an integral part of the experience. Instead of standing outside a tower block in Easterhouse in the freezing cold, I felt that I could have just watched it all on television. I certainly don't think I gained any insight into what it's like to live in that community.

While the ideas, set-up, programme and aspirations of the new National Theatre of Scotland are undeniably exciting and innovative, whether they can pull it off remains to be seen.

they can pull it off remains to be seen. Despite my reservations about *HOME* in Glasgow, it's early days. I'm willing to give the NTS the benefit of the doubt and look forward to the rest of this year's work. While it's unlikely that Ireland's National Theatre is ever going to shed the burden of a building, we could still learn a great deal by looking towards our neighbours. My hope would be that the NTS model might encourage us to take a step back from the Abbey (and all of its controversies) and to ask the most simple and direct questions about what it should aspire to do, how its funds should be directed, how it could successfully reflect modern Ireland and how it could best serve and welcome the citizens who foot its bills.

and one who escaped to London. The younger of the two was trying to use plutonium to "reparticulate" his dead father's ashes, his father having died of gulf war syndrome. An intercepted e-mail on this subject leads to government surveillance and, to put a long story short, M15 were finally sent packing by a group of local

While the ideas, set-up, staff, programme and aspirations of the new National Theatre of Scotland are undeniably exciting and innovative, whether or not

Lynnda Radley is a playwright, critic and dramaturg from Cork. She lives in Glasgow.





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Here's to another great year of Irish theatre magazine!

Through the Leaves

PATRICK LONERGAN thumbs through the latest publications on Irish theatre

CONALL MORRISON'S PRODUCTION of *The Dandy Dolls* was one of the surprise hits of the ill-fated *abbeyonehundred season* in 2004, upstaging works by Yeats and Synge. If you were one of the many people who knew little or nothing about its author, George Fitzmaurice, then you're likely to enjoy *Wild In His Own Way*, a new study of his life and works by Fiona Brennan. It sheds light on Fitzmaurice's writings, arguing convincingly that they deserve our attention, and provides an account of his dealings with the Abbey which, perhaps unsurprisingly, were not easy.

This is one of many new releases from Carysfort Press, the Dublin-based publisher of books on Irish theatre. This year, they're focussing on some of Ireland's most prominent playwrights. First up is *Out of History*, about the

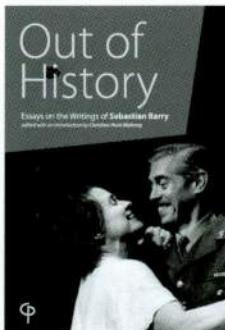
plays of Sebastian Barry; then we've got a volume entitled *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* and there's also an as-yet untitled volume on Oscar-winner Martin McDonagh.

Another recent award winner is Elizabeth Kuti, who received the prestigious Blackburn Prize this year for

The Sugar Wife, her brilliant drama about a Quaker family in Dublin in 1850. The prize is awarded every year to a woman playwright writing in English; past winners have included Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr, so Kuti is in good company. If you

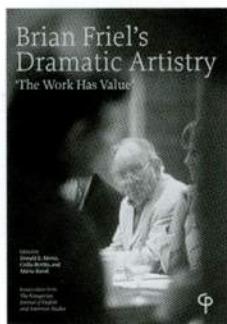
missed the Rough Magic production of the play last year, you can read the script, which has been published by Nick Hern Books.

Also new from Nick Hern is Stella Feehily's *O Go My Man*, currently on tour in Ireland and the UK. Like her



2003 surprise hit *Duck*, the play is again set in contemporary Dublin, and displays a lively use of language, and terrific characterisation. *O Go My Man* was to have appeared at the Abbey, according to press reports; the quality of the published script is high enough to make one regret that this didn't happen. From the same publisher is Rodney Lee's *The Gist of It*, premiered by Fishamble in March - which will be reviewed in the next issue of *ITM*.

Love in the Wars, a play by Booker Prize-winner John Banville, has just been published by Gallery. Better known as a novelist and critic, Banville here provides his third stage adaptation of the plays of the 18th-century German dramatist, Kleist. While they are certainly more literary than dramatic, Banville's plays have a lively theatricality too, as we saw some years



ago in the Barrabas production of Banville's *God's Gift*.

Finally, from Cork University Press we have the unexpectedly topical *Staging the Easter Rising* by James Moran. This book examines the Easter Rising itself, its treatment

in plays by O'Casey and Yeats, and the theatricality of official commemorations of the Rising from De Valera onwards. Moran makes a series of interesting propositions about how we can understand the Rising and its legacies in terms of performance.

Studies of Irish theatre are often excessively politicised, so it's nice to see Moran turning the tables, discussing politics in terms of theatre – but he also provides useful explorations of plays, notably *The Plough and the Stars*. It's an interesting read now, and likely to become increasingly relevant during the next ten years. 



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View from the Stalls

In our expanded Reviews section, *ITM's* reviewers get to grips with the past three months' productions around the country. Some of these reviews were first published on www.irishthemagazine.ie

Ian McDiarmada in *Faith Healer*



BRONNIE HUNTER
WITH
THE
MURKIN



New and Old Voices

It has been a good period for new Irish writing, from established playwrights as well as emerging voices. Our critics assess recent productions of new work from Daragh Carville, Darach Ó Scolaí, Frank McGuinness and Tom Murphy.

ALICE TRILOGY by Tom Murphy

Royal Court Theatre, London

10 November – 10 December 2005

Directed by Ian Rickson

With Derbhle Crotty, Juliet Stevenson,

Stanley Townsend

Reviewed 26 November 2005

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

TOM MURPHY'S BEST PLAYS COULD be described as miraculous, in two senses. First, they conclude with moments of transformation that defy both the laws of physics and our understanding of the real: Harry lifts a pulpit several times his own weight in *Sanctuary Lamp*, King sings to the accompaniment of music from a plugged-out record player in *Gigli Concert*, and so on. Secondly, they're miraculous as works of art: they confound dramatic conventions, ask actors to do the apparently impossible, strain the credulity of audiences – and somehow they still work. *Alice Trilogy* differs from Murphy's earlier works in many ways, but it retains this miraculous quality.

This trilogy combines three self-

contained works, each of which focuses on different stages in the life of the eponymous heroine, played by Juliet Stevenson. Formally, linguistically and (to an extent) thematically, each of the plays is different; taken together, they achieve their effect not so much through the accumulation of information, as from the contrast between one play and the others. Murphy has used this episodic approach before in *Famine*, but because he's focussing on one character here, *Alice Trilogy* has an intensity that's new, and at times frightening.

We begin with *In the Apiary*, set in the 1980s. The twenty-something Alice hides in her attic, having a whiskey before it's time to collect her kids from school. She's in dialogue with her alter-ego, who's perched on a stool nearby, played with edgy malevolence by Derbhle Crotty. We learn much about Alice's unhappiness, but the lasting effect here is created by Murphy's exploitation of repeated sounds. There's Alice's use of the word "yes", which is delivered as a question rather than an affirma-

Stanley Townsend and Juliet Stevenson in Alice Trilogy



tion; there's Crotty's use of the word "fuck", delivered in a tone of manic disbelief, as if things can't possibly be *this* bad; and there's the sound of Alice's husband's budgies singing. These sounds merge in the final moments, sounding (in Alice's words) "like hacksaws cutting through wire" – a phrase that provides an aural representation of her state of mind.

We move then to *By the Gasworks Wall*, set ten years later. Alice is in conversation with a former lover, played by Stanley Townsend, whom she's contacted after a long separation. Both have spent years imagining each other's lives, contemplating the possibility of being together. The dramatic momentum here is created by the collision of these imaginings with the reality both characters confront in each other.

Finally, we move to the present, to *At the Airport*. Murphy uses the monologue form here, making it seem (miraculously) exciting again, after years of overuse by other dramatists. Although the action is set in an airport café, Alice speaks directly to the audience, referring to herself as "the woman". She interacts occasionally with her husband and the waiting staff too, and we gradually realise that this rupture in her sense of herself arises from her shock at the sudden death of her son. The contrast between Stevenson's performance of the mundane activity of eating food

in a restaurant, and the description of her bereavement, is deeply upsetting.

Then, about two minutes from the end of the play, the miracle happens. Throughout the action, Alice has struggled with reality: she's created an imaginary alter-ego to talk to in the first play, transferred her desires onto a fantasised male figure in the second, and attempted unsuccessfully to come to terms with her child's death in the third. Suddenly, from nowhere, she's forced to focus on something inescapably *real*, as a hitherto minor character makes a shocking revelation, which prompts a moment of transformation and, perhaps, of healing. This moment hasn't been signalled before – and it feels almost like a cheat, as if Murphy didn't know how to finish the play. *Alice Trilogy* thus comes dangerously close to failing, artistically and dramatically. Yet, because this revelation appears like an invasive rupture in the structure of the play, it feels true to life in a way I've never seen represented on stage before: in reality, this is *precisely* how tragedy happens – without warning, without logic. Many directors would lose their nerve when confronted with Murphy's willingness to explore human pain in this way; here, Ian Rickson tackles and indeed celebrates this feature of his dramaturgy.

Stevenson struggles at times with her Irish accent, but her portrayal of

the disintegration – and sudden re-integration – of Alice's life over three decades is supremely intelligent. And Crotty is impressive throughout (one longs to see her take the lead in an Irish production of this play). But most exciting here is the continuing restlessness of Murphy's imagination: *Alice Trilogy* is reminiscent of many of his great plays, but he's also exploring new ways of writing, and new ways of representing our pain – and the possibility of its relief.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in English at NUI Galway and is Reviews Editor of this magazine.

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ag Darach Ó Scolaí

Léirithe ag Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe faoi stiúr

Dharach Mhic Con lomaire

Ionad Ealaíne Axis, Baile Munna 17-22

Deireadh Fómhair mar chuid de
chamchúairt tire.

Léirmheas déanta 18 Deireadh Fómhair 2005

AG RIÓNA NÍ FHRIGHIL

IS DRÁMA NUACHUMTHA É
Coinneáil Orainn, ar toradh é d'iar-
rachtaí na Taibhdheirce drámadóirí a
ghríosú chun pinn. Bhronn
Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe duais
Gradam Cuimhneacháin Bháitíre Uí
Mhaicín ar script Dharach Uí Scolaí

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agus, mar chuid den duais, léiríodh an dráma faoi stiúir Dharach Mhic Con Iomaire, i gcomhpháirt leis an drámadóir féin.

Tá an dráma seo lonnaithe sa todhchaí, rud atá eisceachtúil ann féin, ó thaobh léirithe Gaeilge de. An bhliain 2020 atá i gceist agus tá an bheirt chainteoirí dhúchasacha dheireanacha ar teitheadh ón 'namhaid' atá acu, mar atá, an Roinn Gael, Gaeilge agus Gaelachais, is cosúil. Is i dtéarmaí cogáiochta a thuigeann an bheirt seo a seasamh ar son na Gaeilge in éadan an státhórais. Bíonn siad de thiart ag faire amach do chigirí, gunnaí faoina n-ascaillí agus iad i bhfo-lach sa choill. Thug Peadar Ó Treasaigh taispeántas gan locht uайдh ina ról mar chaptæn. Léirigh sé go rímhaith an turise agus an t-éadóchas a bhí ag teacht air de dheasca na síorstreachtailte ar son na teanga. I gcodarsnacht le seo, léirigh Donncha Mac Con Iomaire, a ghlac páirt "Seáinín", diograis agus soineantacht na hóige. Bhain an chodarsnacht seo idir fuinneamh na hóige agus taithí na seanaoise, ní hamhán le carachtair an dráma, ach le haisteoireacht na beirte festa. Bhí taithí Pheadair Uí Threasaigh le haithint ar an chur chuige caolchúiseach, muiníneach a bhí aige. Cé gur thug Donncha Mac Con Iomaire sárthaispeántas uaidh ar an mhórchóir, bhí an easpa taithí le rianú ar an dóigh ar labhair sé ion-tach gasta le teann diograise ó am go

chéile. Maidir leis na naimhde a bhí acu, d'fhóir Morgan Cooke agus Brídín Nic Dhonncha go mór do na páirteanna a bhí acu mar chigire na roinne agus runaí na roinne faoi sheach. Ghluais siad go héifeachtach agus go slachtmhar ar fud an stáitse agus níor chuir ceachtar acu oiread agus siolla ná mionghluaiseacht amú.

In ainneoin an ghrinn a bhí ina orláí tríd an script agus an léiriú, ba é an ciniceas i leith thodhchaí na teanga agus iarrachtaí an státhórais í a chaomhnú is mó a chuaigh i bhfeidhm ar an lucht féachana. Déantar aoir neamhthrocaireach ar na heagrasí Ghaeilge agus cuirtear ina leith gur eagraíochtaí faisisteacha iad atá á rith ag brabúsaithe agus díograiseoirí díchéillí ar mó an dochar ná an maitheas atá dhéanamh acu don teanga. Cáineann Ó Scolaí an aicme léannta atá á cothú ag na heagrasí seo, dar leis, agus an fháillí atá á déanamh sa phobal dúchasach. Cé go n-ardaíonn an dráma seo ceisteanna tábhachtacha faoi phleanáil teanga agus ról an státhórais san earnáil sin, tá amhras orm faoin leagan amach dénártha atá ar ábhar an dráma, mar atá, stát v. pobal dúchasach, foghlaimeoir v. cainteoir dúchais, pleánáil stádais na teanga v. réaltacht shochtheangeolaíoch na linne. Lochtaítear straitéis an státhórais go tréan sa dráma agus cuirtear ina leith go bhfuil scríos a dhéanamh ag an chóras ar an rud atá

sé in ainm is a bheith á chosaint. Tá ceist le cur faoin chiniceas fén mar straitéis ghríosaithe, áfach, go háirithe nuair a chuirtear san áireamh an t-athrú meoin atá á léiriú ag an phobal i gcoitinne i leith na Gaeilge le blianta beaga anuas.

Tá moladh ar leith ag dul don léiritheoir, Darach Mac Con Iomaire. In ainneoin na lochtanna a fuarthas ar an script fén, is beag locht a fhéadfáí a fháil ar an léiriú seo. Baineadh úsáid shamhlaíoch as an teicneolaíocht, sonratheilgeoir agus *Powerpoint* ach go háirithe, rud a chuir béim ar an deighilt idir an pobal dúchasach agus an aicme léantana a bhí á cur in iúl sa script. Bhí snas, críochnúlacht agus profisiúntacht ag roinnt le gach gné den léiriú, rud a mbítear ag dréim leis ó léirithe Mhic Con Iomaire. Faoin tráth seo is geall le taispeántais iontu fén iad na seiteanna a bhíonn ag léirithe na Taibhdheirce, a bhuiochas sin do Dhara McGee, agus níor thráigh ar a shamhlaíocht an t-am seo ach oiread.

Tharla gurb í an choimhlint idir an maorlathas agus leas na teanga is cúram don dráma seo, is tráthúil, más foróna fén é, gur bhris an scéal le linn don dráma seo a bheith ar chamchuaírt ar fud na tíre, nach mbeadh conradh Mhic Con Iomaire á athnuachan ag bord bainistíochta na Taibhdheirce. I bhfianaise an rath atá ar léirithe na Taibhdheirce ó tháinig Mac Con Iomaire i réim agus i bhfi-

anaise an cháil atá amuigh ar ardchaighdeán na léirithe i measc lucht drámafochta na Gaeilge agus an Bhéarla, is deacair ciall ar bith a bhaint as an chinneadh seo. In ainneoin an chlaonadh chun áibhéal agus chun cinicis atá le sonrú ar script Uí Scoláí i dtaca leis na heagrás Ghaeilge, is cosúil go pointe áirithe, nach ró-fhada ón mhuiileann atá an sac leagtha aige.

Is léachtóir le Nua-Ghaeilge i gColáiste Phádraig, Droim Conrach, í Ríona Ní Fhrighil.

COINNEÁIL ORAINN by Darach Ó Scoláí

Produced by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe

Directed by Darach Mac Con Iomaire

With Morgan Cooke, Darach Mac Con Iomaire,
Bridín Nic Dhonncha, Peadar Ó Treasaigh

On Tour, Axis Theatre, Ballymun, 17-22

October 2005

Reviewed on 18 October

BY RÍONA NÍ FRIGHIL

COINNEÁIL ORAINN WAS THE WINNER of the Bháitéal Ó Maicín Memorial Award, a script-writing competition initiated by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe in 2003 to promote contemporary drama in the Irish language. As part of the prize, this play was produced by the Taibhdhearc under the direction of Darach Mac Con Iomaire and in association with the author, Darach Ó Scoláí.

Set in 2020, the play presents the last

two native Irish speakers, who are on the run from an unspecified “enemy”. The enemy appears to be the Department of Irish people, Irish language, and Irishness. The two fugitives perceive their dealings with the State department in terms of war, as they keep watch for inspectors on the outskirts of an unnamed town, guns under their arms. Peadar Ó Treasaigh, in the role of the Captain, conveys impeccably the despair of an aging veteran, whose life was spent fighting for the Irish language. In contrast, Donncha Mac Con Iomaire who plays the part of “Seáinín” exudes the energy, idealism and innocence of youth. The contrast of young and old is reflected in their respective performances: Ó Treasaigh’s is measured and confident; Mac Con Iomaire’s energetic acting, though excellent, lacks composure and subtlety at times. As for their “enemies” in the State department, Morgan Cooke and Bridín Nic Dhonncha execute their roles as department inspector and department secretary respectively with a slickness and efficiency that could only pertain to civil servants in the realm of fiction.

Although there was no shortage of witticism and comedy in the production, the enduring impression was of compelling cynicism in relation to both the future of the Irish language and all State attempts at its preservation. State-funded Irish-language organisations are ruthlessly parodied

in a Myles-na-gCopaleen fashion. Depicted as fascist organisations run by opportunists and deluded enthusiasts, these organisations are ironically shown to pose the greatest threat to the language. Ó Scolaí is highly critical of the class of educated elites that these organisations support to the detriment of the indigenous community of Irish speakers. While the play raises critical questions about language planning and the role of the State in this sector, the binary oppositions of State v. people, native speaker v. learner, statistics v. sociolinguistic reality, tend to simplify these complex issues and apportion blame solely to the State. The State-funded language organisations are found to endanger that which they are supposed to protect. One could argue that the sheer cynicism of the script is more likely to engender pessimism as opposed to activism among its target audience.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, Darach Mac Con Iomaire’s production could scarcely be faulted. An imaginative use of technology, specifically a Powerpoint show, further emphasised the division between the learned elite and the native community alluded to in the script. This production exhibits the professionalism and meticulousness that Irish-speaking audiences have come to expect of Mac Con Iomaire’s work. Dara McGee’s set-design, a regular showpiece in Taibhdhearc productions in recent

years, did not disappoint.

Given that the theme of the play is the conflict between bureaucracy and the wellbeing of the Irish language, it was appropriate, if highly ironic, that the story broke while this play was on national tour that Mac Con Iomaire's contract as artistic director of the Taibhdhearc was not to be renewed. This decision beggars belief considering the success of the Taibhdhearc's productions under Mac Con Iomaire's directorship, and the reputation that his work has within and beyond the Irish-speaking community. The extreme cynicism and pessimism regarding bureaucracy in Ó Scolaí's script, which initially appears excessive and unjustified, no longer seems so unfounded in the wake of recent events.

Ríona Ní Fhrighil lectures on contemporary poetry and drama in Irish at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin.

FAMILY PLOT by Daragh Carville

Tinderbox Theatre Company at Riverside

Theatre, Coleraine (on tour)

Directed by Michael Duke

With Helena Bereen, Gordon Fulton,

Susan Kelly, Claire Lamont, Frankie

McCafferty, Libby Smith

Reviewed 19 November 2005

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

FAMILY PLOT IS PRODUCED BY
Tinderbox as part of its policy of nur-

turing new writing in Northern Ireland. The title puns on the word "plot", as the play both reveals the family's darkest secrets, and is set in a graveyard – in the family plot. The play begins with five of the family members already trapped together in the grave, continuing their torture of each other after death. Then the last surviving member joins them, and the four generations together are forced to confront their sad history.

The cast includes Frankie McCafferty as Frank and Libby Smith as his wife Tess, a couple whose marriage was deeply unhappy in life, and is no happier after death. Claire Lamont plays their daughter Emer, their only child, whose conception forced them to marry. Gordon Fulton and Susan Kelly play Da and Ma, Frank's parents, with Helena Bereen as the ancient and vicious Aunt Lizzie. In life, they all shared a house, a site of exclusion for Tess who was ostracised by her husband's family. His parents tacitly encouraged his violence towards her. The purgatorial, grey nowhere zone of Stuart Marshall's set links the hopelessness of the grave with the emotional and spiritual death endured by the characters in their shared life.

Yet despite the strong cast, the play never rises above the level of a cliché. This is a pity, because its central conceit is clearly a comment on the process of peace and reconciliation in

Northern Ireland. The family reiterate their mutual loathing and misery, becoming helplessly trapped in loops of behaviour and dialogue that they are powerless to control or escape until they can find some shared memories of love or joy. When they finally do, the moment is managed without excessive sentimentality or scenes of family togetherness. The final redemption of five of the characters allows them to escape the trap of the past and to move on, to "go" to a non-specific afterlife. Interestingly, the plot does not demand a full reconciliation. Rather, it is a willingness to risk the future that is crucial. Frank, left alone on stage at the end, remains there because he cannot imagine anything else. "There's nothing there, just nothing", he says, shouting after them, "Let's see how far yous get".

However unlike its literary forebears, Sartre's *No Exit* or Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*, *Family Plot* does not successfully comment on human nature and society. It appears that the fault for this lies with the direction. The text of the play, which is printed in the programme, is considerably more complex and interesting on reading than it was on stage. On the page, the metaphor of this family's multigenerational cycle of violence and bitterness, and the need for forgiveness, is more poignant and less comic. Yet the production often makes use of clumsy

devices and underuses the talents of its production team as well as its cast. Conleth White lights the stage in a warm glow for the transformation of the characters, which effectively communicates what has happened, but this image is such a cliché that one almost expects to hear the voice of God calling each character forth. After the character "moves on", the actor freezes on stage, which makes Frank's final isolation visually ineffective.

The script often presents comic exchanges that are later revisited and given a more grim and unhappy interpretation. Early in Act II, for example, Tess tells Frank "I rue the day I ever met you". Frank responds, "I'll rue you in a minute ... I'll rue you before you're much older". Later, Tess remembers "spitting blood in a Belfast sink", and Emer remembers her desperate childish attempts to save her mother from her father's violence, and her appeals to her indifferent grandparents. The direction should allow for the full range of emotions within these family scenes to emerge. It should also, without drawing analogies too explicitly, allow the text to comment upon the range of jurisdictions implicated in Northern Ireland's Troubles.

It may be that the audience forced the interpretation of the performance as purely funny in their response to it, making it difficult for the actors to

*Claire Lamont, Gordon Fulton and Susie Kelly
in Family Plot*



PHIL SAWYTH

play anything but broad comedy. Certainly, the large audience in the Riverside enjoyed the work, and Tinderbox have met their brief in nurturing a play that addresses Northern Ireland's present impasse. However, it will be interesting to see if another interpretation of the play offers anything more thought provoking and complex.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster at Magee.

SPEAKING LIKE MAGPIES

by Frank McGuinness

Royal Shakespeare Company at Trafalgar

Studios, London

14-25 February 2006

Directed by Rupert Goold

With Teresa Banham, Kevin Harvey, William

Houston, Barry Aird, Vinette Robinson

Reviewed 17 February 2006

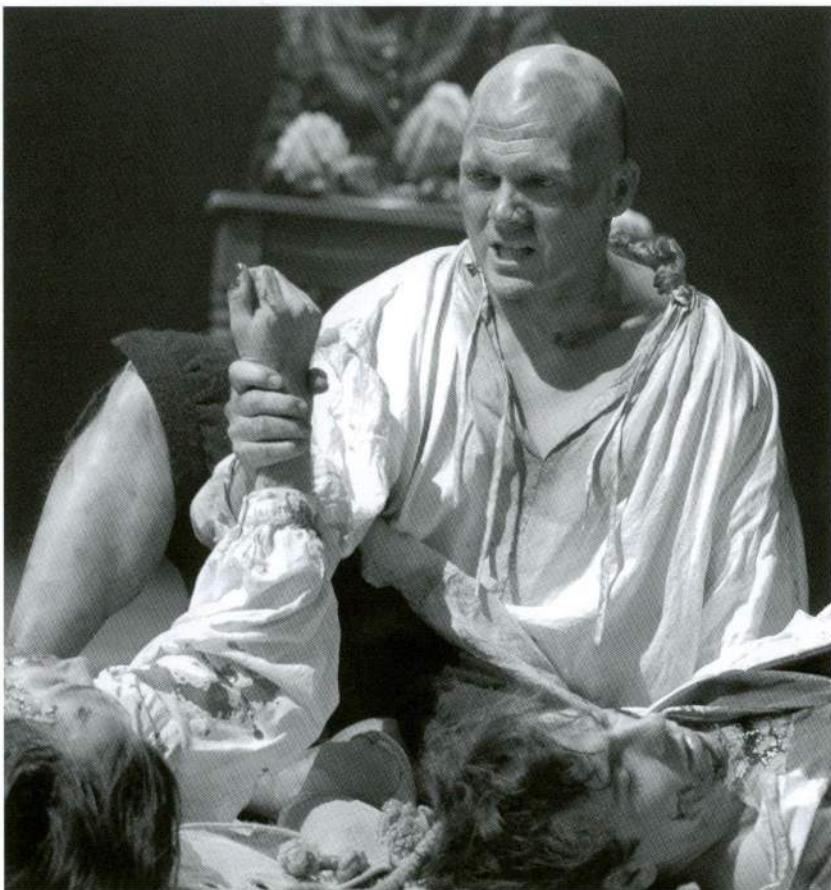
BY DAVID CREGAN

SPEAKING LIKE MAGPIES was commissioned from Frank McGuinness by the Royal Shakespeare Company to mark the 400th anniversary of The Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The play creates a contemporary perspective of the ill-fated Catholic conspiracy which attempted the assassination of the Protestant King James I. McGuinness has regularly engaged the genre of historical drama, and has successfully represented the historical tension between Catholics and

Protestants inherent in this play, tensions which have dominated British history since the Reformation. However, no-one familiar with McGuinness' versions of history would expect a straightforward play involving historical accuracy and unbiased opinion. In the programme for this production, McGuinness pre-empts criticism of his dramatic reimaginings of history: "I cannot see a documented fact without turning it into a doubting fiction".

This production is filled with creative representations of the issues and tensions which lie beneath both the personal and the political dimensions of British history and the Protestant faith. In order to legitimise divergent perspectives, and add doubt to the certainty of history, McGuinness has created a fictional character who is the representation of both public and private conscience, the Equivocator, excellently portrayed by Kevin Harvey. This character, whose very name connotes uncertainty, is half-human, half-animal. His presence throughout the play is to advance the historical narrative, while simultaneously underlining the spiritual and civic tensions of this pivotal moment in British historical memory.

What is most interesting about the production is its design and direction. Taking its cue from McGuinness' non-naturalistic text, the production com-



Barry Aird in *Speaking Like Magpies*

bines technical and visual imagery, providing an evening of intense theatricality. The play opens with a pyrotechnic device which, when lit, moves upstage centre to indicate an ignition line, eventually terminating in a loud explosion which blows a large hole in the brick wall which constitutes the rear wall of the set. Directed skilfully by Rupert Goold, all

of the action of the piece comes through the hole created by this intense detonation. The set design by Matthew Wright allows for the historical characters the play represents, such as King James and his wife Queen Anne, to emerge through the rubble dressed in beautifully designed period costumes. This allows the audience to recognise that this partic-

ular version of history is being told through memory and the ravages of time. This creates an aesthetic of timelessness that makes this play as much about the present as the past.

Goold's stage direction is dance-like in its precision and fluidity. McGuinness' dialogue is largely poetic and, as is typical with much of his writing, characters often complete each other's sentences in a chorus-like cacophony of sound. Goold stages these complex scenes in such a way as to allow the actors to move about the stage with a variability which accentuates McGuinness' sinuous language. This play is not Realism, and consequently is served by this non-naturalistic style. This successful physical interpretation of a complex writing technique gives way to dramatic ritualistic ensemble moments set to original music by Adam Cork, as well as exceptional individual performances from William Houston who plays James I, Teresa Banham who plays Queen Anne, and Vinette Robinson who plays May, a servant-girl at the centre of the action.

Although both play and production are highly imagistic, McGuinness effectively advances the details of an historical narrative which to this day has inspired celebrations of Guy Fawkes' Day on November 5. The play itself requires a certain knowledge of British histo-

ry, but the raw physicality of the production gratifies the most sensual elements of McGuinness' writing. *Speaking Like Magpies* is a style of theatre which combines narrative satisfaction (through identification with historical memory) with an intensely contemporary visual performance of heightened energetic physical acting, exciting moments of video design by Lorna Heavey, and modern technology. All of this accentuates and deepens the audience's entry into McGuinness' exploration of meaning and memory.

The lighting design by Wayne Dowdeswell includes moments when the house lights are brought up to implicate the audience into the timeless issues of significance and dimmed again to return to the history. This technique foregrounds the issues of religious zealotry and terrorist plots, which must be related to contemporary world politics. In this sense, the Gunpowder Plot serves merely as a platform for a production which eloquently and visually encourages an answer to the final question posed by the Equivocator to the audience, "What do you believe?"

David Cregan is an Assistant Professor in the Theatre Department at Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, USA. He has written extensively on the plays of Frank McGuinness.

It's Tough Out There

Hitmen, child-murderers, and frustrated businessmen: we've seen some seedy characters recently in a cluster of new international plays staged in Dublin.

THE SYSTEM: Parts I and II

by Falk Richter

RAW in association with Project Arts Centre
and the Goethe Institute

Directed by Rachel West

With Adam Fergus, Orla Fitzgerald, Kieran
McBride, Emma McIvor, Philip McMahon,

Gary Murphy

5-14 January 2006 at Project Arts Centre

Reviewed 13 January

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

ELECTRONIC CITY AND UNDER ICE ARE, respectively, the first and second parts of German playwright Falk Richter's *Das System* trilogy (concluded by *Hotel Palestine*, also presented at the Project in a performed reading on the final day of this production). *Electronic City* is a Kafkaesque scenario involving a trio of shrill, self-satisfied media gurus hatching a play, tv show, or feature film of some kind involving two hapless people/performers trapped in a soulless contemporary environment of interchangeable hotels, airports, and retail outlets. *Under Ice* is more reflective, the story of an aging corporate drone harangued by smug

consultants whose memories of a life of alienation involve potent metaphors of being trapped under ice.

The presentation of both plays together may not have been the best idea. *Under Ice* works quite well, largely due to a strong performance by Gary Murphy as the executive whose remaining sense of humanity is being slowly eroded by the relentless drivel spouted by his consultants, but both plays are essentially composed of a stream of loaded corporate jargon punctuated with obvious satiric one-liners. It plays out like a game of bullshit bingo, but the ironic fun goes out of it fairly quickly and the experience of listening to taxonomies of corporate exhortation presented as political drama for over two hours is more numbing than an actual executive committee meeting, where your mind can wander. The sheer tedium of the language is certainly part of the point: Falk is clearly using the nomenclature of postmodern capitalism to critique it. But the problem is a paradox that the playwright is not unaware of: in repre-



Philip McMahon, Gary Murphy and Adam Fergus in *The System*

senting the crushing banality of the system, you risk merely replicating the tedium of living in it, rather than presenting a sense of perspective.

This issue is addressed in *Electronic City*, where the so-called "team" (Emma McIvor, Philip McMahon, and Kieran McBride) endlessly reflect on their own creative endeavours. The team records its own process of creation with an on-the-spot "making of" video where they analyse the situations they have just created and had played out by their "actors" (or are they real people

trapped in a self-inscriptive post-modern mediascape?). They are writing and producing a drama about "the system" and inflicting their vision on the two performers (Adam Fergus and Orla Fitzgerald), separated by space on a raised platform which cuts them off from both the audience and "the team". When these characters within characters try to give input or insight to the team, they are ruthlessly put down with one liners like "we're the ones responsible for the metaphors. We're the ones who went to college after

all". This interminable reflexivity itself becomes mind-numbingly uninteresting though, and it is not helped by the stridently shallow characters. These are patently obnoxious individuals, and there is nowhere to go to escape from them. Though again this is precisely the point, it is an obvious one that is quickly made and then repeated over and over and over and over and over and over and over. Yes. Like that.

Repetition can be a poetic device, of course, and certainly Richter plumps contemporary corporate lingo for all of its rhythmic qualities. Still, there is a limit to how much insight can be gained from lines like "There's something dead lying here beside me... oh, I think it's me".

Escape from this linguistic prison is provided by the second play, largely because Richter allows us a glimpse of an interior world in the character of Paul Niemand, the middle-aged executive under review by management consultants. Niemand's mental escapes into a world of dark but painfully human reminiscence is skilfully portrayed by Murphy. Relatively immobile behind his desk, he creates a sense of his character's drifting off into the mindscapes of inner reflection with voice and facial expressions alone. Niemand recalls scenes of sex and death which remind him of the only true realities of existence as Charlie Sunshine

(Fergus) and Aurelius Glasnip (McMahon) drone on about team-building and watersports.

Overall, *The System* contributes no insight that is not screamingly obvious from the outset, and in picking the soft targets of the contemporary media and the corporate consultant, Richter hasn't done himself any favours in the originality department either. Again, this may be the point, but when the point is that this is the point, is there any point having a point? Yes. That's what the play is like.

Harvey O'Brien lectures in Film Studies at UCD.

FROZEN by Bryony Lavery

Tall Tales Theatre Company

Directed by Patrick Talbot

With Liam Carney, Bernadette McKenna,

Elizabeth Moynihan

25 October – 12 November 2005 at Project

Reviewed 8 November

BY SARA KEATING

THE PROGRAMME NOTE BY DEIRDRE Kinahan accompanying this production states that "*Frozen* is not a play about child murder" or "the warped thinking of a paedophile", as if such a dramatic theme was somehow distasteful. What is distasteful, in fact, is that the play actually uses child murder as a shortcut to the audience's sympathies. Tall Tales may insist that

Frozen is not about child murder, but its central paedophile character certainly provides the sensationalist set-up that draws an audience straight in.

The title of the play lends this production its central aesthetic: the stories of three cold and loveless lives unfold under harsh fluorescent lights in a clinical white box set designed by Sabine D'Argent. The title also lends the play itself its key psychological metaphor. Nancy is a mother, frozen in a state of shock and blind hope by the disappearance of her youngest daughter. Ralph is a serial killer, frozen in perpetual disconnection to the wider world of human emotion. And Agnetha is a psychologist, frozen in grief by the death of her business partner and sometime lover. Agnetha's existential angst, the play further suggests, can be traced back to her Nordic origins, which serve as a metaphor for the "blank slate" view of humanity that appears to be Lavery's central interest in the play.

While the murder of Nancy's daughter unites the fractured, and occasionally interweaving, monologues together, it is Agnetha's character who ultimately reveals the main focus of Lavery's dissection of the conditioning forces of human nature. Agnetha's meticulously detailed lectures on the development of the serial killer's brain suggest the begin-

nings of an exploration of the function of nature and nurture in shaping the human mind. (Incidentally these lectures proved so meticulous that a high profile plagiarism case was launched against Lavery by clinical psychologist, Dr Dorothy Lewis, following the play's celebrated Broadway production). The character of Ralph, meanwhile, enables the live enactment of Agnetha's experiments, while grieving mother Nancy, whose youngest daughter was Ralph's last victim, provides the human face through which we understand the repercussions of the sociopath's dysfunction. According to Agnetha, this dysfunction is best understood by analysing the erosion of the sociopath's frontal cortex, the site of the brain where the human capacity for empathy – that quality which distinguishes human beings from the lower orders of animal life - is located.

Ironically, the thoroughly unsympathetic characterisation of Agnetha – the complete lack of empathy she displays in her interactions with both Ralph and Nancy - reveals some of the difficulties of the play's interest in the human mind. The brain scans and experiments confirm the erosion of Ralph's frontal cortex area, while his revelation of childhood abuse – including blunt trauma to the head – adds a psychological layer to the conclusions that the physical experi-



Bernadette McKenna and Elizabeth Moynihan in *Frozen*

FIONAN O'CONNELL

ments have thrown up. Unfortunately, while it complements Agnetha's research objectives, the use of physical evidence to prove Ralph's history of psychological trauma confuses the either/or nature/nurture argument that the dramatic climax points towards, by suggesting that Man's innate human nature is actually formed and reformed by the circumstances of his

life. This is a logical philosophical conclusion, certainly, but one that allows Lavery to avoid taking any ethical stance on Ralph's responsibility for his crimes, or, more significantly, Agnetha's research methods. Most importantly, however, it also leaves Lavery's most interesting character, Nancy, out in the cold.

Kinahan's programme note states that *Frozen* is really Nancy's play, and

this is borne out in director Patrick Talbot's casting of the superb Bernadette McKenna as the devastated mother. McKenna's simultaneous display of vulnerability and strength gives the production an emotional core where the utterly unsympathetic characters of Agnetha (perfectly drawn out in the disaffected monotone of Elizabeth Moynihan) and Ralph (given aggressive and visceral life by Liam Carney) refuse the audience empathetic identification. Nonetheless, neither Nancy's loss nor the triumph of her spirit in the face of the gravest tragedy demands the centre of the audience's attention. Despite Talbot's best efforts at redressing the balance, Lavery's play keeps drawing us back to Agnetha's failure to find a psychological model that admits some sense of individual responsibility, and to Ralph's ultimate refusal of responsibility in the most definitive act of self-denial, his suicide.

While paedophilia itself may provide little scope for ethical ambiguity, *Frozen's* refusal to engage fully in the fundamental issues of human accountability ultimately denies Tall Tale's attempt to take a stance on these issues too.

Sara Keating is completing her PhD at the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin, and writes about theatre and visual arts for various publications.

SHOOTERS by Jack Gilhooley

Purple Heart Theatre Company

Directed by John O'Brien

With Tana French, Mary Kelly, Dermot

MacGennis, Stewart Roche.

14 November-10 December 2005

at the Focus Theatre

Reviewed 23 November

BY SUSAN CONLEY

PINTER MEETS PULP FICTION AND NEITHER is the better for it in American playwright Jack Gilhooley's Irish premiere. Purple Heart Theatre Company have, in the past, made a good fist of works that are outside the Irish canon, and indeed, off shore; here, it's less of a feeling of discovery than of weary *déjà vu*.

Constructed as two one-act plays tenuously linked across an alley, and an interval, the first half of *Shooters* is directly linked to Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, which the text refers to. In Pinter's 1957 play, a pair of blue collar hitmen wait to be told what, and who, to do. In this case, two overeducated shooters, Lou (Stewart Roche) and Barry (Dermot MacGennis), also wait for their next assignment, and pass the time trading vocabulary in the tradition of David Mamet, at the velocity of Neil Simon. Their manner asks us to regard their profession as a work-a-day existence, albeit strewn with blood and guts; the inextricability of their union, based as it is outside of the law, is intended to create



Tana French in Shooters

the tension between them. Despite the fact that Lou is pursuing an affair with Barry's sister, and Barry pursues an affair with Lou's wife, the two men have only really got each other. They converse about many meaningless things, bicker about work in such a way as to try to convince us they are kvetching about a job like anybody else would, and argue out their relationship relentlessly. Finally, their assignment comes through: kill the

boyfriend of their Russian mobster boss's daughter. Up to now it had been Barry who had turned gun shy; now, Lou can't pull it off, and it's curtains for them both. Deciding that everybody - and that's everybody, wives, sisters, children, daughters of mob bosses and their unsuitable boyfriends - can flee to upstate New York and safety, the men make their escape to freedom.

The second act revolves around the

two "girl shooters" who have been hired to rub out Barry and Lou. These women are not gifted with literary pretensions; instead, their rehashing revolves around their shared high school history, and one's betrayal of the other's high school love affair. As Molly (Tana French) drags police-woman and freelance assassin Arlene (Mary Kelly) down memory lane, they ultimately find themselves in the same situation that Barry and Lou did: they are also unable to fulfil their remit, and the Pinter reference comes back to ostensibly tie everything up nice and tidy, as we're left with Molly training her gun on the door that Arlene is about to walk through.

While the first act has some cohesion and interest, thanks in the main to MacGennis' sterling performance (against which Roche's rushed performance shows up poorly), the second act is akin to countless fingernails clawing at a chalkboard. The relationship between the women is grossly immature, unformed, and pointless. Kelly is convincing as the self-contained part-time killer-for-hire, while French's performance draws on an extremely limited range of verbal rhythms and physical gestures. If the play had more than a superficial notion about making assertions about the human condition, one might be behoven to point up the possibly misogynistic character of the women's conversation ver-

sus the men's. Broads. Ha. Even when they're doing a man's job, all they do is talk about boys. By contrast, the men, so evolved are they, can transgress all sorts of sexual loyalty boundaries and run off into the sunset together, compliant women in tow. John O'Brien's direction seems content to let the words run past in a torrent, unburdened by ideas, while designer Martin Cahill has created the reasonable facsimile of a Brooklyn tenement.

The play is a cultural reference stew that has gone off the boil. We've seen the "gangsters talking about mundane stuff while about to kill somebody" characterisation in Tarantino's 1994 film; we've watched Chekhov's dictum flouted before (nope, none of the guns ever fire); we've heard the kind of overarticulated language out of the mouths of supposed regular joes thanks to Mr Mamet. Seen it before, heard it before, and to better effect. Watching people talk out their relationships rather than acting out their relationships makes for heavy going, and eventually we feel like dumb waiters ourselves, having spent the guts of an evening waiting for something to happen, to no avail.

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

Scenes from the Barricades

Political theatre is back: here we review work that explores the disappeared in Chile, the disaffection of urban youth, the Peace Process, the status of Irish soldiers in the first World War and the Easter Rising.

BLOOD by Lars Norén

HATCH Theatre Company in association with

Project Arts Centre

Directed by Annabelle Comyn

With Ingrid Craigie, Peter Gaynor

Conor Mullen.

16 November – 3 December 2005 at Project

Reviewed 2 December

BY PETER CRAWLEY

"IT'S AN OPEN WOUND," ADMITS Ingrid Craigie's journalist and author, Rosa Sabato, early in HATCH Theatre Company's production of *Blood*. It's a wound that the characters in Lars Norén's 1995 play must not allow to heal; a gash of personal histories, brutal politics and national narratives, torn open on 11 September, 1973. Twenty years later, Rosa's continuing tragedy, and that of her psychiatrist husband Eric (Conor Mullen), is an emblem of many thousand others: the pair were arrested and tortured during the military coup, ultimately fleeing to Paris without their seven-year-old son.

"You have to see each new hell as it arises," Rosa says, sounding somehow inured to Chile's unending and hidden

horrors, but with the weary determination of those who strive through conflict without resolution. Unfortunately this predicament seeps out into the play itself and ultimately the production. When the wounds can't heal, any sense of closure seems impossible. Dramatic shape, in such circumstances, seems either insensitively glib or simply incoherent. *Blood*, in short, just won't clot.

Anxious not to reduce the many dark and unanswered questions of Chile's "disappeared" or its national history (and perhaps writing in even more fetters as a neutral outsider; Norén is Swedish) the play accommodates so many references to Chile's political conditions and their possible psychological consequences that only a laborious television interview can spell out the context. Thus encumbered, the only solution Norén arrives at to contain this thematic tangle is a bewilderingly contrived plot and desperate grasps for the framework of more sturdy trusted dramas.

Eric for instance, likes to quote from *Oedipus Rex*. In fact he has tickets to see



Peter Gaynor, Conor Mullen and Ingrid Craigie in *Blood*

a new production of *Oedipus Rex*. He has further things to say about *Oedipus Rex* once he has seen it. And, by the play's conclusion, we learn there are six productions of *Oedipus Rex* running in Paris. And yet Eric is not entirely alive to the significance of conducting an affair with Luca (Peter Gaynor), a man with – hint – a weak foot, who says he's young enough to be – hint hint – Eric's son. This suggestion is not quite a subtle as I make it sound. Nor, indeed, is one scene's debt to *Death and the Maiden*, in which Eric and Rosa enact a torture sequence for sexual pleasure, coldly pursued over a sparse piece of classical music. Inviting such comparisons is both self-defeating and unflattering: where Sophocles had his characters rush blindly towards their doom, and Ariel Dorfman let his stumble blinkingly into the light, Lorén barks heavy instruction at his procession of sleepwalkers. Sympathy has left the building.

How is Annabelle Comyn's production supposed to keep its composure against such a nosedive from pathos to bathos? Answer: other than the brisk changes of Paul O'Mahony's supple design, it can't. And really, no member of the cast can bestow any more dignity to their characters than they deserve. When Eric barges into Luca's apartment to find him – shock! – in a sexual clinch with Rosa, as Wilde said of the death of little Nell, it takes a heart of stone not to laugh.

But whatever grim entertainment the story affords – through its obvious parallels with Greek tragedy – becomes steadily pulped by a superfluous coda in which Norén worries that we may have missed the Byzantine complexity of his allusions. Carrie Crowley's TV interviewer returns to point out how the borders between life and art have been demolished and bravely puts it to the now-incarcerated Luca, having thankfully murdered his parents, that "the story has obvious parallels with Greek tragedy".

You don't say.

A dying attempt to re-engage with global conflict splutters out in the frame of this hopeless conclusion, one that doesn't bode well for political allegory, the dramatisation of unresolved conflict, or even the limits of human sympathy: pick too much at a scab and prepare to be bled dry.

Peter Crawley is News Editor of this magazine.

DEVOTION by Leo Butler

TEAM Theatre Company at Ballinteer

Community School, On Tour,

Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess

With Amy Hill, Conrad Kemp, Carl Kennedy

Reviewed 28 October 2005

BY DEREK WEST

A CHILLY, ECHOING SPORTS HALL (cruel acoustics) on a dull day, with the half-term holiday looming, pre-

sented serious obstacles for TEAM performing *Devotion*. To their credit, playwright and players held the awed attention of their 15-16 year-old-audience almost to the end when, duty over-riding drama, some of them began to peel off in sundry directions, to classroom or canteen.

While the theme is global (conflict, war, fanaticism), the scale is localised (three youngsters on ground wasted by war or urban devastation). Two young lads (Conrad Kemp and Carl Kennedy) and a girl (Amy Hill) play out fantasies of life and love around an abandoned car. There are references to marital break-up, child-rearing, parental bickering in recessionary times; terrorism, and hostage-taking. There's a quest for a hypothetical paradise. There's violence and a sense of death hovering over all. The audience is left in an uneasy uncertainty – are we watching children's games or child combatants? Is it playtime or wartime? Themes of love, hope, and mortality are woven through the action.

It's an impressionistic construct, which contains prompts and conundrums for subsequent discussion in the workshop or classroom – a trifle programmatic, but a far cry from earlier Theatre-in-Education pieces, that addressed the Big Issues in docudrama style, earnestly pointing the way to consideration of human rights, booze 'n' drugs, teenage pregnancy,

child abuse etc. *Devotion* takes its cues from wacky comedy, rather than from the tradition of the well-wrought play. It defies classification: the closest analogy I can find is with the Belgrade playwright Biljana Srbljanovic's *Family Stories*, where adult actors play the parts of children enacting adult lives amidst the detritus of a ruined state.

Devotion succeeds best as it explores and sets out the potential of live theatre for the young spectators, many of them coming to watch as newcomers to the medium. As an anatomical study of the dramatic experience, it succeeds admirably. The proximity of players and viewers, the energy, physicality, and occasional emotion of the playing arrest and hold the viewers. Plot seems of secondary importance to powerful image – a burnt-out car, centrepiece of the set; manikin limbs scattered disturbingly; a prosthesis, spirited out of nowhere; a tatty doll treated with tenderness; a hooded terrorist, menacingly incoherent; simulated death-by-shooting (one of the few spots where the SFX lacked bite and effect); a contemplated suicide, gun-barrel between the teeth. The images shift and the action is relentless. The players are supple in movement – falling, jumping, gliding, fighting, dragging, and punching, without let up. Thomas de Mallet Burgess directs with broad strokes; Denis Clohessy



Carl Kennedy, Amy Hill and Conrad Kemp in *Devotion*

provides an effective musical soundscape; the vocal presentation is charged, vehement and loud most of the way through the performance.

Unfortunately, in Ballinteer, in the echoing cavern of the gymnasium, too much is lost among the girders – if you want lines to resonate in the mind, they have to be audible. The students don't seem to mind – buzz words keep them on track: "Batman"

and "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary", plus a liberal sprinkling of coarse-cut patois upholding a kind of coherence (reassuringly familiar and a bit naughty). There are surprises, shocks, revelations – smoke and mirrors stuff – without any reaching after the overly spectacular.

Devotion is a play of too many beginnings, in danger of meandering, but, in best *Batman* tradition, rescue

comes in the final reel. The most triumphant and coherent moment of the play comes right at the end – the rough-and-tumble of the games has ceased, the characters constitute a tableau of repose, while a video screen silently relays arresting images of victims of conflicts (Belsen to Mi Lai to Baghdad). It's a highly effective adjustment of perspective, where the games and the things they echo come together, contextualising the pity of war, in pure theatrical terms.

Theatre-in-Education is still a kind of interloper, elbowing its way into an over-crowded curriculum, competing at Senior Cycle level with the demands of syllabi and CAO, points and percentages. *Devotion* calls our attention to a world that is not well represented "on the course". All the time this kind of work risks being pushed out to the margins, when it should be centre-stage as a matter of course, when the theatrical experience – so well delineated in this production – should be given full acknowledgement as a legitimate and forceful way of learning.

Derek West, Principal of Newpark Comprehensive School, has recently chaired two arts initiatives for schools: 'Creative Engagement', which has stimulated a series of arts projects and soon-to-be published 'Artists~Schools', guidelines for collaborative work between artists, teachers and students.

THE WRONG MAN by Danny Morrison

Tivoli Theatre and New Strung Theatre

Company at The Tivoli Theatre

Directed by Sarah Tipple

With Tony Devlin Nuala McGreevy,

Liam McMahon, Chantelle Moore,

Chris Patrick-Simpson

10 October - 5 November 2005

Reviewed 3 November

BY HARRY BROWNE

DANNY MORRISON HAS ALWAYS GIVEN the impression of thinking outside the box. I recall watching a late-night election count on TV, back in pre-ceasefire days, when (pursuing the ballot-box half of his own famous dual strategy) he was the well-beaten Sinn Fein candidate, and the enormous grin on his face fit neither the occasion nor his role in it.

Then came his jail sentence for his part in an IRA kangaroo court. During his time in the Maze, Morrison wrote a quirky column for *An Phoblacht*. Once, when nationalist Ireland was worrying about the prospect of changing Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution to appease unionists, Morrison wrote a sharp, funny piece about how little the Articles mattered, based on a survey of IRA inmates who assured him the precious texts had played no part in motivating them to militant resistance.

Still, we would hardly have credited the prospect that Sinn Fein's ex-PR



Liam McMahon and Tony Devlin in *The Wrong Man*

man would eventually write a play, set in 1984, full of nasty and/or dysfunctional Provos, in which the only political speech is a persuasive critique of armed struggle from a sensitive, witty RUC man. That's what we've got in *The Wrong Man*, and it's to Morrison's credit.

Unfortunately, that's not all we've got. At least half this 90-minute play is dreadfully slack, unengaging soap-opera, meant as a sad exposé of the Provo-at-home. While some of the

inside-the-IRA scenes have an unsurprising ring of truth – the desperate tone of the interrogation of an alleged informer, the chit-chat and bitterness on an aborted mission – it's not sufficient to create real drama. And things get considerably worse when there are women (a pair of IRA wives) on stage.

Morrison has evidently decided women are more emotionally direct than men, so the unfortunate Chantelle Moore and Nuala

McGreevy are stuck with lines like: 'I'm sorry too, but I'm so angry and frustrated'. Even when Morrison and director Sarah Tipple take extreme measures – the old 'two scenes taking place simultaneously around the same kitchen table' trick – the play fails to benefit. Notwithstanding the now-predictable Tarantinisms (*Ninety-nine Red Balloons* as a torturer prepares his tools; a twisted timeline) the play is, at times, an awkward embarrassment.

The surroundings helped suck any breath of life that might have remained in the struggling mid-section. On the Thursday late in the run when I attended, there were perhaps twenty other audience members in the large Tivoli space. Someone suggested that the play might have been moved to the bar: that surely could have been no worse acoustically than the theatre, where voices were lost in space and noisy creaks kept wafting down from the lighting rig.

The play nonetheless explodes into theatrical life in a stunning final 25-minute scene. Tod Malone has been dragged in by the RUC, giving Brian O'Driscoll lookalike Chris Patrick-Simpson a chance to stare sullenly and silently ahead of him, while detectives work him over. In the latter roles, Liam McMahon and, in particular, Tony Devlin, take control of the stage. Here, the attraction is not

"authenticity", because surely no cop was ever as brilliant, vivid and heart-breaking in his attempts to "persuade" a suspect to talk as Devlin. Questioning Malone about a killing, he acts it out, powerfully inhabiting the terrified victim as he tries to talk his way out of being shot. It is, simply, a wonderful fragment of drama, of acting, that almost erases the pedestrian stuff that has preceded it.

Morrison's title, with its air of Hitchcock, ends up being thought-provokingly ironic. Despite a series of passionate denials, we're never sure if any one of the men on the spot here is literally "wrong": the (apparent) loyalist snatch squad really has got an IRA man; the IRA interrogators may really have an informer; the Provo unit has correctly identified an off-duty UDR man; the RUC has arrested a real Provo, and spotted a potential tout. Is one of these men morally "wrong"? Or has he chosen a life that is wrong for him? Have the women chosen wrongly too?

Clearly the producers were overambitious in scheduling this long Dublin run for *The Wrong Man*. The tiny audience I joined included virtually no one who looked less than 40 years old. The thought that there is a young Dublin cohort who stayed away from *The Wrong Man* because it was all too remote, who don't know their RUC from their UDR, their Twinbrook from their Shankill, is eas-

ily the most heartening thought to which this erratic, depressing play gives rise.

Harry Browne lectures in journalism at DIT and writes for Village magazine.

SHOOTING GALLERY

by Des Bishop and Arthur Riordan

Bedrock Theatre Company at Andrew's Lane

Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Jimmy Fay

With Susan FitzGerald, Simone Kirby, Tadhg

Murphy, Arthur O'Riordan, Mal Whyte

18 – 29 October 2005;

reviewed 25 October

BY PETER CRAWLEY

IT IS EASTER, 1916, AND TWO friends flounce around a squalid room in Rathmines, facing into a long weekend with no provisions. That this weekend will be a turning point in their nation's history – hosting a violent, unpopular and deeply botched insurrection that will lay military siege to a post office and a biscuit factory, among other strategic outposts, and which, with time, will stretch into heroic myth and national rhetoric – is currently less important than their meagre 'provisions': a dwindling supply of opiates and morphine.

As David (Arthur O'Riordan) and Sean (Tadhg Murphy) feel the effects of their last fix begin to dissipate, just as a violent swell of nationalist

republicanism begins outside, the symmetry is almost poetic: a terrible beauty is born.

Des Bishop and Arthur Riordan's play loses little time in furthering this comparison, finding, with the same satirical gaze that energised the pair's previous collaboration, *Rap Eire*, that the intoxication of booming politics is as heady, fleeting, and useless as the temporary obliteration of morphine.

Staggering around in his long johns and dressing gown, slugging from a bottle of opium, Riordan's David is a comic creation in the tradition of Groucho Marx, preserving a professorial sense of decorum without the benefit of a pair of trousers. Tomorrow is for Ireland, he sombrely counsels Murphy's squeaky and sporadically idealistic medical student, Sean, but "today we find the opiates that make tomorrow possible." Later, as the GPO falls into the hands of the rebels, and David gravely considers his self-enforced opium withdrawal, his lines acquire a heavier double meaning: "At times like this," he says, "you wonder if the sacrifice was worth it."

Neither the pleasing chime of such lines, however, nor director Jimmy Fay's wittily anachronistic inclusion of The Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in The UK*, is enough to propel a play forward, and, in search of a plot, *Shooting Gallery* soon abandons the obliterated



Simone Kirby in *Shooting Gallery*

tion of historical satire for the prefabricated structure of farce.

Sure, they hold onto a wry sense of historical humour, as when Simone Kirby's wildly misdirected member of Cumann na mBan seeks shelter in their room and unhappily berates the Rising as a bloody shambles, "arranged by poets, playwrights and Dublin people". And, oh yes, there are puns that should never have made it past Riordan and Bishop's second draft ("You're Wolfe Tone deaf."). But farce, with its multiple doorways, its mistaken identities, its costume changes and cross-purposes,

comes to dominate proceedings without making a convincingly satirical point. Is history repeating itself, first as tragedy, now as farce? Or do Bishop and Riordan simply need a handy plot structure?

Deploying the mechanics of such comedy with a confident and light touch, it is a tribute to Riordan, Murphy and Fay that one sequence – in which the hapless protagonists carefully ration out a meagre amount of morphine, acquired from a conveniently broken down medical van, and then proceed to scoff the lot – is far more amusing than it has any

right to be. Furthermore, Fay is blessed with Ferdia Murphy's wonderfully mildewed design, the single room remaining as colourful and musty, under Sinead McKenna's lights, as a bowl of decaying fruit.

Aided and abetted by an accomplished farceur such as Mal Whyte – expectedly at ease playing a blustering British army captain – the production's true surprise is Susan FitzGerald. There are few sights more cheering than the actress shaking free from the shrill type-casting of innumerable costume-drama roles at The Gate, and her performance here, as the anti-republican neighbour Mrs Synnot, commands your attention as her politics are tripped up by lunatic plot twists.

And yet, as amusing as *Shooting Gallery* is, the farce ultimately feels like a cop-out. It's as though Riordan and Bishop embarked on their satirical exercise with iconoclastic glee but, like their protagonists, such early euphoria soon ran out. Or perhaps the arch confidence of the satirist becomes unsteady against the warp and weave of a national myth. The revolutionary, like the drug addict, knows that the first hit lasts only so long, before the long agony of confusion and remorse follows. Could it be that Riordan and Bishop are no more certain of what the Rising means to this country, at this time, than anyone else?

HOW MANY MILES TO BABYLON,

by Jennifer Johnston, adapted for the

stage by Alan Stanford

Second Age Theatre Company

Directed by David Parnell

With Fiona Bell, Peter Corry, Fergal

McElherron, Philip O'Sullivan

On tour 10 November – 9 December, 2005

Reviewed on 18 November

BY LOUISE LEPAGE

I WAITED FOR THE LIGHTS TO GO UP on Second Age Theatre Company's production of *How Many Miles to Babylon* with a certain degree of unease. Plays are quite different beasts to novels, and this adaptation of Jennifer Johnston's novel, would have to overcome a number of challenges in its transformation from page to stage. Although play adaptations of novels are frequently successful, the adaptation process, for playwright and director, is a far from straightforward one. How, for example, would Stanford restructure and represent a story that is narrated as a series of memories, which transports the reader from boyhood to adulthood, and from Ireland to Flanders, in the blink of an eye?

This story is told by Alexander Moore, an Anglo-Irish lieutenant in the British Army during the first World War. Alec narrates his story in a montage of episodes, portraying events and people in his life from his boyhood to a horrifying present in

Philip O'Sullivan, Peter Corry and Fiona Bell in How Many Miles To Babylon



which he faces execution under court martial. The one constant throughout his short life – which has been dominated by loneliness, indecision, and cowardice – is the warmth of his friendship with Jerry Crowe. Alec's friendship with Jerry is troubled by differences in class and religion, but ultimately that friendship "saves" Alec from crippling loneliness and the dehumanising effects of war. It is for Jerry's sake that Alec performs his final act of courageous loyalty (narrated in a closing monologue), an act that provides the play with its moving climax.

In some important ways, Alan Stanford's adaptation is praiseworthy: his play is faithful to Johnston's original story and it delicately renders both dialogue and character. Particularly well handled are the themes of the beauty of true friendship and the vulnerability of the individual who is pitted against merciless ideologies (social, religious, and political). Stanford's editing of Johnston's novel is finely and intelligently done. However, there are problems with rendering this novel a play, which neither the adaptation nor the production manages to resolve adequately.

Crucially, it is the uneasy relationship between form and structure that causes this problem. Like Johnston's novel, Alec's narration constitutes the play's structural mode. The prob-

lems with this choice, however, are several. The play, in taking its audience on a journey through swiftly changing scenes through time and space, begs to be performed as physical theatre (unless a large budget is available to adequately manage a realistic design treatment of settings). Second Age certainly attempted such a style: the production's sparse set allowed for easy movement through time and space, and several attempts at imaginative and physical approaches to stage action were made. However, the very fact that this play is *narrated* – that events, people, and relationships are all described or interpreted for the audience in advance of, or during, the scene itself – means that it becomes largely devoid of action (why *show* when you have already *told*?). In short, it is rendered physically static as the need for physical expression is massively reduced. Unfortunately, this also meant that the production's presentation of relationships appeared physically uneasy, stilted, and sometimes awkward.

Disappointingly, this conflict extended to its employment of design (by Sabine D'Argent). While a grand and prominent picture frame served effectively to conjure mood, location, and relationships by the images it displayed of Alec's memories of locations and of people, other elements functioned more crudely. A

piano, used in its characteristic function in early scenes, later became a makeshift trench for actors to scramble over during a scene on a battlefield, an employment that smacked of amateurism. And all this was set within a draughty cavern of a proscenium arch that, unfilled and under-used, failed to conjure atmosphere or location. *How Many Miles to Babylon* was partially saved by some wonderfully vivid characterisations by the actors, particularly from Corry as

Alec, Bell as Mother, and O'Sullivan as Father, whose performances brought real warmth and emotional resonance to the stage. However, in the end, the production failed because of its inability to adequately cohere conflicting elements.

Louise LePage is currently working on a PhD in Drama at Royal Holloway, University of London, having completed an MA in Drama and Performance Studies at UCD.

Building Bridges?

Theatre here is increasingly exploring issues of difference and ethnicity, with some of the most interesting work in this area coming from Northern Ireland.

DARKIE by Damian Gorman

Blue Box Theatre Company

Tower Street Theatre, Belfast, as part of the

Belfast Festival at Queen's

Directed by Jenny Long

With Neil Cole, Gráinne Gilmartin, Brian McMahon, Tracey Muldoon, Adele Smyth

2-3 November 2005

Reviewed 3 November

BY KAREN FRICKER

DAMIAN GORMAN'S NEW PLAY couldn't be more timely: it is a long-overdue broaching, in the theatrical realm, of issues of immigration and

racism in a contemporary Northern Irish context. The play treats the experiences of three Bosnians working on a mushroom farm in present-day Ulster. In a culture where discussions of any kind of difference tend to be subsumed or sidelined into the ongoing problematics of the larger political situation, it is welcome indeed to find theatre artists tackling the challenges of increasing diversification head-on.

Gorman's gesture towards topicality is only one part, however, of a theatrical project that struggles to address an apparent myriad of objectives and

preconditions, most stemming from the fact that Blue Box Theatre Company is essentially a student company, formed as a vehicle for final year students in the Belfast Institute's Higher National Diploma in Performing Arts. Placing the company's work in the context of the Belfast Festival at Queen's created expectations of professionalism that were perhaps inappropriate to the nature of this project. One of the typically "studenty" aspects of Jenny Long's production is that actors in their early 20s play characters ranging from their own age up to their 70s; another is the very different ability levels of the performers. Doubtless the strangest aspect of this production is when it inexplicably bursts into song: it features several musical numbers, composed by Garth McConaghie and accompanied by a live onstage band, which come out of nowhere, dramaturgically speaking, and send the production into a tonal tailspin from which it never recovers.

The story begins when the Bosnian lad Djemal (Brian McMahon) arrives from Tuzla to join his friends Enver (Neil Cole) and Dobrila (Gráinne Gilmartin) at a farm called Martin's Mushrooms. Gorman's script treats the very real problem (underlined recently in the Irish Ferries dispute) of unequal pay and standards for immigrant workers: the Bosnians make much less than their local colleagues,

are put up in freezing accommodation, and are often misunderstood and objectified by their bosses and co-workers.

One of Gorman's most effective dramaturgical strokes is the way he handles language: when the Bosnian characters address each other, the actors speak in their own accents, but are clearly understood within the fiction to be speaking their own language; when they interact with the locals, they put on Eastern European accents. This has the effect of putting both language groups on equal footing with the audience, while reminding us of the inescapable cultural difference between the characters. The performers playing the Bosnians are excellent, and the scenes between them, and of Dobrila's phone calls home, are sensitively handled, clearly making the point that there are many diversities of culture and personality between members of one nationality.

Gorman's depiction of the locals, however, particularly those in authority, hews closer to stereotype: farm owner Trevor Martin is a standard-issue racist/xenophobe baddie, who, predictably, is cheating on his wife with his equally racist line manager Rita. Trevor's wife Siobhan is a more interesting character, a likeable and positive-minded woman who longs for a better life; Tracey Muldoon is very effective in the role. There is some good observation behind the character

of Zarko, the local Bosnian thug who extorts money from new arrivals, but the choice to have him and the corrupt local Councillor McFarlane explicate their role in the community through song ("We Are the Middlemen") creates a huge distance between the audience and a fictional world that many other aspects of the production are asking them to consider seriously.

Script and production achieve an effective ironic distancing from their subject matter through the character of Verdigris (Adele Smyth), a hippie do-gooder on the farm staff who sings sappy songs ("Diversity Can Build a Bridge") clearly intended by the show's creators to poke fun at simplistic notions of togetherness and racial harmony. But what, then, are we to make of the show's finale, in which all the performers reunite on stage for a reprise of "Diversity Can Build a Bridge" apparently without irony? The apparent desire for a big group closing number may have superseded the larger dramatic interest of the production.

Long's baggy production does little to bring coherence or a point of view to the production's divergent elements and impulses. And yet, eventually, it was hard not to be won over both by the overall spirit of Gorman's text and the shambolic energy of the young company. I was left hoping, however, that Gorman might revisit some of this material through a form that would

more ably exploit its political potential.

Karen Fricker is a research fellow at the Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin and reviews theatre for The Guardian (UK) and Variety (USA)

THE NIGHTINGALE

**By Hans Christian Andersen, adapted
and directed by David K.S. Tse**

With Fiona Liu, Nina Kuok, Jamie Zubairi
Yellow Earth at The Riverside
Theatre, Coleraine

3-23 December 2005, Reviewed 20 December

BY JONATHAN HARDEN

IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT THE official bicentenary celebrations of Hans Christian Andersen's birth spread worldwide last year: his writings have been translated into more languages than any other work of fiction. Written in Denmark, set in China, and staged in Northern Ireland, his *The Nightingale* continued these festivities fittingly, in an international and cross-cultural exchange that saw Yellow Earth celebrate ten years as the UK's only revenue-funded East Asian theatre company, in a province where the Chinese community are the largest minority ethnic group.

The story is that of a Chinese Emperor who, following the death of his infant son and the subsequent suicide of his wife, finds solace in the

Jamie Zubairi in The Nightingale



pure and beautifully simple song of a nightingale. He imprisons the bird, but it is soon ousted by a new toy, a dazzling, jewel-encrusted mechanical bird. After the real bird has escaped back to the forest, Death arrives to take the Emperor's life. The nightingale returns to save its former captor.

Structurally, Tse's adaptation of Andersen's simple tale tends toward the filmic, but its opening barrage of short scenes with poor transitions fails to achieve or maintain any kind of dramatic tension. The use of quasi-cinematic editing techniques, quickly (if not seamlessly) cutting from long-shot to close-up, promises an engaging experience, but this is not sustained: this early experimentation proves to be at the expense of narrative flow. While the diverse settings of the tale (court, forest and port) provide ample opportunity for visual excitement, it is here that the production disappoints most.

Not until the Emperor is on his deathbed are we treated to any kind of visual treats. The most notable of these the deathbed itself, vast and startlingly white, with a massive footboard downstage and a life-scale headboard centre-stage, which has the result of rendering the emperor tiny, childlike, and powerless against the enormity of his own mortality.

An imprecise lighting design provides little in the way of framing or atmosphere, being generally far too

bright to allow any sense of magic to creep into the production when it needs it most. A translucent screen to the rear of the stage - used variously for a gentle moving projection of flowers, fireworks and clouds - adds some welcome visual texture to the spectacle, lending itself also to rudimentary shadow puppetry employed to present elements of the story that fall outside the confines of the court.

The power of this form almost manages to shine through in a well-tempered portrayal of the empress' suicide, but the moment is gone just as the young audience begins to appreciate the gravity of the moment. Soon after, as the empress's body is mistakenly caught in the nets of a fisherman, the production achieves a fleeting moment of genuine poignancy, which, coming after only twenty minutes, is never bettered.

Andersen's *The Nightingale* is both honest and incredible, providing heartbreak and euphoria in equal measure. This is the established emotional equation of the fairytale: pleasure can only overcome when pain has gone before, hope is defined against despair, and light exists only in relation to dark. In his adaptation, Tse resists fully exploring the central darker moments of the story. Both the death of the infant heir and his mother's suicide are passed over too quickly and, presented in the abstract, they are never allowed to take solid form

either on stage or, I feel, in the minds of the target audience. These choices serve only to demean the Emperor's grief and so undermine his triumph over it. In directing pantomime sadness and failing to achieve any emotional depth or integrity throughout, Tse accomplishes only a hollow and uninspiring finale.

Regardless, the cast must be credited for maintaining performances of high energy throughout. In particular, there is magic in the vocal performance of Fiona Liu as the nightingale, which left the young audience noticeably awestruck. The venue too, should be applauded for its decision to avoid serving up the same old Christmas fare, even if this year's attempt turned out to be undercooked.

Jonathan Harden lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster, and is Creative Producer of SNEAKY Productions.

TOWN MOUSE, COUNTRY MOUSE

by Medb Lambert

Barnstorm Theatre Company

Directed by Philip Hardy

With Sean McDonagh and Jody O'Neill

On tour; reviewed at The Ark, Temple Bar

on 4 Nov 2005

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

IN THE INTIMATE SETTING OF THE Ark, two actors (Sean McDonagh and Jody O'Neill) introduce themselves

to an audience of children ranging in age from four to six years old. Keeping such an age group quietly engaged for forty minutes is a significant challenge, but Barnstorm has established a well deserved reputation for providing high-quality, lucid, and gripping performances for young audiences. Their approach to this production is no different.

In their introductions, McDonagh and O'Neill encourage their audience to draw upon their own knowledge of the fable by Aesop of the town mouse and country mouse, upon which the play is based. This gives the children an opportunity to interact with the actors and to compare Barnstorm's version of the tale with their own expectations of the narrative.

Adopting the Brechtian approach of exposing the constructed nature of the performance that is to follow, the actors continue to converse with the audience as they take on the roles of the mouse characters, and paint each other's faces. This brief question and answer session contextualises the performance for the child spectator, building anticipation and generating excitement. However, it also raises the energy level of the audience to such a level that they continue to fire questions, temporarily preventing the actors from beginning the narrative, until the adult ushers intervene.

Written by Medb Lambert in collab-



Sean McDonagh and Jody O'Neill in *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*

oration with members of Barnstorm, the production centres on themes of "difference". Spike (McDonagh) from the city and Dandelion (O'Neill) from the country both have different perspectives on life. Simultaneously, the audience are given an alternative outlook, with Ferdia Murphy's brilliantly oversized set reflecting a mouse's viewpoint of the world.

As Spike arrives in the countryside, Dandelion shows him what life is like on the farm. McDonagh and O'Neill work extremely well together as their high-energy chase sequences across different levels of the set continue to engage the audience. The dangers of the unknown are present-

ed for the child spectator, as Spike and Dandelion work together to avoid being caught by an owl.

As the two mice make their way to Spike's home, the innovative set is transformed into a city dwelling of oversized Coke cans and crisp packets. With more games and chases, it is now Dandelion's turn to experience difference and confront the unfamiliar dangers of this unknown world. However, the second half merely repeats the actions of the first but in an altered setting as *difference* is represented aesthetically but not integrated into the narrative. The simple narrative style may be adequate for Aesop's original short fable, but this

approach does not suit the medium of theatre, as the story becomes repetitive and lacks complexity and dramatic tension.

As a result, the concept of difference is merely *presented* rather than *explored* on stage, with little conflict between the two characters and no momentum toward a climactic moment. By the end of the play the mice become friends and return home, yet nothing is provided for the audience to suggest that the characters have explored and understood the limitations and benefits of both town life and of country life, an

aspect which may have made the production more interesting for the child audience.

Under the direction of Philip Hardy, both McDonagh and O'Neill are excellent, particularly in terms of their movement on stage. Along with Hardy's terrific use of space, their performances add a vibrancy to the production that almost compensates for the flaws in the narrative.

Pádraic Whyte is reading for a PhD in children's literature and film at Trinity College, Dublin.

Taking It Out There

Plays that emerged from improvisations in rehearsals, a focus group on suicide, and another that uses film to say how terrible film is... who says Irish theatre isn't experimental? We review the Abbey's *Homeland*, Calipo's *Wunderkind*, Barrabas's *Luca*, and Smashing Times's *Testimonies*

HOMELAND by Paul Mercier

Abbey Theatre

14 January - 18 February 2006

Directed by Paul Mercier

With Liam Carney, Gabrielle Reidy

Reviewed 26 January

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

POTENTIALLY A LANDMARK PRODUCTION in the National Theatre's new era,

Homeland promises an evening of national self-reflection, with the audience asked to face unflattering aspects of contemporary society. Mercier borrows the episodic narrative of the Oisín myth, with the central character Gerry Newman (Carney) negotiating a short return visit to Dublin, where he must confront the consequences of his actions as a "communications spe-

cialist". His journey takes us into the all too familiar territory of brown envelopes, questionable planning decisions, and sprawling estates which leave the construction industry rich and thousands of people living in monotonous suburban landscapes.

The play's opening scene, with Newman's flight landing in Dublin, is certainly engaging. As director, Mercier engineers moments of neat physical theatre throughout: with the plane passengers swaying and bouncing here, the pace sets off with some energy. Newman's subsequent journey provides many comic moments. He is conned by the glamorous Niamh (Reidy) whom he meets in a nightclub. He wakes up the following morning to discover she has disappeared with his money, credit cards, and passport, and he is left to survive on his wits alone. Niamh later turns out to be a prostitute caught in an abusive relationship with her pimp, and with this revelation the tone shifts from the light-hearted caper about a spindoc tor to a much darker depiction of people's lives in general. *Homeland* does not manage to successfully negotiate this swing.

We are soon wondering, in fact, whether any genre underpins the play. The narrative engages with specific topics such as immigration and drug abuse, and just as quickly abandons them. If the play lacks narrative coherence, neither is it founded on

subtle characterisation. The treatment of deferential immigrant hotel workers and a mob of hooded drug addicts veers towards caricature, the latter perhaps intended as a symbolist move, but resulting in heavy-handed representation.

Despite this, the acting is consistently good. Carney provides a strong lead to a proficient ensemble who perform an array of character types. Also commendable is the lighting by Paul Keogan, which furnishes many striking effects: a group of squatting protestors cast streaks of light from torches, street lights flash to convey movement when Gerry and Niamh are driving a car, and the especially pleasing use of colour contrasted with black and white in some scenes.

Conor Linehan's piano score gives the play crucial support, creating a sense of progression when the script becomes sluggish. While this works successfully in the first half, in later scenes the tinkling piano, when intended to signal pathos, sounds hollow and rather clichéd, ultimately exposing the weakness of the writing: by the second half, so many narrative trajectories have been launched that any sense of coherence or articulation is lost. The final line of the play was inaudible in its delivery, and the end instead punctuated by a clever filmic device of a black screen narrowing to a small aperture of visible stage before snapping closed.



David Pearse, Andrew Bennet, Katy Davis, Norma Sheahan, Liam Carney and Gabrielle Reidy in *Homeland*

These final moments are symptomatic of a general imbalance in the production: the direction, clearly influenced by film and TV techniques, is impressively slick, the staging at times inventive, and the acting mainly polished, yet the play itself lacks clarity of vision. The play's repeated chant of "synchronicity" can be related to Mercier's use of the Oisín myth. This proves a puzzling rather than elucidating device. The myth serves as a skeletal structure, but neither reflection back on the Oisín story, nor special insight into

today's Ireland emerges from this intertextual game. The characters wistfully long for a land elsewhere, a place of no worldly sorrow. This quick allusion to Tír na nÓg seems to propose romantic idealism as a solution to the plight of a soulless nation; the play points to a diseased national condition but shies away from its harsher realities. Mercier developed the script through pre-production, yet further shaping might have revealed a more powerful message. In Gerry Newman's encounter with the consequences of his past, there

lurks a critique of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, but the play does not have the satirical bite to plumb the contemporary moment effectively.

While there are encouraging signs here that the Abbey values both modern methods of play-making and attempts at updating the traditional canon of Irish theatre, this play does not rattle expectations. *Homeland* is not a big enough departure from standard features of past Abbey productions: inclusion of laughs to ensure a "good night out", familiar sounding music, familiar ensemble acting, even the play's umbilical connection to Irish myth — all temper the sense that a genuinely new period in the National Theatre has been inaugurated.

Heather Johnson lectures in English literature at IADT, Dun Laoghaire.

WUNDERKIND by Darren Thornton

Calipo Theatre Company

25 January-4- February 2006 at Project Arts

Centre

Directed by Darren Thornton

With Owen McDonnell

Reviewed 4 February

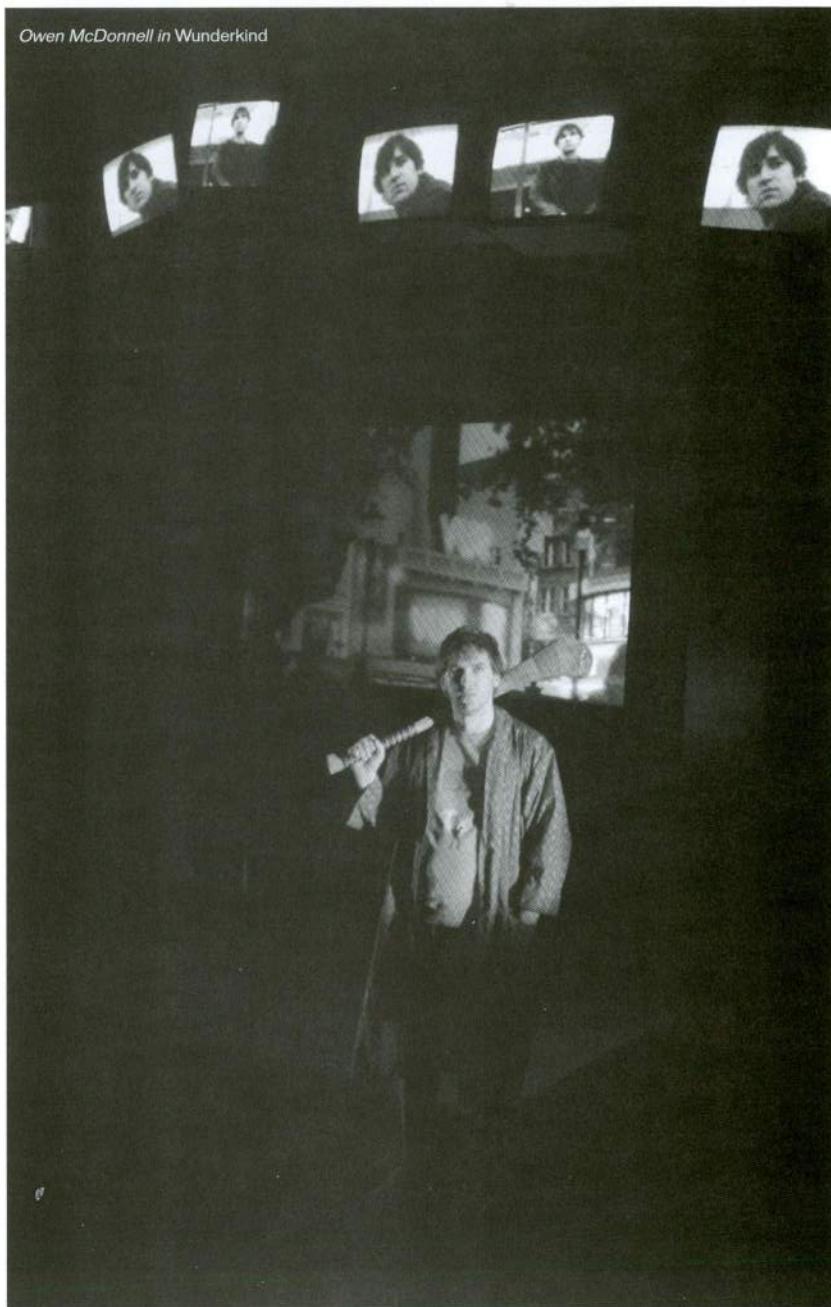
BY SUSAN CONLEY

CALIPO THEATRE COMPANY ONCE again tells us a story that goes back and forth between cinematic and theatrical form. In *Wunderkind*, while there is much to enjoy, there is nevertheless a feeling that the tension

between what each form demands, with regard to its content, isn't being well-satisfied in either case. Movies move, as William Goldman famously exhorts, and they move through the greater use of imagery rather than text. Plays move too, but by and large rely upon the spoken word to drive the narrative. Thornton has clear strengths as a filmmaker, and his use of video chimes into the action at appropriate times to generally hilarious effect, but the actual text is not up to the task at hand. In a pitch to a Big Hollywood Producer, it might be something like *Overnight* meets *Another Irish Monologue (In Which The Actor Plays All the Parts)*, and each come dangerously close to cancelling each other out.

Trapped like an animal in an anonymous room in a Hotel Anywhere, first time writer/director and Cavan man Sean (Owen McDonnell) is a modern day endangered species: where once the auteur was the classic outsider hero taking on the studio system, these days the independent filmmaker is once again dependent upon the money men, whether or not their suits are merely metaphorical. In a time in film history in which low budget is denoted by single-digit millions, the days when even a modest feature could get off the ground without a cabal of producers are over. Sean knows this, and knows he has to some degree sold his

Owen McDonnell in Wunderkind



soul- the problem is, these guys want to return it.

It was supposed to be a lifelong dream come true: a tyro director helm-ing his first full-length fiction film, sur-round-ed by the chaos and bustle and personalities of a film set, the actors, the production staff, the poncy British first AD, the smugly judgemental pro-duction manager, the keen (and cute) PA/film student- and those producers, the Four Fathers, lurking at the edges, watch-ing their money get spent, count-ing the beads of sweat on Sean's brow. Sean's mate, Dominic his best ally, his original producer, his buffer between the suits and his baby, has dived headfirst into the party-all-night lifestyle; increasingly, as Sean gets closer to the dreaded test screening, he finds himself more and more on his own, undefended, outnumbered. The test bombs, and the film is taken away, Sean is banned from the editing room, and in a final outrage, a famous Oscar-winning director is sent out to shoot pickups that completely change the cut and thrust of Sean's film. He is reduced to a spectator, seeing his film only through routine deliveries of the daily play outs, alone in his under-wear, running the sequence of events relentlessly on the cinema screen in his mind.

Based as it is on writer/director Darren Thornton's real-life experiences while working on the TV series *Love is the Drug* for RTÉ (and we can't

help but wish that were the story being told), he hits all the right notes, and has created a believable character in a believable scenario. O'Donnell prowls Kieran McNulty's well-designed set, taking us through his own personal nightmare with flash-backs, with narration of his version of the ending of his film versus the studio's. He pushes his misery to the extent that the result is actual blood on the cutting room walls (to curiously little reaction from everybody who's been trying to keep him away from his movie); and he traces his feelings of powerlessness and victimhood to a fairly average moment of humiliation from his childhood. His film is given a Hollywood ending; writer/director Thornton's resolution is quiet, a passing comment that raises his character's spirit and softly implies that he'll live to fight another day.

The notion of the pitch is an apt one, and it is the stripped down style of the writing that reinforces this. O'Donnell's delivery is staccato to match the pithiness of his declarative lines, lines that follow the format of 'I sat down. I put my hands on my knees. I hung my head'. It's almost like listening to a verbal storyboard as frame by frame we are lead through a scene, action by action, step by step, rarely allowed to see something unfold in real time, never allowed to fill in the blanks for ourselves. The performance sung every time a clip

flashed onto the monitors suspended above the set: cameos by well-known Dublin actors, and a special guest appearance by Neil Jordan, lifted the narrative to heights that the monologue format couldn't reach. Witty and well-made, these clips are the heart of the piece and are clearly where Thornton is at his most creative and joyous. Somebody give that guy a couple million bucks and see what he can do with it: Thornton's obviously got what it takes, cinematically.

TESTIMONIES

by Paul Kennedy and Mary Moynihan

Smashing Times Theatre Company

Helix Space, Dublin

Directed by Ena May

With Bibbi Larsson, Sean O'Boyle,

Margaret Toomy

Reviewed 16 November, 2005

BY FINTAN WALSH

A SAD TALE MAY WELL BE BEST kept for winter. The truism is not much of a consolation, however, when you're struggling through the squally bowels of DCU to see a show about suicide. You just can't help wondering, as I did on this occasion, if some tales are simply too dark to be told; even on an evening as sympathetic with its subject matter as the one in question. While my brief was to review a Smashing Times production of *The Empty Chair* by Joe O'Byrne, I learned at the box office that the show in pro-

duction was actually *Testimonies*, with the former now scheduled for a rehearsed reading. Even after all that, however, there was no escaping the topic: the titular testimonies were confessions of suicide.

In keeping with Smashing Times' commitment to community outreach, *Testimonies* is a theatre programme consisting of a performance, followed by audience discussion and/or workshops, designed to raise awareness about suicide among teenagers and community groups. The performance itself is structured around three monologues, two of them delivered by relatives of those who have committed suicide and one by a character who has seriously considered it. Directed by Ena May, each piece is staged using a minimum of props and lighting.

Paul Kennedy's *A Day Out* is first up. A young man (Sean O'Boyle) recalls events leading up to his friend Darren's suicide. Darren began drinking heavily when he was dumped by his girlfriend but seemed to enjoy the concert he attended the night he took his life. Now grief-stricken, Darren's friend wonders how he might have prevented his death. In *One Breath*, written by Artistic Director Mary Moynihan, involves a young mother (Bibbi Larsson) recalling the decline of her mental health. Though she once contemplated suicide, a call to the Samaritans set her on the road to recovery. Finally, in Paul Kennedy's *Is*



Sean O'Boyle in *Testimonies*

There Anything We Can Do, a woman (Margaret Toomy) talks though the recent suicide of her twenty-five year-old son. In frantically trying to understand his motivation, she inadvertently reveals that he may have been gay and unhappy about his sexuality.

The performance component of *Testimonies* is fraught with problems. Despite the title, the monologues are not testimonies as such, but loosely based on testimonies. This authorial manipulation - which is not necessarily a bad thing in itself - is exposed here in the writing's dry repetition of formula and the persistence of agenda: a person's symptoms go unnoticed, somebody commits or tries to commit suicide, they should have sought help and saved their families from the painful consequences wit-

nessed on stage. The acting is also flawed, frequently flitting between the painfully understated and the embarrassingly hysterical. However, Toomy's highly emotive performance as a confused, distraught, guilt-ridden mother in the final monologue just about rescues the show.

As part of the programme's interactive objective, a panel comprised of two therapists, a representative from the Samaritans, writer Paul Kennedy, and the three actors invited audience responses following the show. Ignoring concerns about the performance, such as those mentioned above, most people instead offered their own anecdotes about suicidal tendencies and loss. And of these there were many. It soon became clear that *these* testimonies were the programme's

main concern, as confirmed by the fact that while the show lasted an hour, the discussion lasted an hour and a half.

Despite this prioritisation, the elicitation of the audience's experiences cannot simply be put down to theatrical expertise, due to the problems already highlighted. Neither can it be explained by inventive post-show workshopping, for there was none. Seeing as quite a number of the sixty-odd spectators cried as soon as the show began, and spoke so readily and candidly afterwards, one must presume that the majority present were primed for some kind of communal outpouring, regardless of the type or quality of stimulus. Take away the performance, and I suspect that a similar discussion would have taken place. While I have no problem with therapeutic discussion *per se*, if theatre companies do not use creative *theatrical* and *dramatic* contexts in which to explore complex problems, who will? On an ethical note, one wonders if such a direct approach on such a delicate subject is a wise move by a theatre company, especially when working with youth groups? Companies like TEAM usually manage this balance better, by engaging the audience with sensitive subject matter via dramatic scenarios without compromising on performance quality. Perhaps the greatest disappointment was that those of us who had no direct experience of suicide parted with little to reflect on, except

for the strange guilt that comes from regarding the pain of others.

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

LUCA by Barrabas, The Company

Directed by Veronica Coburn

With Amy Conroy, Raymond Keane,

Eoin Lynch.

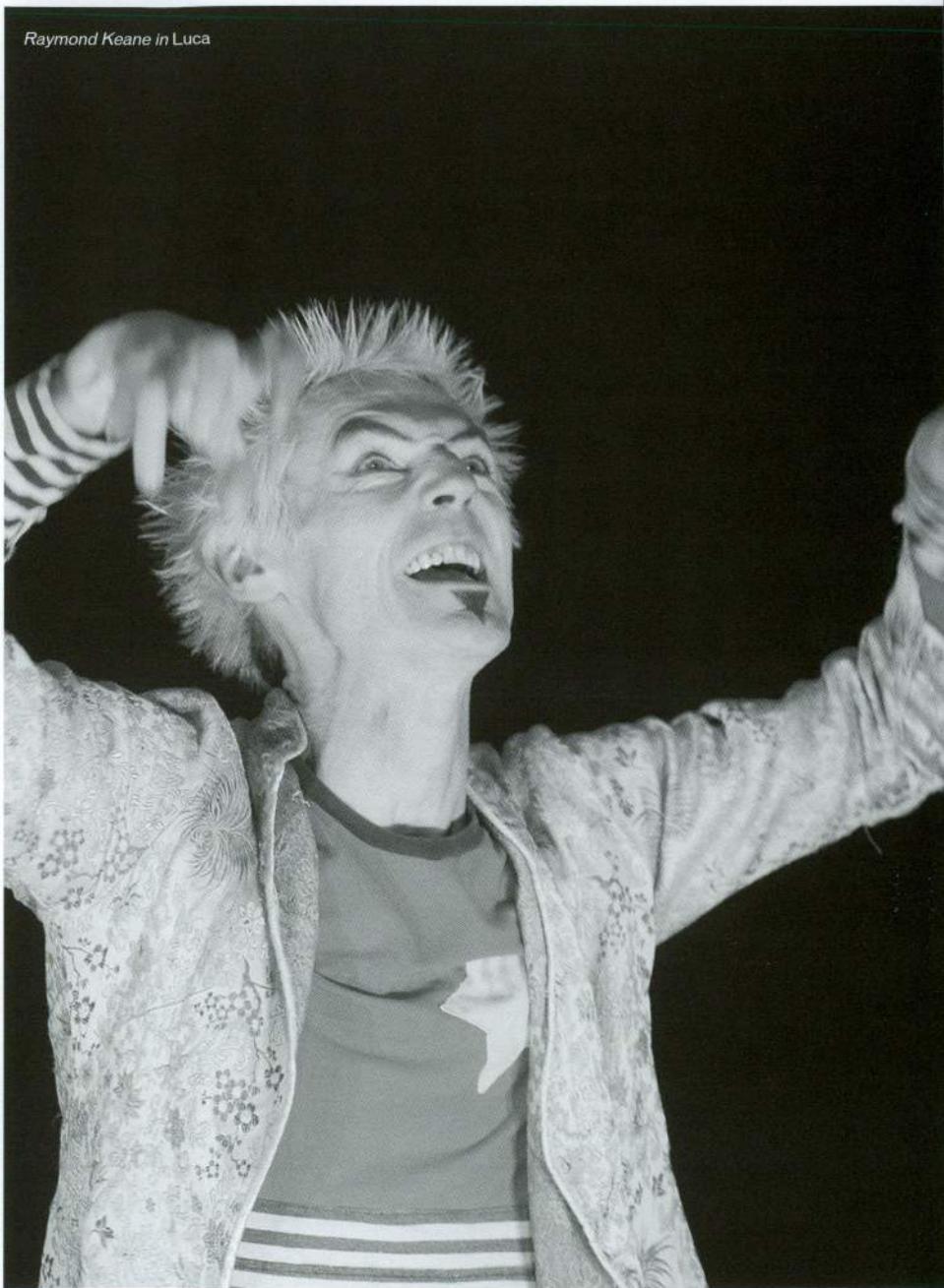
2-19 November 2005, Project Arts Centre

Reviewed 15 November

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

'LUCA ABHOR THE CHAOS", SAYS LUCA, a virtually omnipotent time-travelling demon sprite portrayed by Raymond Keane. In Luca's world, "abhor" means "love", and Luca does love chaos. Together with his equally supernaturally empowered cohorts Sparrow (Conroy) and Him (Lynch), he travels the world, honing in on chaos and anarchy, revelling in the madness of human life, egging on its darker side, enjoying the "fiendish rush" to be had from being bad. Like a group of mischievously malevolent but powerful children (who are also fully sexualised and express themselves on a sexual level as freely as a verbal one), the trio indulge in name calling, game playing, and arguing over which adventure in time to enjoy next. Baby swapping in maternity wards, repainting the kerbs in Northern Ireland, selling disposable

Raymond Keane in Luca



cameras at Abu Ghraib: these are a few of their indulgences, all done not so much in the name of evil, but of chaos, which is only evil if you choose to see it that way.

The impression of chaos is something Barrabas tends to revel in. From the frantic whirlwind of *The Whiteheaded Boy* to their joyful rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the company has delivered some of the most carefully orchestrated theatrical chaos seen on the Irish stage. The emphasis on simplicity and physical precision, the recourse to child-like vocal characterisation and the use of colourful, expressive set design has always brought an impression of wonder with it, and Luca is, in this sense, vintage Barrabas.

The material is very heady: moral relativity, divinity, creation, "death and destruction and glorious atrocity" are far from pre-school subjects but, played through the medium of clown and game-play typically employed by this company, the show cuts straight to the heart of troubling existential paradoxes. Does humanity have an instinctive desire for good or evil? Are the angels and devils which haunt the fringes of our conscience really as different as they seem? Given the power clearly possessed by these creatures, what would humanity itself become?

Luca confronts this dilemma, much to the disgust of Sparrow and

Him, by developing a fascination with Angels and by even daring to use the hated and unutterable word "love". He also nurses an unhealthy fixation on the inauguration of Mary Robinson, an obsession which may be as almost randomly wilful as most else that Luca does, but which certainly gives an Irish audience some time for head-scratching as to its applicability to this moral landscape.

The show takes the form of a series of games and confrontations between the three characters as they travel through time and space. Some of the games become quite sexualised, in one case descending into an outright orgy. Sexualisation is neatly accomplished through costume by having the characters carry detachable sexual organs fashioned out of terry cloth (a nod to classic Greek comedy, one presumes). In one case, this becomes a very amusing playing out of the theme of emasculation as phalluses are removed and stolen as part of one of their games. This device allows sexuality to be both acknowledged and ignored as the moment requires and as jealousies and desires arise and disappear, representing both the importance and triviality of sexuality as a force of human consciousness.

Just as these characters seem to revel in bearing witness to and participating in acts of veniality and carnage in the human world, the audience derives most of its pleasure

from the show in watching the execution of the organised chaos of Luca's world on stage. Director Veronica Coburn and the performers know precisely how to control their space (framed by angled raised platforms shaped to look like an enormous open flower, with attendant vaginal resonances), and they even succeed in staging an exciting chase scene as the trio are pursued by a dinosaur on prehistoric earth. There are a couple of big set pieces as the trio travel

through time, but mainly the focus is firmly on the actors, who are superb.

The three performers create distinctive, seemingly spontaneous, characterisations and yet play together physically, vocally, and emotionally as one heaving, whirling spectacle of body and mind in motion. Keane's performance is so physically engaging that it is possible to miss completely the fact that his fingers have been elongated with prosthetics, giving extra emphasis to his gestures.

The Shock of the Old

Below, ITM critics consider some of the best – and worst – of the recent stagings of familiar or classic texts, from the outstanding invention of *Titus Andronicus* to a disappointing *Drama at Inish*

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

by John Webster

Loose Canon Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

8 – 18 February 2006

Directed by Jason Byrne

With James Flynn, Patrick Moy, Deirdre

Rocroft, Karl Shiels, Jack Walsh

Reviewed 16 February

BY TANYA DEAN

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS "WHERE'S THE set"? The audience are greeted by the empty black husk of the stage at the

Project's Space Upstairs. Loose Canon's *Duchess of Malfi* is, in a word, stripped. Even the text is filleted down to the bare bones. In fact, the programme manages to condense the plot down to one line: "though certain scenes and characters have been cut (in some cases radically) the scenario of the performance is faithful to the original plot: a recently widowed Duchess, forbidden by her brothers to remarry, marries her steward and is eventually found out, tortured and finally murdered". With this bald



Deirdre Roycroft, Patrick Moy and Karl Shiels in *The Duchess of Malfi*

statement, Loose Canon are setting themselves the theatrical challenge of extricating emotion and dramatic depth from such a severely edited text.

Understatement can be a virtue, and nowhere is this more expressively shown than in Director Jason Byrne's remarkable design and Sarah Jane Shiels' eloquent lighting. Particularly striking is the opening sequence. Onto a silent bare stage troop three serving-men, who unfurl an Oriental-style rug centre-stage and then retreat, not a word spoken. Gradually, the rug is lit, softly at first and then with growing resolution.

The rich red and gold threads take on a vibrant lustre, and an oasis of colour and opulence is formed in the dark shadows of the stage. Assorted arrangements of props comprise the various scene changes, but the rug remains constant. For the Duchess' incarceration in the final scenes, the rectangle of colour suggests a gilded prison surrounded on all sides by dark shadows through which the conspirators creep. The production avoids the use of background music and sound effects, using silence to create a stifling atmosphere of conspiracy and apprehension, broken only by dialogue. The exception is

when the Duchess is informed that her death has been ordered, and quiet piano music plays faintly in the background, mannerly and unobtrusive, a mocking counterpoint.

The culled text creates its own problems, the most pressing of which is a lack of emotional equilibrium. The actors are forced to sublimate much of the story and emotional motivation. Too often, vocal ranges oscillate wildly between low-pitched tension and bellows of rage. In the opening scene, where the conspiracy by the Duchess' brothers to suppress their sister is revealed, Ferdinand (Patrick Moy) in particular vibrates with tension, spasmodically exploding in almost adolescent rage before being repeatedly drawn back by the Cardinal's (Karl Shiels) low conspiratorial tones. Right from the start, Moy's Ferdinand comes across as already unhinged by his unhealthy obsession with his sister, leaving very little room for the character to develop. Shiels does his best to give the Cardinal gravitas but has little to work with because the majority of the character's face-time and subplot has been omitted.

The Duchess herself, as played by Deirdre Roycroft, is a curiously mercurial creation. Articulate and self-assured, yet she becomes almost girlishly coy when proposing to Antonio (James Flynn). When confined and tormented by her brothers, she vacil-

lates between tortured distress and snappish anger. But it is in the twilight scenes that that the character comes into her own. In her final conversations with Bosola (Jack Walsh) and her dignified step towards death, Roycroft finds emotional equilibrium and imbues the character with a hitherto unseen stateliness that gives her death the impact it deserves.

However, Walsh's Bosola is the pivot point of this production. Alternately wry and self-loathing, he retains an innate dignity throughout, despite first appearing onstage in rags. The character of the Duchess' maid Cariola has been omitted and several of her lines reallocated to Bosola, allowing him greater emotional connection with the Duchess, most notably when she asks him, "Dost thou think we shall know one another in th'other world" and he replies, "yes, out of question". This is later revived when he asks her, "doth not death fright you?" and she replies, almost affectionately, "who would be afraid on't? Knowing to meet such excellent company in th'other world". Indeed, the connection between Duchess and spy is more affecting than that between her and her secret husband. Bosola and the Duchess seem to recognise some hidden facet in each other, a shared melancholy. He becomes both gaoler and confidante for the Duchess in her final hours, and she for him becomes

a symbol of unassailable dignity within the ruling classes that have shown him only disdain.

Tanya Dean recently graduated from the Samuel Beckett Centre in Trinity College Dublin with a B.A. in Drama and Classics. She is the Publishing Assistant with this magazine.

DRAMA AT INISH by Lennox Robinson

Abbey Theatre

22 October - 31 December 2005

Directed by Jim Nolan

With Tom Hickey, Anna Manahan,

Aaron Monaghan

Reviewed 31 December

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

A THEATRE COMPANY IS ATTEMPTING to stage serious drama. The actors are committed; costumes, setting, and lights are top-notch; and their repertoire comprises many great plays. Yet everything goes wrong: one mishap follows another, until finally everyone realises that, instead of watching theatre, they should all be out having fun.

This is the plot of Lennox Robinson's 1933 comedy *Drama at Inish*, but it's also a fairly good description of events at the Abbey since 2004. This play about a series of theatrical disasters was itself the victim of a series of theatrical disasters: cut from the 2004 abbeyonehundred programme, it's directed by Jim

Nolan, whose own play was quietly dropped from the Peacock line-up in 2005. It's disappointing, then, that instead of drawing a line under the theatre's recent problems, this production exemplifies much of what's been wrong: a lack of directorial imagination, a conservative approach to programming, and superficiality when substance is required.

This is not to suggest that *Drama at Inish* is a bad play; in fact, it's very intelligent. Focussing on a theatre troupe who stage European classics in a rural Irish town, the play combines well-constructed melodrama with allusions to the works of Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. So the audience gets to feel smart, but not *too* smart: they laugh at the pretentiousness of the play's townspeople, who see themselves as characters in *The Cherry Orchard* or *Hedda*, but that laughter allows them to acknowledge their own familiarity with those works. The play is, therefore, a celebration of theatre, in all of its guises – even if the celebration involves affectionate mockery for the most part.

It's therefore surprising that this production is almost entirely lacking in theatricality. We are confronted with a vast, naturalistic representation of a hotel sitting room when we arrive (designed by Blaithín Sheerin), which presents a detailed illusion of "reality", right down to the knives and forks on the table centre-stage.



Robert O'Mahony, Anna Manahan and Kate O'Toole in *Drama At Inish*

Despite the fact that this set remains in place for the entire play, set changes between scenes seem to last forever, as stage hands fumble around with very minor props for one minute after another. The attention to detail here is admirable, but misconceived: the point of this play is that we are decidedly *not* watching Ibsen. The set, like the script, needs to present a heightened, exaggerated version of reality. Instead, it's cumbersomely cluttered, and rather dull too.

Acting is similarly problematic. The Abbey has assembled a top-notch cast, but they never gel into an ensemble. The better-known actors

simply do their usual *shtick*. Tom Hickey is, well, Tom Hickey: the stiff-limbed movements, the move from low to high pitch in delivery, and so on. Anna Manahan is similarly predictable, with every line delivered as if in acknowledgement of the audience's appreciation of her. And Aaron Monaghan reprises the role he's already played a few times at the Abbey, with the gormless expression and – once again—the funny walk. In other words, three of the most skilful actors here are asked only to do what we've seen them do many times before. This is bad for us, and bad for them too. The rest of the

cast are asked to do nothing more than deliver their lines in the general direction of the audience, and remember when to walk on and off stage, which they manage quite well.

Jim Nolan is an imaginative director, whose own plays focus with great insight on themes of performance and theatricality. Yet here there's very little evidence of directorial vision or authority. Nor do we get a clear sense of why this play is being produced here and now: nothing new is being said, and every element of the production – from action to design to direction – achieves the bare minimum expected of it, and nothing more. It's not that this is a bad production – it's fine, really. It's just that, with this cast and director, it could have been much better – more inventive, more theatrical, more playful. It's difficult to understand why it wasn't.

We do get a little bit of colour and life at the end, when balloons are released, and the cast sing, exhorting the audience to join in. It feels like forced gaiety for everyone. The actors hold hands, take one last bow, shout *Happy New Year!* and wave as we wander out. It's New Year's Eve, and this has been the last show in the run of the last Abbey play of 2005. The overriding feeling created is hope that this production does indeed represent the end of an era, that better things lie in store. We'll see.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

Island Theatre Company on tour at Civic

Theatre, Dublin

7-12 November 2005

Directed by Terry Devlin

With Susie Lambe, Paul Meade, Liam O'Brien,

Geraldine Plunkett

Reviewed 12 November

BY TANYA DEAN

AS RENTS AND PROPERTY PRICES continue to climb in Ireland, we are witness to the phenomenon of the "stay-at-homes": grown adults who continue to live with their parents well into their 20s and 30s. How can a human being develop emotionally and psychologically when they are still living in their childhood home at a point where, traditionally, most should be giving into the instinct to buy and feather their own nest? This is by no means a new concern, nor a uniquely Irish one, as testified to by Island's production of *The Glass Menagerie*. Set in St Louis in the 1930's, it presents a plausible picture of how emotionally stunting such a living situation could be.

Tom Wingfield (Paul Meade) is forced to live at home with his overbearing mother Amanda (Geraldine Plunkett) and crippled sister Laura (Susie Lamb), acting as the breadwinner in the absence of his father, who abandoned the family years ago. As a grown man denied adult independ-



Liam O'Brien and Susie Lamb in *The Glass Menagerie*

ence, Tom has been unable to mature emotionally; Meade takes relish in demonstrating his character's almost adolescent resentment, reacting to his mother's cosseting with throwaway jibes and tantrums. Each time he storms out from a confrontation, he always sulkily returns hours later, reeled back in by the metaphorical apron strings. Lamb uses an awkward, diffident physicality to portray an almost pathologically shy young woman who cannot function socially

outside the hermetical confines of her family home. Both brother and mother dote on her, but always underlying this production is the knowledge that she is the albatross anchoring them to this dead space. Rather than find her own way to pull herself and her family out of their sepia-toned life, Amanda transposes her need for male approval and definition onto her daughter.

This is an evocative exploration of the dated pressure both on the

daughter to marry and the family to find her a match. The production does not actively make connection with the fact that the "Gentleman Caller" who should have fulfilled Amanda (the absent Mr Wingfield) instead condemned her to a life as a disenchanted single mother. But his highly prominent portrait in a cheap frame, hanging on the stage is a constant reminder of the void he has placed in their lives. Despite relying on men for redemption, Amanda is constantly worrying that Tom will turn out like his father: an ultimately self-fulfilling prophecy. And when the Gentleman Caller promised for Laura does appear onstage, all the characters refuse to see what a disappointment he is. Liam O'Brien plays the Gentleman Caller as an amiable but ultimately forgettable wag, with nothing of substance to offer.

In the first act, scenes move briskly in sequence. But in the second, when Laura finally interacts with her Gentleman Caller, the pace slows to a standstill. Whilst this is an undeniably pivotal moment, the breakdown in pace means that all impetus is lost. Both female characters are crushed by the Gentleman Caller's failure to live up to their hopes, and Amanda turns on her son, finally releasing a lifetime's worth of disappointments and unfulfilled promise. Plunkett is at her strongest when exhibiting the grotesquery of Amanda's blithe self-

ishness, but lacks the suppressed anger and frustration that would have made the final showdown with her son emotionally affecting.

Island sticks firmly to a naturalist approach that relies on character interaction, dialogue, and well-worn themes of frustrated ambition and family pressure, to present an intelligible performance of a family drama. Director and designer Terry Devlin has favoured a sectioned-off wooden floor space and abbreviated black walls for his set. Whilst a clear signifier for the oppressiveness of the family's home, the staging space is swallowed up somewhat by the black cavern of the Civic, with the result that the claustrophobic home-life of the Wingfields is merely presented to the audience, rather than encompassing them. This style is at odds with Williams' description of *The Glass Menagerie* as a 'memory play', an idea explicitly mentioned in the opening monologue, but not investigated in any depth in this production. The dream-like quality promised by Tom is never explored, replaced instead by a memory-and-monologue style of performance similar to that of Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In his production notes, Williams observed that, "being a 'memory play', *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention". Disappointingly, Island fails to take advantage of that freedom.

WAITING FOR GODOT by Samuel Beckett

Theatrecorp Theatre Company

Black Box Theatre, Galway

Directed by Max Hafler

With Daniel Guinnane, Jonathan Gunning,

Fred McCloskey, Sean T. O'Meallaigh

15 Nov – 20 Nov 2005; reviewed 15 Nov

BY DIARMUID O' BRIEN

IT'S POPULARLY UNDERSTOOD THAT Samuel Beckett's plays are bleakly existential laments on despair and the meaninglessness of life. They are also very funny: humour, the footman of grief and fear, is present in all of Beckett's works, and *Waiting For Godot* is one of the funniest plays ever written. Comic actors are often cast in the lead roles: Steve Martin and Robin Williams appeared in one famous Broadway run. Perhaps the defiant humour of the play, with its doomed heroes laughing hollowly into the void, explains why fans of Beckett have a special place in their hearts for this ever welcome Tragicomedy In Two Acts.

Beckett's humour and humanity are particularly emphasised in this affectionate production of *Godot* from director Max Hafler. We see a genuine compassion tempering the co-dependent plight of Vladimir (Jonathan Gunning) and Estragon (Daniel Guinnane), as they potter about their little scrap of limbo. Gunning brings passion and a slight lisp to the inexplicably optimistic Vladimir, and is well foiled by Guinnane's more carnal

Estragon, who has resigned himself to the suffering of the world. Adding a bit of novelty to their endless routine is the cruel if eloquent landlord Pozzo, played by *Ros Na Rún*'s Fred McCloskey with an authoritative charisma in the first act, and then a stricken helplessness in the second. Sean T. O'Meallaigh plays both Godot's young messenger and the long-suffering slave Lucky, and excels during the latter's impromptu lecture on the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley.

The Black Box is, of course, a black box theatre, and doesn't have the traditional proscenium. It's essentially an enormous empty warehouse, with the stage area and the audience's seating in the centre taking up less than half of the available space. Sometimes such a singular configuration can provide an opportunity for innovation; sadly, in this case, the set just doesn't work. The bleak country road is represented by hanging stained cloths and a padded floor that runs the width of the audience. It seems amiss to use such a mean looking set to suggest a desolate emptiness, when the theatre itself provides a far more effective emptiness already.

I mentioned that *Godot* is a funny play. However, its humour demands discipline, and this production suffers from a tendency to play up the slapstick and camp. Rousing the audience towards a constant, nervous giggle meant that a lot of the



Daniel Guinnane and Jonathan Gunning in *Waiting For Godot*

play's more tragic moments (such as when Vladimir finally realises that they will be waiting forever) and less serious moments (the hat routine) lose impact. In a play whose aesthetics are heavily influenced by the comedies of early cinema, this production drifted too far from the deadpan sensibilities of Buster Keaton, and leaned more towards The Three Stooges. Some of grimmer truths of Beckett's words are only really, fiercely funny when said with a straight face: a touch more restraint would be welcome in this otherwise well considered production.

MIKE SHAUGHNESSY

Diarmuid O'Brien is a Galway-based writer.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

by William Shakespeare

Siren Productions

Directed by Selina Cartmell

With Olwen Fouéré, Ruth Negga, Owen Roe

Project Arts Centre

3-8 December 2005

Reviewed 7 December

BY FINTAN WALSH

TITUS ANDRONICUS IS NOT FOR the faint-hearted. Shakespeare's early tragedy is a collision of torture, mutilation, rape, sacrifice, murder, and cannibalism. There is no love, no redemption, and no exposition of imitable morality. For the audience, this typically means neither empathy nor cathartic release, just a grotesque

feast on the spectacle of bloody destruction.

When Roman General Titus returns from ten years of war against the Goths, 21 of his 25 sons have been killed. Small compensation lies in the fact that he has captured Queen Tamora and her sons. Upon sacrificing her eldest, the Queen's hatred of Titus is compounded, and she reacts by scheming revenge. When made empress, Tamora frames Titus' two sons for killing Bassianus, which leads to their beheading. She then urges her own children, Chiron and Demetrius, to rape Titus' daughter Lavinia, which they do, while cutting out her tongue and hacking off her hands. Through feigning madness, Titus eventually succeeds in arresting Tamora's sons, before killing them and baking them in pies. In the final scene of the play, the Queen unknowingly eats her own children; Titus kills her and his own daughter Lavinia; he himself is slaughtered by emperor Saturninus, who is himself subsequently murdered. Through the red mist of this macabre mayhem, the only message to emerge is a comment on the mad, meaningless nature of war itself: there are no winners here, just corpse, upon corpse, upon corpse.

Soon after Siren Production's performance begins, Titus (Owen Roe) and his heaving slave-train dramatically cut though the playing space. Tamora (Olwen Fouéré) spearheads

the clanging captives, which include her scantily-clad sons Alarbus (Shadann Felfeli), Demetrius (Aidan Turner) and Chiron (Tadhg Murphy). Appealing to Titus for mercy, claiming that it is nobility's true badge, the Queen seems almost resigned to her domination. Resignation and domination, however, are not conditions that this woman readily accepts. Beseeching words aside, everything about Fouéré's spitting, vigorous, defiant embodiment of Tamora forebodes recalcitrance and violent revolt. Squared up against the flushed, spread-legged, militarism of Roe's Titus, the opening encounter sets the tone for an epic battle of wills between the "barbarian" Goths and the "civilized" Romans. As soon as Tamora's plea for mercy is uttered and rejected, the plot is set in motion with the scorned Queen vying for retribution on her capturer.

Under Selina Cartmell's direction, Siren's *Titus* attempts to discipline the reeling narrative and gory content through stylization. The movements of the 30-strong cast, under Ella Clarke's choreography, are simultaneously cool and menacing. Working within a small theatre space, individuals and ensemble factions move like effortlessly manoeuvred chess pieces. Choreography is at its most impressively trippy when Tamora seemingly flies in the air like the Wicked Witch of the West. Set design is also central to



Olwen Fouéré and Owen Roe (background left) in *Titus Andronicus*

choreographic choices. Jean Guy LeCat's large metal cage which dominates one end of the promenade stage is the production's most striking feature, which, in its contemporaneous design – much like the costuming by Monica Frawley – implicitly suggests that the play's meditation on war has current resonance. Further, Paul Keogan's lighting design and Denis Clohessy's musical score work in counterpoint to the dissonant cadences of the plot and design.

While these aesthetic choices focus the text, the actors anchor it. Fouéré's Tamora is a wonderfully fierce, uncompromising portrayal. As was the case with Fouéré's Maeve in

Fabulous Beast's *The Bull*, it is chiefly her character's sexuality which threatens here. Equally impressive is Roe's playing of Titus as a once assured, but eventually humiliated and somewhat bemused man, who ultimately desires nothing more than the destruction of desire itself. For him, it takes mass annihilation to stop this cyclical terror. Negga also stands out for playing the violated Lavinia as a bashed-up, poorly-supported string puppet, always on the brink of collapse.

When Titus leads the Goth horde onto the stage at the outset of this production, Siren's epic ambitions are obvious. Indeed, Fouéré's entrance is highly reminiscent of the one she

made in *Passades* at Digital Hub in 2004, which Cartmell also directed. Although *Titus* was initially planned for the same venue, this fell through. Alas, Project Upstairs is no warehouse and the production ultimately suffered under its confines. Despite directorial, design and acting achievement, viewing *Titus* here was a bit like

watching Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* on a mobile phone: you get the idea, but not the ideal. Assuming that the company had a similar ideal in mind, let's not hold this against them too much. Typical of Siren's work so far, *Titus Andronicus* is an ambitious, bold and risky venture, in the best possible meaning of those terms.

Star Vehicles, Piling Up

Hollywood superstars Ralph Fiennes and Ed Harris, comedienne Michelle Read and Deirdre O'Kane, heartthrob Keith Duffy: as celebrity looms over the production and marketing of Irish theatre, our critics refuse to be dazzled

FAITH HEALER by Brian Friel

Gate Theatre, Dublin

12 February – 1 April 2006

With: Ingrid Craigie, Ralph Fiennes,

Ian McDiarmid

Directed by Jonathan Kent

Reviewed 19 February

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ABOUT FORTY PEOPLE ARE SITTING ON the stairs at the Gate, hoping for returned tickets. Two women at the front have been queuing for ninety minutes already; one will get in, but not the other. An embarrassed couple linger uneasily in the lobby: he's in a tuxedo, and she's in a cocktail dress – a black number with bananas,

pineapples, and other fruit on it. He briefly looks relieved, as he catches sight of someone who's as overdressed as they are – but then the other tux-wearer starts telling people to take their seats and switch off their mobile phones... and the man goes a little redder. In the theatre, a boy, aged maybe eleven, shuffles excitedly in his seat. He can't decide which is going to be more thrilling: seeing the guy who played Voldemort in the last *Harry Potter* movie, or seeing the guy who played the Emperor in *Star Wars*. Nearby, an elderly couple have decided that, since they are at a Brian Friel play, they are going to find *everything* funny: they will laugh at

Ralph Fiennes in Faith Healer



ANTHONY WOODS

least once every 45 seconds until the play's over, even when death, miscarriage, and suicide are being described. The couple two rows down are bickering: she's visibly excited by the prospect of celebrities onstage, but he's just nodded off. Sweet wrappers rustle, mobile phones beep, latecomers sneak in, the apparently incontinent sneak out, ambulances scream into the Rotunda, and it's getting hotter and hotter and hotter.

It's another Gate Theatre *Event* – what people throughout the world are calling the "Ralph Fiennes *Faith Healer*". And we're all waiting for it to begin.

Then something startling happens. A curtain is drawn across the empty stage. As it reaches stage right, we have a moment to look at the image projected onto it, of a deserted country lane – then it begins to open from the left, revealing a row of chairs, a poster, and a man in a long coat. The audience is disorientated by the speed of the set change, and suddenly we're all aware that the figure centre stage is Ralph Fiennes. Then he begins speaking, delivering Friel's opening incantation in a strangely arrhythmic lilt. And immediately we've stopped seeing Fiennes, and are now watching Frank Hardy, the *Faith Healer*.

Fiennes' performance is mesmerising – literally. He stalks the stage,

now pointing persuasively to the empty seats beside him, now defensively covering his chest with his hands. He's both suave and shabby: he sports an elegant jacket and pants, but wears grubby green socks too; he speaks confidently, but needs a crumpled newspaper clipping to convince us of his value. This combination of charisma and self-loathing means that we now know why Grace and Teddy loved him enough to follow him around Scotland and Wales for years, and we understand too the restlessness of spirit that drives him to his death.

Ingrid Craigie's performance as Grace is, in contrast, creditable but never credible. In her monologue, Grace works towards the gradual realisation that she sees herself as one of Frank's "fictions" – a realisation that prompts her suicide. So the audience needs to believe that Grace is likely to kill herself, and also needs to care when that tragedy is revealed to us. In what is admittedly a difficult role, Craigie is disappointingly one-dimensional, beginning at a high pitch, and staying there. The necessary build-up of tension therefore can't happen, and it's difficult to relate to her character.

Then Ian McDiarmid as Teddy arrives. In a nice contrast to the hype surrounding this production, McDiarmid's Teddy gives a wickedly amusing, down-to-earth account of

the vanity of stage performers. We enjoy the twinkle in his eye as he smiles warmly at us; we watch him work through several bottles of beer (without actually drinking much of it); we enjoy his combination of world-weariness and enthusiasm. And he is so charismatic and good-natured – and has forged such a strong rapport with the audience – that we believe *everything* Teddy says, even though his stories are the least credible in the play. McDiarmid has understood that Teddy is a manager who upstages his main act, and he exploits this element of Friel's script – and the audience's sympathies – brilliantly.

When the show's over, some people stretch their limbs and mutter, "that was hard work, wasn't it?" (three hours of monologues is tough enough, it's true). One or two are humming the theme from *Star Wars*. Many seem exhilarated and moved. And it's easy to overlook in the bustle out the door how completely we've all been taken in. We have accepted, without protest, that we were addressed by the ghost of Frank Hardy; and we've accepted, without question, that he actually healed people. In short, we have been enabled to believe for three hours that the impossible is indeed possible. This belief is due to the wonderful performances and the masterful direction, but it's fundamentally due to

the script: we've been seduced – not by Fiennes, and not by Frank, but by Friel

PLAY ABOUT MY DAD by Michelle Read

READCO

Project Arts Centre

31 January - 18 February 2006

Directed by Tara Derrington

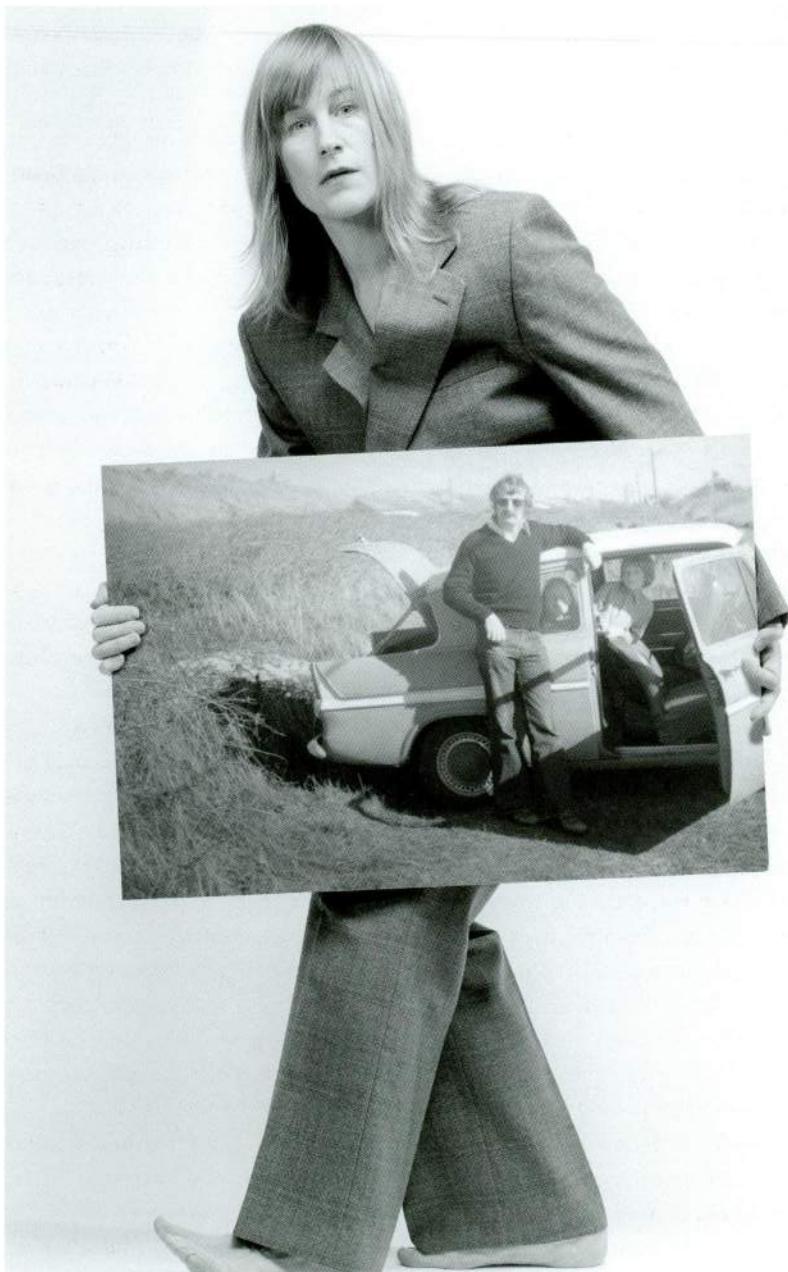
With Michelle Read

Reviewed on 6 February

BY TOM DONEGAN

LOCATED SOMEWHERE BETWEEN art and autobiography, Michelle Read's *Play About My Dad* represents the culmination of an extended creative process inspired by the experience of losing her father, Barry, to cancer in the summer of 1998. Performed as a monologue, the piece skilfully interweaves a broad survey of their relationship with a specific account of how Read responded to his death, offering the audience a revealing discourse on what is conventionally a very private experience.

Contrary to what might be expected of a work with such origins, Read's approach is refreshingly upbeat and informal. Presenting herself "as herself", she quickly establishes a close rapport with the audience, chatting to us as we enter, introducing her crew, and even pausing to have a cup of tea before getting started. This relaxed performance style was greatly facilitated by McNulty's unusual set



Michelle Read in her own Play About My Dad

design, which transformed the Project Cube into an intimate domestic sanctuary: an enclosed, fully carpeted playing space wherein the audience are seated "in the round" on a variety of low-level benches, cushions and arm-chairs. Dissolving conventional boundaries between performer and spectator, such proximity imbued proceedings with a particular quality of collective experience, expertly honed as the action unfolds.

The piece is structured around a series of anecdotes and re-enactments, with Read obviously keen to endear her father's memory to us. Rather than placing him on a pedestal, she injects these recollections with a sense of playfulness, mimicking his thick Norfolk accent and even involving the audience in recreating a boisterous childhood game he particularly disapproved of. A selection of old family photographs projected onto the walls enclosing the space is also employed, allowing her to comment amusingly on his many fashion faux pas. Throughout, Derrington's subtle direction kept Read's energetic presence well distributed around the space.

Interspersed with these amusing vignettes, a second series of recollections sees Read reconstruct the events directly surrounding her father's unexpectedly sudden demise. In contrast to the overall air of joviality, this news is portrayed with a striking eloquence - the premature severing of

their special bond being described as "like the cutting of a cord, the invisible umbilical".

Although at the time this rupture was understandably painful to Read, the passing years have seen a gradual healing of the resulting wound. Turning her attention to this recovery process, Read's tone becomes more philosophical, reflecting on the role of the play itself in helping her to transcend her grief and move forward with her life. Determined that we understand that its purpose is not to "claim death for myself", the discussion draws its final observations in more generalised territory, with this personal journey seen to symbolise the essential truth that for those left behind, the show must go on.

Whether or not we have personally suffered such bereavement ourselves, the universality of the issues at stake in *Play About My Dad* make empathising with Read's situation unavoidable. As the privileged witnesses to this unique project, we too are able to draw renewed strength and insight from her brave decision to share such experiences publicly. Though rooted in pain and loss, this process ultimately affirms the need to celebrate life - a fitting memorial to the father she obviously loved so dearly.

Tom Donegan is a recent graduate of the MPhil programme in Irish Theatre and Film at Trinity College Dublin

WRECKS by Neil LaBute

Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork

23 November – 3 December 2005

Directed by Neil LaBute

With Ed Harris

Reviewed 23 November

BY DIARMUID O'BRIEN

IF YOU GO TO SEE NEIL LABUTE'S new play you'll meet an (every)man who will tell you all about himself. Throughout most of the play, you will be more than satisfied that you know this guy, that you understand him, and can relate to him on many levels. You meet people like him all the time. He is a sincere man of simple pleasures: not too bright, and not exactly eloquent, but he has that gift of slightly bemused insight that many working men obtain. He has struggled through hardships in his life and does not have a single regret. From the very start, you're on his side (he is, after all, in mourning), and nod in sympathy to his every sentiment.

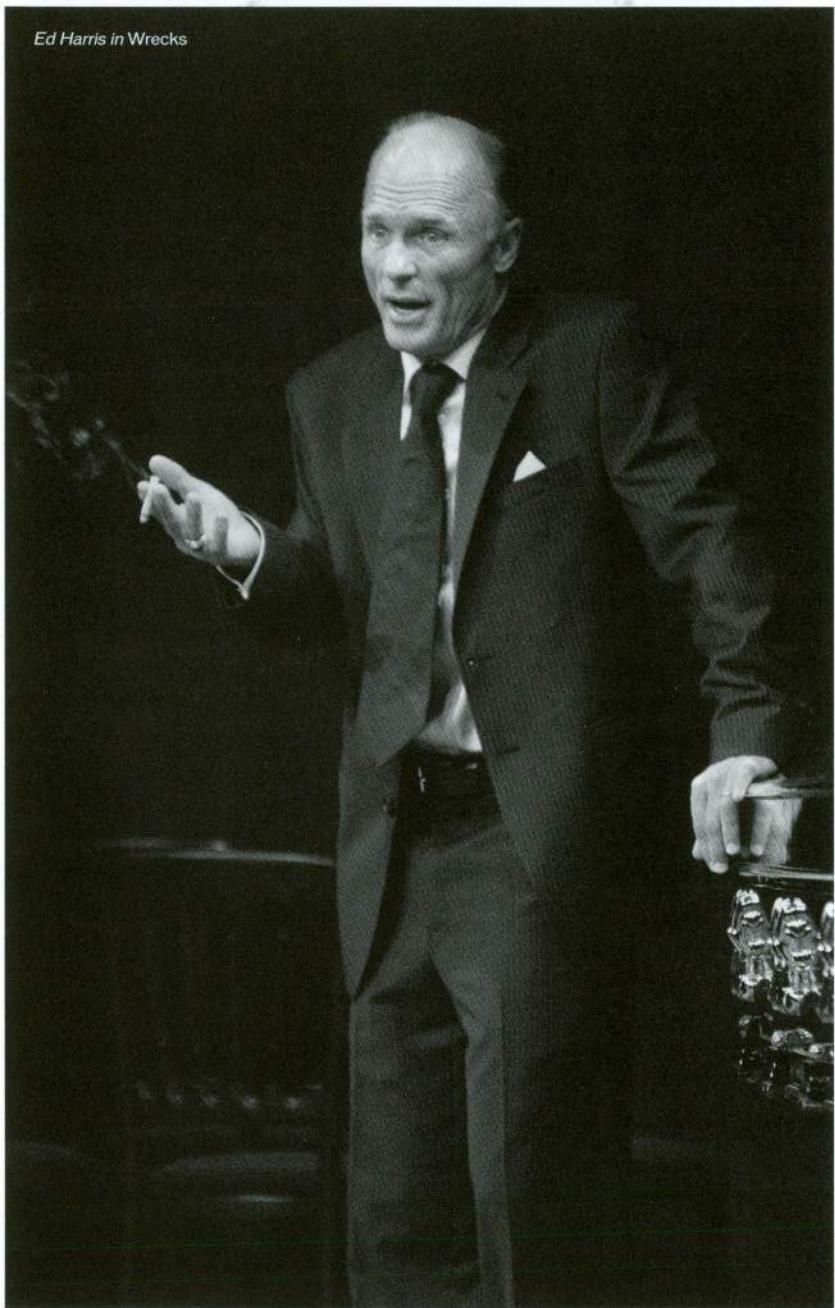
But just over an hour later, when you walk out of the theatre, you'll feel bewildered, overwhelmed, possibly betrayed, and probably disgusted. *Wrecks* is a smart little stealth bomber of a play. It flies beneath your perceptions and ultimately delivers a surgical strike to your sense of judgement. Every little anecdote and tangent that the monologue meanders through is precisely designed to dis-

arm you, to find a way past your conscience and good nature, and to leave you feeling used and complacent in something scandalous. And, worse still, you're not entirely sure anymore if it was actually all that wrong.

Harris plays Edward Carr, a middle-aged Illinois man who has just lost his wife. He is in the funeral parlour at "the viewing" and is apparently giving a speech to the friends and family present. But his thoughts are elsewhere. In fact, they're in the foyer, smoking cigarettes, and confiding in us. He's reluctant at first, and not overly accustomed to talking. He is dismayed by the gratuitously public shows of mourning from the crowd gathered inside. He doesn't understand how they can cry so much in public, like it's a competition. He did cry, he assures us, but at the appropriate and respectful time. His wife died with dignity and extraordinary grace and he is determined to honour that. He begins to tell us the story of her life, his own, how the two became intertwined, and why they should be remembered.

This is the final play of the Everyman's (European City of Culture augmented) 2005 programme and it's a trump card. Writer and director Neil LaBute has cultivated a reputation for charting the uglier side of human nature, so it's all the more alarming to be greeted by such an unsettlingly likeable character.

Ed Harris in Wrecks



Harris has not acted on the stage for nine years, yet he is perfectly at ease in front of an audience in his European, and moreover Corkonian, début. He invests Edward Carr with such resolve and empathy that you want him to keep talking, even when you slowly begin to realise that something is amiss. As the pun in the title suggests, this is a new spin on the Oedipus story, but even if you were aware of that going in, the emotion of the hour is such that the ending cannot but disturb you. In fact you'll actively hate it, and perhaps even, as some of the audience did, outright reject it.

But the strength of Harris' performance is that, after a while, you simply forget he is a world-famous celebrity plying his trade in Cork, and listen only to Edward Carr, the plain man laid bare before you. The story should be a tragedy – it has been for centuries – but Edward Carr doesn't think so, and the audience are left not knowing what to think.

LaBute has crafted a play that doesn't merely strive to engage the audience for a passive hour in that magic space between stage and stalls, but insidiously breaks through and prompts us to cast doubt on our own (hitherto fully developed) sense of conscience.

DANDELIONS by Fiona Looney

Landmark Productions in association with MCD

Olympia Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Michael Caven.

With Dawn Bradfield, Keith Duffy, Pauline

McLynn, Deirdre O'Kane

31 Oct – 19 Nov 2005. Reviewed 8 November

BY KAREN FRICKER

THERE ARE A LOT OF "FIRSTS" associated with this Landmark Productions world premiere: the first play by popular columnist Fiona Looney, the first step by producer Anne Clarke out of the highbrow subsidised realm into the commercial fray, the stage début of Boyzone/Corrie heartthrob Keith Duffy, and – perhaps most remarkably – the first straight play premiered at the 1200-seat Olympia in some 20 years.

But new doesn't necessarily mean progressive. The script itself has a familiar case of first-play underdevelopment, Michael Caven struggles unsuccessfully to bring the varied skill levels of its performers into the same dramatic world, and the audience appears to be attracted largely by the celebrity status of its cast and writer. The collision of these problems results in an evening that ends up communicating some deeply conservative societal values.

The centre of the play is the friendship between Jean (Deirdre O'Kane) and Noirín (Pauline McLynn). The former is a suburban super-mom



Dawn Bradfield in *Dandelions*

happily living her life through and for others, while McLynn's character channels her boredom and distraction through wisecracks and over-identification with her more virtuous friend. This world – of school runs, barely-present husbands (Jean and Noirín's never materialise onstage), and sneaky 11 am glasses of Chablis – is familiar from Looney's *Sunday Tribune* columns and presumably part of what drew a largely female audience to the production. Another major draw was the popularity of the performers, but the two female leads' identity and experience as comediennes is part of what sandbags the production. Egged on by the audience's tendency to laugh at anything

that comes out of McLynn's mouth, a rhythm quickly develops of setup/O'Kane, punchline/McLynn, even when the exchanges are not comic. Neither actress is particularly well prepared to bring off the more serious and emotionally searching aspects of the story as they emerge.

For the equilibrium of the neighbourhood is shaken when Jean's former boyfriend Damien (an under-powered Duffy) and his wife Orla (Dawn Bradfield, excellent as ever) move into the cul-de-sac, bringing with them the rather obvious dramaturgical device of *Secrets From Jean's Past*. Damien was her first love and, we gradually discover, the pair had a sneaky drunken bonk soon

after Jean's marriage, which may make him the unacknowledged father of her elder child, a son. Most interestingly, this emerging plot line causes ructions between Jean and Noirín, forcing the latter to cope with feelings of rejection because Jean never told her about this episode with Damian. This provokes an engaging confrontation between the two women about the responsibilities of friendship, and eventually leads to Noirín making a decisive life change.

More problematic, however, is the story of Jean's interactions with Damian, and the subplot that emerges about Damian and Orla's struggles with parenthood. After years of trying to have a baby, they arrive in the neighbourhood as the new parents of an adopted Vietnamese baby girl. Presumably, Looney gave the child this ethnicity to broach issues about Ireland's newly multicultural status, but more care needed to be taken in the production's depiction of casual racism. Behind Orla's back, Noirín refers to the child as "Miss Saigon" and "A number 27 to go", lines that got the biggest laughs of the night. An exchange between Damian and Orla wondering if their new neighbours are racist seems intended to distance the play from Noirín's epithets, but the potential social comment was lost in the audible buzz in the audience provoked by what was Duffy's first

appearance on stage. By the time Jean, deep in the second act, calls the child "Ho Chi Minh" (to more audience hilarity), it is hard not to feel that the production is furthering racism, not commenting on it.

The resolution of the Jean-Damian subplot furthers the play's xenophobic messages. He becomes convinced that Jean's son is his, and finally proposes – in one of the only scenes that exploits the full expanse of Joe Vanek's elaborate set – that they bin their marriages and get back together. Though uncertain about the child's parentage, Jean nonetheless tells Damian the child is not his and that he should move on with his life. After Orla spots this exchange and apparently mistakes it for a canoodle, we discover in the play's final scene that Orla and Damian have moved out of the neighbourhood. On the one hand, this comes off as an inexperienced playwright's attempt to hustle the source of conflict out of the frame. But it also contributes to a fairly unsavoury portrait of early 21st-century Irish suburban life: the message seems to be that lying is acceptable as long as it services the good of the family unit, which is held up as the implicitly virtuous centre of society; and that difference – including past lives outside the bubble of bourgeois privilege – should be rejected. The overall impression left by the production was of a highly unappealing smugness. ■

DruidClassic

THE YEAR OF THE HIKER

John B Keane

'The theatrical coupling of John B Keane and Druid....has yielded extraordinary riches'

The Irish Examiner

GALWAY: Town Hall Theatre

Tue 9—Sat 20 May 8pm

Previews Fri 5, Sat 6 & Mon 8 May

Matinee Sat 20 May 3pm

Further info and booking:

Town Hall Theatre 091 569777

Directed by GARRY HYNES

Designed by FRANCIS O'CONNOR

WHAT HAPPENS when a man, without a word or gesture, walks out on his wife and young family?
And what happens when that same man, twenty years later, walks back?

The Year of the Hiker is the last in the Druid Keane Trilogy (Sive 2002 and Sharon's Grave 2003 were both critically acclaimed). Directed by Garry Hynes and featuring a stellar Irish cast including Garrett Lombard and members of last year's *DruidSynge* ensemble Sarah-Jane Drummey, Nick Lee, Aaron Monaghan, Eamon Morrissey, Marie Mullen, and Catherine Walsh, this production will run for a limited period.

DUBLIN: Gaiety Theatre

Mon 22 May—Sat 17 June 8pm

Preview Mon 22 May,

Matinee 3pm Saturdays

Further info and booking:

Box Office 01 6771717

www.gaietytheatre.ie

Ticketmaster 0818 719 388

Group Bookings 01 646 86 16





"I can resist anything but temptation"

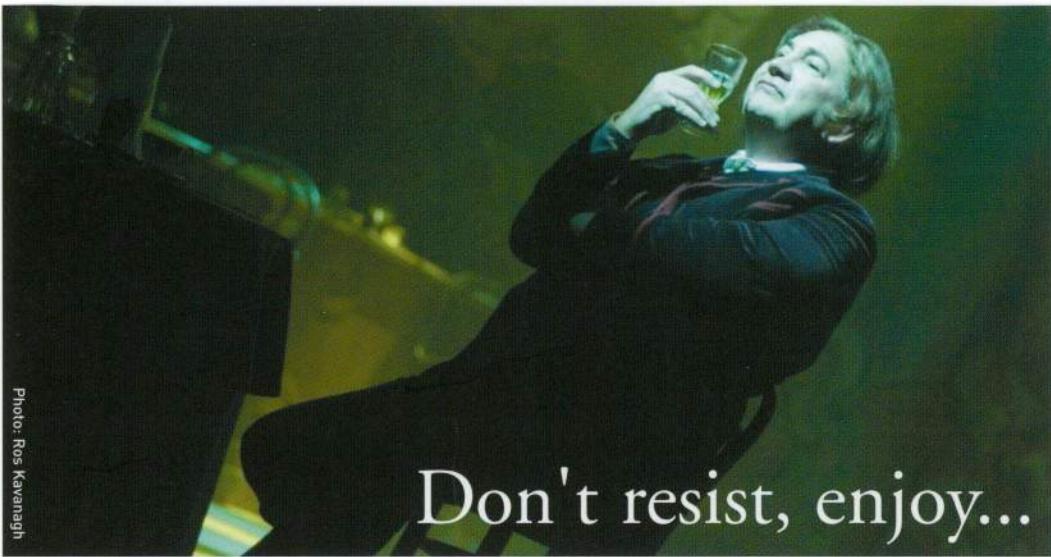


Photo: Ros Kavanagh

AT THE ABBEY

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Directed by

Conall Morrison

Alan Stanford returns as Lady Bracknell in this all male version of Wilde's classic comedy.

Enjoy a summertime theatrical treat with this delicate bubble of fancy!

'Fun and sumptuous' The Guardian

'Genuinely and freshly funny' The Irish Times

8 July - 9 September

Doubt

By John Patrick Shanley

Directed by Gerard Stembridge

Cast includes Brid Brennan

Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Drama & Tony Award for Best New Play

A thrilling play about the nature of faith.

'Inspired and extraordinary' The New York Times

'A gripping mystery' Time Out New York

21 October - 25 November

AT THE PEACOCK

Blue/Orange

By Joe Penhall

Directed by Annabelle Comyn

Cast: George Costigan, Emmanuel Ighodaro, Christopher Staines

A witty and provocative play about race, power, madness and the health service.

Blue/Orange is one of the most important and influential British plays of the last 10 years and concludes the Abbey's successful 4X4 season of new writing and contemporary classic drama at the Peacock.

'I came out of Joe Penhall's new play in a state of hot, black excitement: emotional, intellectual, moral excitement. How many plays can claim that much?' Sunday Times

16 June - 15 July

Booking: 01 87 87 222

www.abbeytheatre.ie



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