

# irishtheatre

VOLUME FOUR, NUMBER SEVENTEEN WINT

GAZINE



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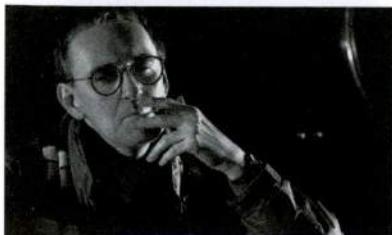
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**ON THE COVER:** Daphne Strothman and Milos Galko in the Fabulous Beast/Dublin Theatre Festival production of *Giselle*. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.

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THE CONTENT IN THIS MAGAZINE IS SOLELY THE OPINION OF THE AUTHORS AND NOT NECESSARILY OF THE EDITORS.



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# The next 100 years

**N**EXT YEAR IS AN HISTORIC ONE FOR Irish theatre. The founding of the National Theatre Society Limited a century ago marked the birth of Irish theatre as we know it, and helped spark the movement towards national solidarity that resulted in the founding of the state.

To celebrate its Centenary, the Abbey Theatre has announced a full year of programming, including productions, tours, readings, talks, and exhibitions. Despite the insistence in its launch materials, however, that the Centenary, among other things, celebrates the "future" of Irish theatre, the programme is both conservative and old-guard, focussed on building up the Abbey "brand" world-wide and on bolstering the status of already-established writers, directors, and designers. While honouring the canon is an important function of a national theatre, the extent to which this is prioritised over the production of new scripts in the Centenary is startling: only five new plays are part of the Centenary programme, none on the

No corrective to the chronic dominance of male writers and directors in Irish theatre is offered; only two of the Centenary playwrights receiving full productions, and three of the directors, are women.

main stage. No corrective to the chronic dominance of male writers and directors in Irish theatre is offered; only two of the Centenary playwrights receiving full productions, and three of the directors, are women. Nor does the Centenary acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the National Theatre and the wider Irish theatre community.

As our commemoration of this historic year, *irish theatre magazine* will cast its net wide, to take the pulse of the Irish theatre community as it faces its next century. Our next four issues will include an ongoing series of contributions by Irish theatre workers, offering their views on what they'd most like to celebrate about contemporary Irish theatre, and

what they think our top priorities should be for the next 100 years. Expect to hear from us: or jump the queue and contact us directly with your ideas! This series will run alongside full coverage of Abbey Centenary productions and events.

The next century begins now!



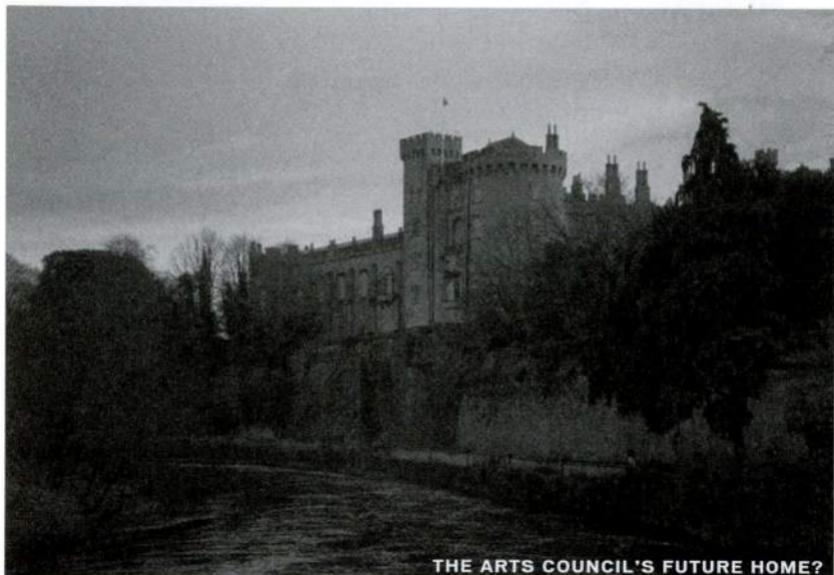
# Moving the Mafia

**T**HE KILKENNY KLAN? IT DOESN'T QUITE HAVE THE SAME RING as the Merrion Square Mafia, admittedly. Nicknames, however, are the least of the Arts Council's worries as the Government's sweeping decentralisation programme aims to relocate over 10,000 public servants and eight departments to provincial locations. The Arts Council has been earmarked for the beautiful medieval city of Kilkenny, noted

for its arts, crafts, and comedy festivals; and famous for its 12th century Norman castle, 17th century resistance to English persecution, and later renown as a prodigious brewing centre.

Curiously, no particular reason has yet been provided for the intended move to Kilkenny, which, according to controversial plans announced by Finance Minister Charlie McCreevy in Budget 2004, will welcome the Council and its employees within three years. Meanwhile, the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism is to relocate to Killarney, in Minister John O'Donoghue's native Kerry — 122 miles away.

Although the Arts Council had yet to respond to the intended move at the time of going to press, a source in the organisation spoke of shock generated by the announcement. As the Council continues to adjust following an 18-month process of restructuring, the source told *itm* that the move may disrupt the running of the organisation further if employees with families prove reluctant to relocate, or outside service contacts become difficult to replace. "This isn't McDonald's," said the source over the potential loss of staff, "continuity is important." In a hurriedly arranged meeting of Arts Council mem-



THE ARTS COUNCIL'S FUTURE HOME?

bers of the State and Related Agencies branch of SIPTU, 12 of 14 attendees voted against the move, with two abstaining.

Patrick Sutton, a continuing member of the Arts Council, director of the Gaiety School of Acting, and PR consultant to An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was more sanguine about Fianna Fail's initiative. "I think it's fantastic!" said Sutton, who will remain domiciled in Dublin. "It's a great opportunity for young people to make a career at the Arts Council, in a place where they can afford to buy a house and live. Prices in Dublin are punitive." Sutton says he is unsure what will happen to employees who are unwilling to move, however — transfers are on a voluntary basis, and no objectors will be sacked. Whether promotions might be jeopardised, however, is harder to safeguard.

"If we have to go, [Kilkenny] is a good choice," admitted the source, "but the timing and handling of the announcement is bad." The three-year timeframe for total decentralisation has already been deemed unrealistic, but an implementation committee has been established to drive the scheme forward. The Arts Council declined to comment on the matter, saying such comment would be premature.

#### NORTHERN BUILDING BLUES

The Lyric Theatre's quest to raise £12 million to rebuild at its Ridgeway Street location (see Paula McFetridge's article, page 14) faced a new challenge at press time. On 8 December, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) announced four building awards to organisations including the Crescent Arts Centre (£1.2 million) and the Lyric, which received

## what's news

the largest grant of £2 million. This figure, however, fell well below the Lyric's request to the Council and is, according to the theatre, "profoundly inadequate" to its needs. "The Lyric has been warning of the dangers of under-funding since the early 1990s," says chairman David Johnston. "The message has now become more stark — the theatre will be forced to close within the next two years if it is not rebuilt... The people of Belfast and Northern Ireland deserve better." ACNI CEO Roisin McDonagh said that the Council was disappointed that the Lyric had chosen to respond so negatively: "The Arts Council is concerned with the quality of the arts and with their accessibility to people right across Northern Ireland. Organisations should take heart from the fact the Council is prepared to place such large amounts of public funding at their disposal, and remember that they also have a responsibility to secure funding from the wide variety of sources available to them." Lottery funding has been

## Project Greenlight

If the 28 awards recently made in the Arts Council's project funding scheme (chosen from 220 applications), the four drama recipients are Gare St Lazare Players, Púca Puppets, Quare Hawks, and the Performance Corporation, receiving between €18,000 and €22,000 each. The fruits of their endeavours should be seen next year.

instrumental in theatre rebuilding projects across the UK, argues the Lyric; the Royal Court in London, for example, received 73% of its £28.8 million total refurbishment costs from the Lottery, while the Cambridge Arts Theatre received 70% of its £10.5 total. By contrast the ACNI's offer to the Lyric constitutes only 17% of the estimated total bill for the rebuild.



FORCED TO CLOSE? THE LYRIC



THE NOTTARA PRODUCTION OF *EDEN*

#### THE WAITING GAME

As has been widely reported (and celebrated), the Arts Council received a 19% increase on last year in the government Budget for 2004. €52.5 million has been allotted for the arts in 2004. Also rich cause for celebration was the much-lobbied-for retention of Section 481 tax incentives for foreign film investment in Ireland. A special €3.9 million was allotted for cultural programming around Ireland's cultural presidency of the EU during the first six months of 2004 (Janice McAdam is the programme manager and Siobhán Colgan is PR manager for the EU presidency cultural programme, under the aegis of arts advisor to Minister O'Donoghue, Fiach MacConghail). At press time, the Council was deliberating on its 2004 funding decisions, which will be announced

just before Christmas. Tick... tick... tick...

#### THE ROMANIAN CONNECTION, PART DEUX

Catherine Boothman reported in *itm* issue 16 about growing links between Irish and Romanian theatre practitioners, focussing on a recent trip of an envoi of Irish theatre folk to the Sibiu Festival. Further evidence of this growing exchange materialised this autumn in the form of a reading series at Bucharest's ACT Theatre in November: Gerry Stembridge's *The Gay Detective*, Conor McPherson's *Port Authority*, Malachy McKenna's *Tillsonburg*, and Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*, all in Romanian translations by Andrei Marinescu (a participant in this year's *itm* international theatre critics' forum — see page 22), were read as part of the Bucharest Festival. In addi-

# what's news

tion, an unrelated full production of Marinescu's translation of *Eden*, by the Nottara Theatre, was also staged during the Bucharest Festival.

## LET'S STAGE AN IRISH PLAY DOT COM

Theatre Shop launched the first phase of its ambitious Playography Project, when the on-line database of each new Irish drama professionally staged since 1975 went live on 9 December. To search for plays by writer, company, performers, cast size, and a myriad other methods, visit their site at [www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com).

## UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

Abbeyonehundred — the Abbey's centenary celebrations — sees Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* soldiering on until 24 Jan. Teatr Rozmaitosci (Warsaw)'s production of *Festen* visits from 28-31 Jan, before Patrick Mason directs Tom Murphy's new version of *The Cherry Orchard* (12 Feb-13 Mar). Budapest's Vígszínház breeze through with their wordless play, *Dances in Time* (17-20 Mar), whereupon Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (after *Antigone*) plays from 31 Mar-1 May. Meanwhile, back at the Peacock, Paula Meehan's *The Wolf of Winter* continues until 17 Jan, followed by Peter Sheridan's *Finders Keepers* (28 Jan-6 Mar) and Stuart Carolan's *Defender of the Faith* (16 Mar-24 Apr). For more details about abbeyonehundred and its full programme visit [www.abbeytheatre.ie](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie)

In a co-production with Lyric FM, Fishamble's opera-inspired radio-dramas air weekly from 24 Dec-11 Jan, featuring work by Joseph O'Connor, Michael West, Gavin Kostick, and Stella Feehily. Jim

## Up Cork

The Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork has several projects in train to "provide a catalyst for the generation and development of new writing for the theatre in Cork." The theatre has named three young theatre artists as new writing associates: playwright/director Oonagh Kearney and directors Tom Creed and Thomas Conway. Their New Voices at the Everyman Palace Theatre programme seeks to discover, develop, and present new plays from emerging writers for rehearsed public readings and full-scale productions. Plays for the first round of New Voices should be submitted to the Everyman before 28 May 2004. Next year the NT Shell Connections festival (usually held in the Lyric, Belfast) takes place in the Everyman. Commissioning 10 new plays a year, the project invites youth theatre groups to the festival in May 2004, with hopes for a larger festival and an Irish commission in 2005. Finally, in association with Cork City of Culture 2005, the Everyman will commission a new play for a full-scale production on the main stage in late 2005. For further information contact Tom Creed at the Everyman Palace Studio on (021) 455-7827 or email [tcreed@eircom.net](mailto:tcreed@eircom.net).

Culleton then returns to the stage with *Tadhg Stray Wandered In*, a new play by Michael Collins, running 22 Mar-10 Apr at Project's Cube... *The Star Catcher* by Cahoots NI continues at the Lyric until



JANE EYRE

Jan 3, with Conor McPherson's *The Weir* to follow in a production by Fiona Buffini (31 Jan-28 Feb)... Storytellers Theatre Company see out the year in the Civic Theatre with a revival of Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's version of *Hansel and Gretel*, closing on 10 Jan. Observatory Lane follow with Charles Richards's *Lonely Hearts* from 26 Jan-7 Feb. Next at the theatre is Willy Russell's *Shirley Valentine* (9-14 Feb) in a production by the Machine in association with Scott Rellis productions... Graffiti undertake a primary school tour of Enda Walsh's *Fishy Tales* from 2 Feb-2 Apr... Meridian's site-specific new work, *Croon*, a collaboration between Johnny Hanrahan and visual artist Daphne Wright, runs from 3-8 Feb in Cork; audiences are asked to assemble

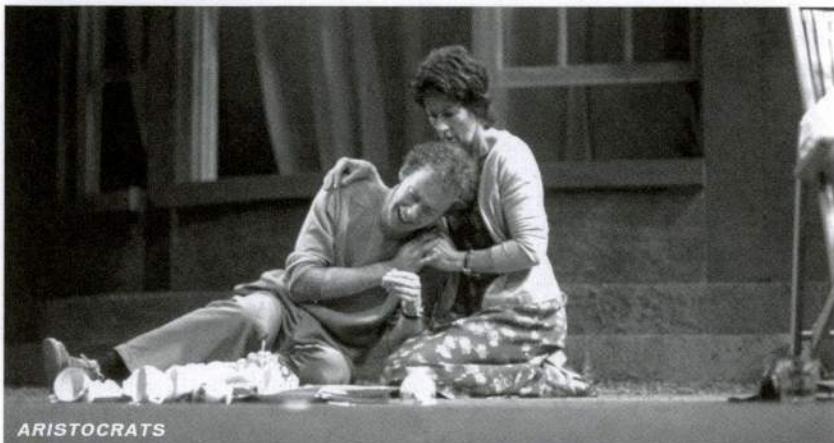
TOM LAWLER

at the Everyman Palace box office.

Anne Clarke's new company, Landmark Productions, launches with the Irish premiere of David Hare's *Skylight* at Project Upstairs from 17 Jan-7 Feb, with a short Irish tour to follow... At the Gate, *Jane Eyre* continues until the end of January, pending audience demand, followed by Joe Dowling's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, running from 19 Feb into Apr...

The first play in DRUIDSYNGE, the long-awaited Synge cycle from Druid Theatre Company, will be *The Playboy of the Western World*, which hits the boards at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway (6-21 Feb) before transferring to Dublin's Gaiety from 23 Feb-20 Mar, followed by a west coast tour... The Gaiety also hosts

## what's news



**ARISTOCRATS**

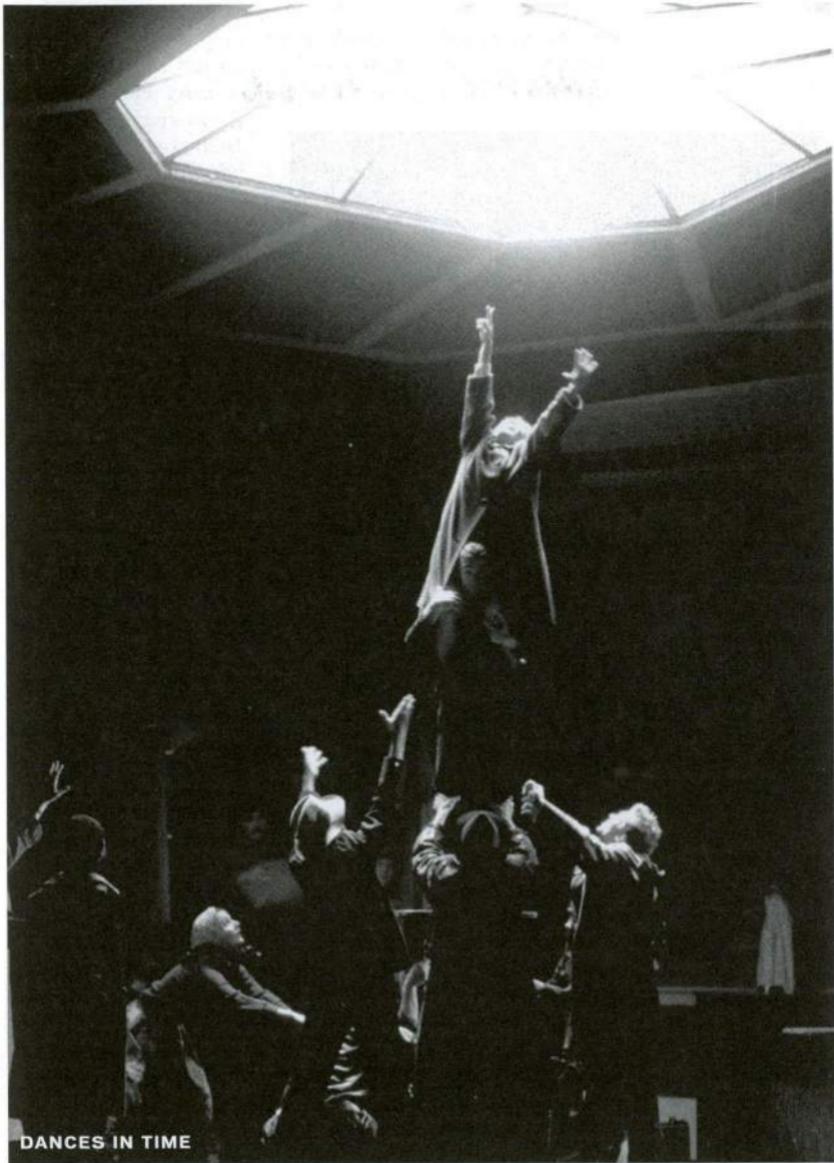
ART NI's production of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (16-21 Feb), directed by Adrian Dunbar. Produced by a consortium of Northern Irish venues, the production opens on 29 Jan at the Millennium Forum, Derry, and tours NI, the Republic, and the UK... Next from Big Telly is *The Thief*, a multi-media comedy by Zoe Seaton, Paul McEneaney, and Paul Boyd, touring from 23 Feb-27 Mar...

Harvesting fruit from their Seeds project, Rough Magic stage Gerald Murphy's *Take Me Away* and Ioanna Anderson's *Words of Advice for Young People* from 11 Feb-13 Mar in Project Upstairs. Directed by Lynne Parker and Philip Howard respectively, each play will be performed for three evenings each week and then together on Saturdays... Red Kettle Theatre Company return to Garter Lane Theatre with a new Jimmy Murphy play, *The Castlecomer Jukebox*, directed by Jim Nolan (9 Feb-6 Mar). The play tours nationwide from 8 Mar-8 May; an excerpt appears on page 92 of this issue.

Island Theatre Company and Glor co-

## Critics' Progress

**R**eports on various aspects of *irish theatre magazine*'s Critical Engagement week, held during the Dublin Theatre and Fringe Festivals in October, appear throughout this magazine (see pages 22-47 and 82-93). A further exciting development from the conference will be the publication, in late 2004, of a special issue of the Canadian theatre journal *Modern Drama* dedicated to proceedings from the Conditions of Criticism academic symposium. The issue will be co-edited by *itm* editor in chief Karen Fricker and Trinity School of Drama head Brian Singleton, under the general editorship of Ric Knowles, himself a participant in the Conditions of Criticism weekend.



DANCES IN TIME

## what's news

produce Brian Friel's *Lovers*, running in the Ennis venue from 2-7 Feb before a regional tour that concludes with a week in the Belltable from Feb 23... Replay will tour *Flaming Fables* by Mary McNally from 5 Feb-2 Apr... Galloglass will stage *The Desert Lullaby* by Jennifer Johnston in the last week of Feb at the Parochial Hall Theatre, Clonmel, before undertaking a four-week nationwide tour... City Arts Centre's Civil Arts Inquiry ends in Mar with Irish Modern Dance Theatre's *Station* (a site-specific work to take place in a Dublin train station)... Barnstorm's spring production will be *Digger, Doc and Dee Dee* by Maeve Ingoldsby, adapted from *Bella, Boss und Bulli* by Volker Ludwig; it will play in the Watergate, Kilkenny in Feb

before a national tour... Next from Tinderbox is *Revenge* by Michael Duke, opening in the Assembly Rooms (aka the Northern Bank Building) in Belfast (22 Mar-3 Apr), and touring to the Derry Playhouse (5-10 Apr), and other venues before ending at Project Upstairs (3-8 May).

Next from Blue Raincoat comes Michael Harding's *Is There Balm in Gilead* based on the story by Edgar Allan Poe, running from 3-13 Mar... Pan Pan's latest theatrical experiment will combine opera, dance, and Shakespeare "specifically the way we are fed it in school" when *Mac-Beth7* premieres in Project in April. Billed as a "reaction," not a version, of Shakespeare, the production will then tour.



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The Arts Council needs to set the bar higher in its funding requests to government, argues Theatre Forum CEO **TANIA BANOTTI**.

**T**HE SPIEGELTENT WAS THE VENUE for Theatre Forum's campaign launch on 7 October. We published the economic analysis which formed our pre-budget submission. This signalled the start of a major effort before Budget Day. Our campaign had a number of angles: a newspaper advertising and billboard campaign aimed at raising awareness with the general public; a concerted letter-writing campaign by members and Theatre Forum itself, with follow up one-on-one meetings with TDs and Senators; a presentation by Garry Hynes, Johnny Hanrahan and myself to the Dáil Arts Committee, ahead of the Arts Council's own appearance; and trying to get our message across in more unusual places such as *Business and Finance* magazine, local radio, etc.

The public briefing by the Arts Council on their budget submission indicated that the Arts Plan will undergo a mid-term review next year. But as someone newly arrived on the scene, I was

astonished to see the funding commitments of the original plan have been unceremoniously chucked, in advance of the review. In this year's submission, the Arts Council has already asked for a large reduction on the level of funding required in 2004, 2005, and 2006.

On the one hand, the Council stated that demand for their support could

reach 72 million in 2004, and logic would suggest that this demand will only increase. On the other hand, it reduced the funding sought from government in 2005 and 2006.

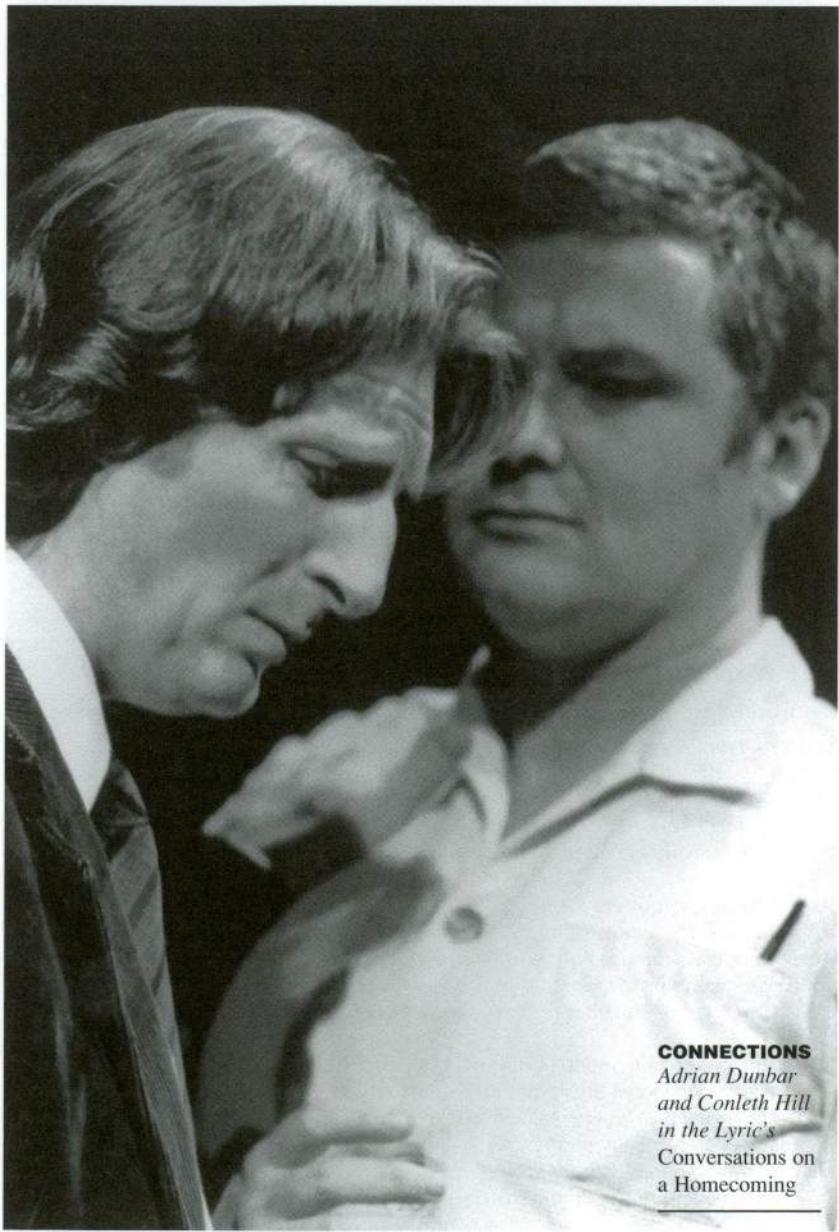
My concern is that the Council is setting its sights too low. We in the performing arts community need to set our sights higher and demand greater support. The funding cuts of 4 million in 2003 represented an insignificant saving in the overall finances of the country. However, they resulted in a cut to the performing arts of 3.25 million, and precipitated a reversal of development and a very real state of crisis that placed many companies in a precarious position.

The sum of 53 million is infinitesimal in the overall Exchequer finances. It's the equivalent of 4 kilometres of motorway

	2004	2005	2006
Funding required under the original Arts Plan 2002-2006	€61.8	€70.6	€79.8
Minimum funding the Arts Council requested in October 2003 for future years	€53.6	€57.6	€61.0
Percentage reduction in demand	-13%	-18%	-24%

— and for this the public enjoys a huge variety of work spanning theatre, dance opera, music, support for individual artists, and arts festivals of all kinds around the country.

We must be braver, more ambitious and more confident in our approach to both government and the public when seeking support.



**CONNECTIONS**

*Adrian Dunbar  
and Conleth Hill  
in the Lyric's  
Conversations on  
a Homecoming*

CHRIS HILL

# Whose Story Are We Telling?

**W**

In the last of our series asking

"What is Irish theatre about?",

**PAULA McFETRIDGE**, artistic director of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, argues for a renewed focus on the relationship between audiences and theatres.

ITHIN IRISH THEATRE AT PRESENT, ONE OF OUR MAIN concerns should be relevance; we need to constantly reassess the role of theatre within our society. Theatre audiences have been declining for the past four years. There are numerous possible reasons for this: more options for escapism, less disposable income — or perhaps arts providers haven't kept abreast of audience needs? Are we offering a diverse, balanced range of work which audiences old and new want to see? Do we have a clear idea of what currently attracts capacity audiences? I think one of the pitfalls of such interrogation is that we tend to underestimate an audience's needs and jump to conclusions about what we perceive to be best for them.

I ask myself these questions with each production I programme at the Lyric Theatre. On numerous occasions over the past 30 months I have thought my choices were right, only to be proven wrong. My sole remit is to present high-quality productions that entertain, stimulate imaginations, and provoke informed discussions, while never forgetting the context in which the Lyric produces. The Lyric is the only producing theatre in the north of Ireland, situated on the banks of the Lagan, in a neutral area of Belfast, with a 50-year history. It is our job to provide theatre year-

round for a diverse audience that complements the output of other local arts providers.

Over the past two years the priority for the Lyric has been to develop a new audience, while satisfying our regulars. Within that time we have increased our audience from 27% to 79% of capacity. There are numerous reasons for this success. I believe there is now a stronger communication between this theatre and audiences or would-be audiences, through increased education and outreach initiatives, re-assessment of marketing tools, and the profile of the theatre within local and national press. The Lyric has striven to give ownership of the venue back to its audience. For example, we no longer pump money into posters and fliers, but rather concentrate on marketing tools which infiltrate the community such as back-of-bus advertising and billboards. Furthermore, a lot of our audience development is done through direct mail — we strive to identify the target audience for each production and contact them directly.

There is no point in telling our audience they will enjoy or relate to everything the Lyric produces; we simply guarantee quality, and assist patrons in their selection of a first theatrical experience through our print material. If we get it right, only then can we encourage them to take a risk and venture out to experience a production they previously would never have dreamt of attending. There is an element of trust to this. It is also important that the Lyric does not produce what it perceives to be populist work on an ongoing basis; rather, within our year-round programme we must allow for its inclusion — balance is the key both in terms of available product and financial risk.

There isn't a large, year-round theatre-going public in the north. Friends' schemes and pre-booking are limited, so cash flow is always in jeopardy; word of mouth is how we sell most of our seats. In this regard, the language we use to define, promote, and discuss our work is extremely important. As a person who enjoys going to live sporting events, there is nothing to be lost in looking to how sports providers have nurtured the huge increase in the profile of sport in Ireland over recent years. Theatre, like sport, is a communal event, unique every time the curtain rises; the spectator has a vital role to play in creating an atmosphere within the arena; both are inclusive and generate an emotional reaction. We need to promote theatre on these terms. The media has played a considerable role in the promotion of sport within the public domain; I think the arts community and funders have a responsibility to remind the media of the relevance of theatre, and the intrinsic role that the media can play in its development.

In the north the need for theatre to reconnect with audiences is probably more pronounced than elsewhere in Ireland — we have

Theatre, like sport, is a communal event, unique every time the curtain rises; the spectator has a vital role to play in creating an atmosphere within the arena.



been understandably preoccupied with other events for the past 35 years (and we are not out of the woods yet). The arts have not been high on the social and political agenda in the north, and were rarely talked about within the marbled halls of government. We need to find a language to quantify and qualify the impact of the arts which the powers-that-be can grasp. The proactive role of theatre is considerably magnified within a divided culture. Theatre can inform individuals, ask difficult questions, and challenge pre-conceived ideas in a safe, neutral environment across the spectrum better than any politician or media representative can.

If, as a theatre producer, I cannot see the connection, no matter how convoluted, between a play's subject matter and the day-to-day experiences of Lyric audiences, then I find it difficult to justify its production. For example, Marie Jones' *The Blind Fiddler* (which premiered at the Lyric in June 2003) played to capacity audiences, and many would consider its choice purely populist and governed by "bums-on-seats." But it had important points to make, and it was absolutely right that the Lyric, rather than an external producer, staged it. It spoke to audiences in the north first

#### **CONNECTING TO AUDIENCES**

*Frank  
McGuinness' The  
Factory Girls at  
the Lyric*

and foremost because of its subject matter. As well as being entertained, audiences were reminded that we perceive our abnormal social experiences as normal. There is the added advantage that a play by Marie Jones motivates a diverse, traditionally non-theatregoing public to attend. The challenge is to get them to revisit. In her play, Marie approached cultural issues differently than, say, Gary Mitchell or Owen McCafferty might have, but she addressed them in her own distinctive way.

The regular exchange of work can only serve to improve the standard of theatre production across the island, increase contract length for practitioners, increase employment possibilities, and encourage audiences new and old to broaden their perception of the artform.

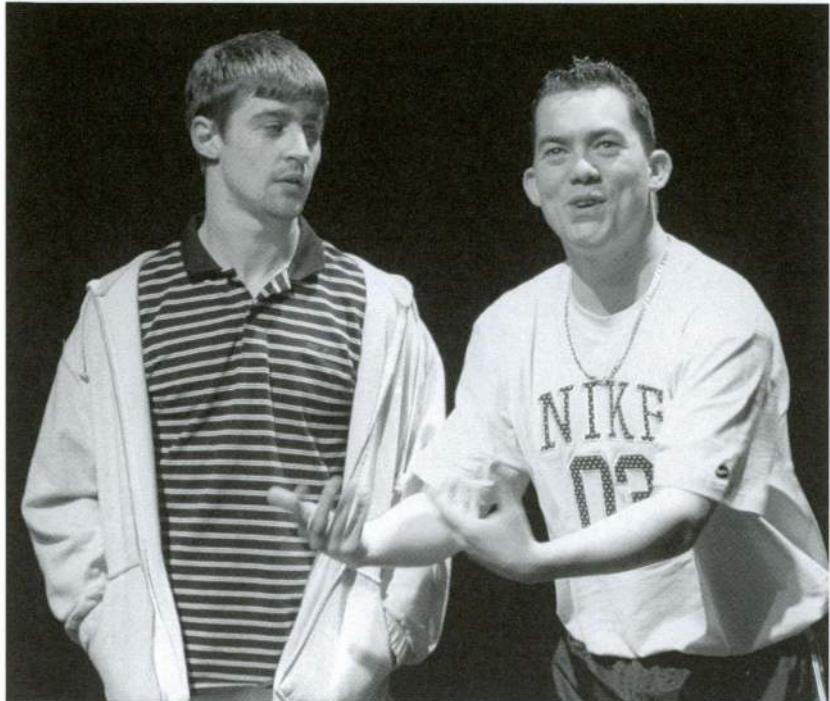
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Another programming choice I am often asked about is Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*, which we produced at the Lyric in May 2002, and which then played in the Dublin Theatre Festival and at Cork Opera House. As well as introducing northern audiences to the work of one of our greatest living playwrights, I believe this play (set in east Galway during the early 1970s) encouraged local audiences to re-examine personal perceptions of how southerners viewed our situation. On one occasion Liam, the John Wayne-loving rural businessman, tells how his childhood friends had considered marching on the north to "shoot (us) a few Prods," given the way "the Catholics were being treated." The impact of such a statement in Belfast was fairly explosive; whereas Dublin audiences viewed it quite passively, and Cork audiences found it humorous.

On the night of our opening, in February 2003, of Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *The Belfast Telegraph* ran a cover story picturing Ulster boys going off to fight in Iraq; and the loyalist feud was still a daily news item. The timing of the production could not have had more relevance. It will be very different when produced on the banks of the Liffey in 2004, as part of the Abbey's Centenary. Context — both geographical and in terms of timing — informs reaction.

The bulk of theatre produced in the north of Ireland is narrative-driven; apart from the work of renowned independent company Kabosh, there is little experimentation with form. There are numerous possible reasons for this: there is a small pool of local practitioners, a serious lack of theatre spaces in which work can be presented, and the current funding situation does not encourage risk-taking or experimentation. There needs to be more money made available for innovative projects that are given the right to fail; this is the only way in which we broaden the skills base of existing talent and expose northern audiences to a range of theatrical styles.

It is also a shame that there isn't a regular exchange of high-quality work north and south. There is a lack of viable receiving venues in Belfast, while there are regional receiving venues without a programming budget. This is exacerbated by the difference in currency: it is increasingly difficult for southern venues to afford northern companies, while northern companies cannot



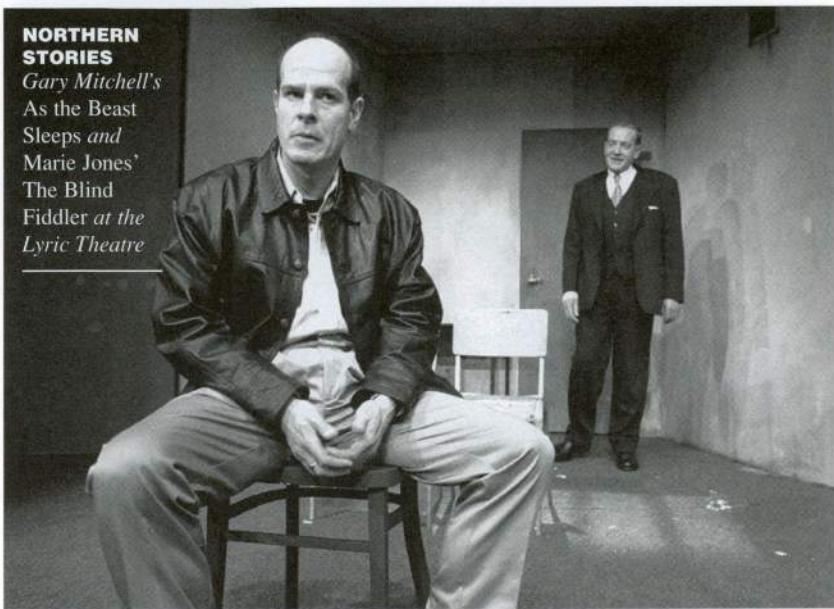
afford to take a cut in venue guarantees and fees. The regular exchange of work can only serve to improve the standard of theatre production across the island, increase contract length for practitioners, increase employment possibilities, and encourage audiences new and old to broaden their perception of the art-form. There is the possibility of north/south co-productions, and a long-term partnership is planned for the Lyric and the Peacock in Dublin, but the financial strain imposed by the difference in currency cannot be underestimated.

Despite my grumblings, I am fairly positive about the future of Irish theatre. Over the next few years, a lot is going to depend on the resources put into infrastructure, particularly in Belfast. The Grand Opera House has received a grant to expand and build a second space. It will be interesting to see what happens with the proposed multi-purpose arts facility in the city centre, and the subsequent repercussions for the Old Museum and Crescent Arts Centres. The Lyric is patiently awaiting a decision from a lottery application to build a new theatre on-site in 2005. As well as improved facilities backstage and front of house, the new design will include a larger

**NEW  
NORTHERN  
WRITING**  
*Owen  
McCafferty's  
Scenes from the  
Big Picture at the  
Royal National  
Theatre.*

**NORTHERN  
STORIES**

Gary Mitchell's  
As the Beast  
Sleeps and  
Marie Jones'  
The Blind  
Fiddler at the  
Lyric Theatre



CHRIS HILL

main auditorium, and a studio space that will allow us to experiment with programming and develop new writing, as well as increase our youth, education and outreach initiatives.

The frightening thing is that the Lyric is constantly being told there is a limited pot of money for capital projects — how can a theatre scene in the north thrive and develop without a producing house? The Lyric is the only year-round employer of indigenous practitioners. Without it the talent drain will not only continue but increase — over the past two years the Lyric has offered contracts to young, newly-graduated practitioners on every production, and there have been young directors on placement for every production. This must continue. There is a huge community arts sector in the north, and a thriving amateur drama movement; Queen's University offers a theatre degree; the Belfast Institute offers national and higher national diplomas in performing arts; nearly every school in the north offers drama at GCSE and/or A-Level. We are instilling a love of the arts in the younger generation, but we must provide them with opportunities to observe indigenous role models, to experience classical texts in their own dialect, and to witness plays that speak directly to them. Otherwise, we will generate talent which will have no outlet.

Recently there have been several promising developments within the northern theatre community: Mick Duke has been appointed artistic director of Tinderbox, and already he has managed to secure three-year funding for the development of new writing. John Botteley, the new theatre director at the Grand Opera House, is keen to open the doors to local practitioners, and has plans to produce work in the future. Simon Magill has taken over as arts programmer for the NTL Studio at the Waterfront Hall, where he hopes to increase the quantity of high-quality theatre available. I also believe new Ulster theatre voices will emerge over the coming years: we are entering a new stage in our political development, there are numerous stories still to tell, and the ability is there to tell them. The arts community in the north is galvanised, with regular communication being assisted through organisations like the Theatre Producers Group and ART NI, and initiatives like the Belfast Arts Lobby.

The next two or three years will see massive changes in the theatre in the north. It took us a year to recover from the failure of the 2008 Capital of Culture bid. We learned something from that experience. We were bruised but we're recovering. It will be interesting to look back in a few years' time and say, did we grab the bull by the horns? Have we moved forward? We have something unique: we have a backdrop and a story to tell that no one else can tell. The world is looking to us at the minute. It is a unique opportunity to produce distinctive theatre.



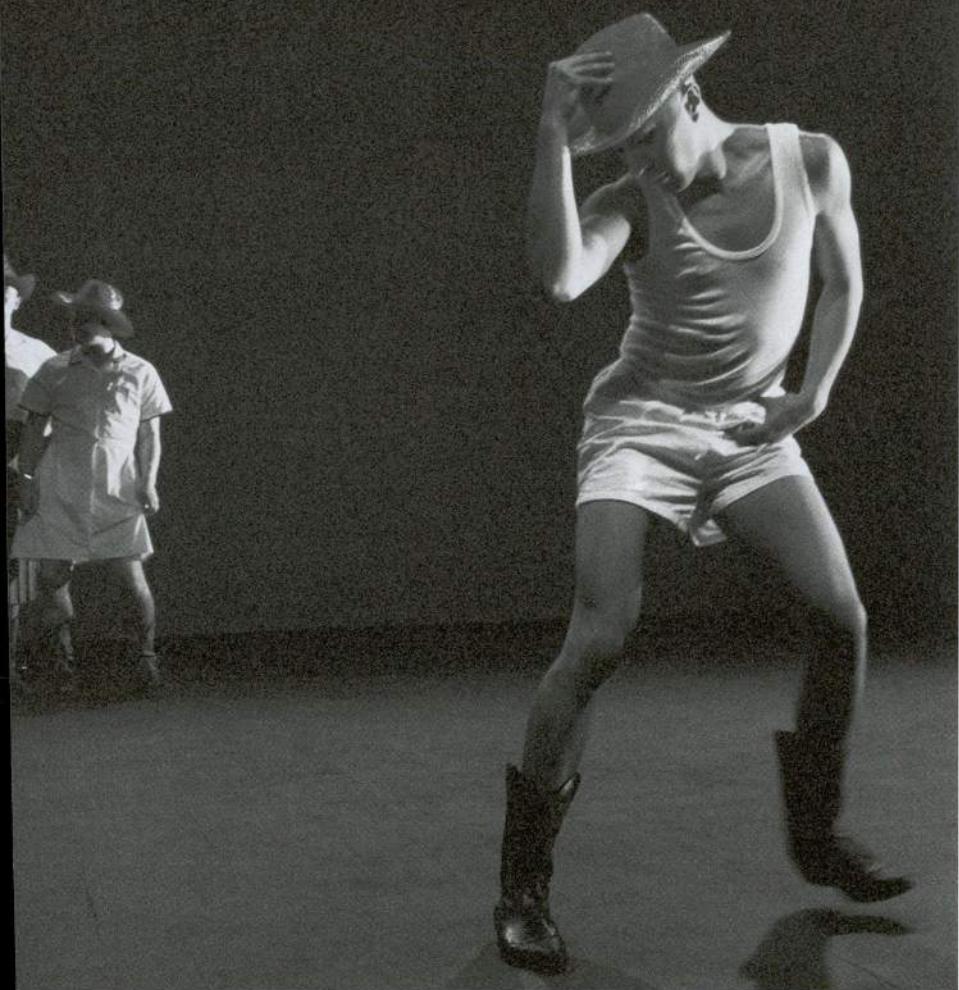
# International Insights

**T**HE FOURTH ANNUAL IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE international critics' forum was held on 6 October 2003 at the Liberty Hall Centre in Dublin. Four critics offered their views on productions in the Dublin Theatre Festival and ESB Dublin Fringe Festival. Here's an edited transcript.

**LUZ EMILIA AGUILAR ZINSER** (theatre critic, Mexico City, Mexico): I spent a year in Dublin 25 years ago, and I spent most of my time here going to the theatre. What amazed me was the power that theatre could have to build a nation. I come from a country that is many nations in one — there is no shared identity between certain communities of Mexico. But Ireland is a small country with shared cultural roots, that was built very much through and around theatre. Then, of course, the city and the country were extremely different to how they are now; now what you have is a cosmopolitan country and city where you find people from Asia, from Mexico, from other parts of Europe. The effect this has had on Irish identity came up in several productions — in *Giselle*, and in *Hurl*, which is about the integration of other identities into that identity. It's the building of an Irish identity in which there is a language with a world.

In *Giselle* this becomes especially interesting in the building of the theatrical language, because it's not only about testing the boundaries of Irish identity but also about testing the boundaries of dance and theatre. In *Giselle* I saw reflected some of the things that Ireland is facing, and saw a kind of reinvention of identity, and not just in an internalised way or in terms of a fight with the English. Ireland is not building an identity against something, but trying to build bridges to something — that's a very powerful thing.

ROIS KAVANAGH



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**BRIAN SINGLETON** (Head, School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin): I thought *Giselle* did just that. What was interesting for me is that having looked at so many shows in the past week, from 1930s rural Ireland right through to a very contemporary working class Dublin play, what struck me about Irish identity is the insertion now of agents of change — of characters who come in and disrupt and force people to look at themselves. If you look at *Hurl*, there are so many people in that play who have come in and forced a disruption and a re-seeing of the self; in *Giselle* you have, as happens also in the classic ballet, the character of Albrecht who arrives in the fictional town of Ballyfeeney and disrupts all sorts of behaviours. He teaches everyone line dancing — something in which you don't touch — and in fact, all the way up to the point where we see the line dancing, the characters have a great aversion to touching each other. And then, of course, when they do discover touch, there's a sexuality which is incredibly violent and explosive. Suddenly the whole thing, the whole nature of the village changes through this insertion of a new person from outside.

**LUDOVIC FOQUET** (theatre critic and practitioner, Paris, France): I agree with what you say about Irish identity and the character of the stranger. Like in *Sharon's Grave*, the stranger arrives and that is what starts the story — he's what brings the "once upon a time." I think there is a lot about Irish identity — about this idea of being confronted by differences and other nationalities — in *Giselle*. In that production it was just very interesting that the performers came from everywhere in the world — I think there were eight nationalities. For me, being French and arriving in Dublin, seeing *Sharon's Grave* was very interesting because it was speaking directly about your history in a language that sounded very Irish to me — it seemed like the sentences were in a Gaelic construction. It was not only a naturalistic reconstruction of the history of one time period in Ireland, but what Garry Hynes wanted to do, it seemed to me, was to strip away every realistic thing.

**KAREN FRICKER** (editor, *irish theatre magazine*, and chair): Can we follow the line of *Sharon's Grave* for a bit? There was a post-show discussion recently in which an audience member challenged Garry Hynes, saying that the production was too much Hynes and not enough Keane. I think that's a crucial question — it is a very stylised production. Do you have a view on that, Brian?

**BS:** Yes, just very quickly, by reiterating something I said on Saturday at the Theatre Festival's Playing Politics event — that



**SHARON'S GRAVE**

realism just masks communication. We'd never get to see the point of a play if we just see a reflection of society which is based on myth. I think Hynes' success in this production is to strip away all pretence of realism and get to the heart of this brutalised society. She set up the dark forces, the pagan and the Christian, and let them run riot through the stage, literally. But that's not to say that there wasn't some redemptive force at the end.

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I think that the success of any of the shows that I've seen that treated Irish identity was based on an ability to arrive at redemptive possibilities of change — of going through something which is really traumatic, but coming out at the end with a new way of seeing. I think Garry Hynes managed to achieve that, particularly in the very final image. The image of Christ on the cross and then the resurrection disappeared for the curtain call, and we just had clouds in that little square on the wall. It was as if both the pagan and the Christian had been removed from the stage and there was just the human.

**ANDREI MARINESCU** (translator and theatre practitioner, Bucharest, Romania): I don't think the plays I've seen in the festival allow me to talk too much about Irish identity, but I can talk about identity generally. Identity is a big question in Romanian society, because we are desperately trying to find an identity — I mean, after 50 years of communism you sort of lose the knowledge of who you are and where you stand and where you belong. When you look at a show like *Hurl*, it's not talking about Irish identity directly; it's talking about identity reflected in the mirror of other identities. You get to know other cultures to find more about yourself, and about your own culture. So that is my main point about *Hurl* — I'm not sure they got to say it very clearly, but I think that was the subtext in the production, and that is a very positive message: we have to adopt other cultures to get to know our culture better, like a mirror image.

**LEAZ:** I want to say something about *Giselle* and the arrival of the foreigner. It only lets happen something which is already happening in the culture — something that was going to happen because of *Giselle*'s bad destiny. He sort of unchains something that was already there. He's not to be blamed. The foreigner is not the one that is going to break the world.

**LF:** On this idea of Irish identity and the idea of the foreign — this was treated in a very funny way in *Soap!*, a show in the Fringe. There was a confrontation between an Australian and an Irish family, but it was played just like a soap opera on TV. There were all these clichés about the "other" — which are really the



basis for shows like this. It's really very, very simple; there is nothing on stage, but it proves how theatre can be strong and magical if it's made from nothing. They just have two rails for the costumes.

**AM:** The clothes on either side of the stage create a space where they can go behind and change from character to character.

**LF:** It's only four actors, who play 14 characters or more. It's written and acted just like TV, so there are a lot of short, intercut scenes, with a lot of clichés from TV, but so funny. There are two people near the stage who play music with a few instruments. It's light, but very good — there is very strong acting, because they have to play Irish and Australian. It's very clichéd, but very funny.

**KF:** To move on to another play that features representations of Irishness: *Duck*.

**BS:** Given what I was taking about before in terms of identity, this was transgressive for me; how the drama evolves at the end is quite surprising. I thought I was watching a Mark O'Rowe play all the way through, with these very familiar characters — women in abusive relationships, and a world of drugs and par-

ents not talking to children, etc, etc. But at the end of it I found that—well, I don't want to spoil the ending, but let's just say that all those things are rejected, and there is some kind of transgression in which the two girls, Cat and Sophie, decide to branch out on their own. It gave me a little bit of hope at the end that these kids are not trapped in cycles of violence. They've discovered that there's a possibility of moving out of it.

There was an attempt to work with the play on the stage in *Duck*, but it was not taken to its possible limits.

The use of music, for example, always to end a scene and take us to another scene – they didn't really use it to create inner atmosphere or to mean more than just working the transitions.

**AM:** I saw this play, but I thought that the end is not in agreement with the point that the author makes throughout the play. Yes, it's all about violence; yes, we can find the same type of characters in the work of Conor McPherson or Mark O'Rowe; but I just didn't believe the ending. What's going to happen? She's leaving, but where is she going?

**BS:** But at least she's made the decision to leave...

**AM:** The story is going to repeat and repeat and repeat; there's no other place to go.

**BS:** But they're sitting on their suitcases; they can't get a taxi, but they're sitting there — they still want to move. It's the desire that's there, whether they achieve it or not is up to themselves.

**KF:** *Duck* was written by an emerging Irish writer, Stella Feehily, and directed by Max Stafford-Clark, a highly acclaimed director of new writing. There has been some discussion around this production — that while it is excellently done, it adds an element of theatricality that is not there in the text.

**AM:** Yes, he certainly added another layer of theatricality, that's for sure. The presence of the director is felt from beginning to end. In every scene, he's there, in the playing of the actors, the cutting of the scenes, the set shifts, the design, everything. I think it was a major improvement for the text. I mean beginning with the text, and ending with the production — it's a big distance, and I think that we can say that we owe this to the director.

**LEAZ:** I saw the presence also of the director, but something that borrowed my attention is that he didn't go as far as he could. He repeated and re-used many things. For example something that amazed me is the extreme abuse of blackouts, that I find throughout Irish theatre. (*audience laughter and applause*) I think it's abusive! Also the scenography in *Duck*, I think did not need to be that heavy — all that dark wood. All that could have been changed in a more flexible way. For example in *Hurl* I did see that attempt —



DUCK

I don't think it was accomplished, but they were not afraid of making the scenery whatever you want in it to be at any moment. We saw that fully accomplished in the Lepage [*The Far Side of the Moon*], and in *Giselle*. There was an attempt to work with the play on the stage in *Duck*, but it was not taken to its possible limits. The use of music, for example, always to end a scene and take us to another scene — they didn't really use it to create inner atmosphere or to mean more than just working the transitions.

**KF:** We're naturally working our way towards the next theme that we wanted to address, that of scenography.

**LF:** I'll begin with some scenography that was not very accomplished, in my view: *Sharon's Grave*. I was very interested in and enjoyed a lot of this production; the physical work is very, very precise — all the physical relations between people, especially during the love declaration. I loved the idea of working with nothing, just an empty space. But I could not understand, why this huge, huge, huge monument, so symbolic? OK, it's a grave

— but for me, it was old-fashioned scenography, with all its doors. It didn't mean anything with this beautiful show. I felt that the movement on stage, which was like dancing, was very well worked, but I didn't understand why they contrasted it with this heavy scenery.

You can contrast that with other shows, like *Giselle* and *Far Side of the Moon*. And with *Soap*, which was so different — they do it with nothing because they have nothing, so they create what they need, and it works very well. What was interesting about *Giselle* and *Far Side* was the thinking behind the use of scenery — it's closely linked to the work of the text and the physical aspects of the production. In both cases the director seems to have been really involved in thinking out the space. I like how in *Giselle* the table could be an altar, and then they turn it around and it becomes something else. I like this kind of work with symbolic materials like the earth — this has to do with Irish identity but it also it's about transformation, which involves the imagination of the audience. That feels like a beginning of something.

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**BS:** There's a difference between decoration and scenography. Scenography is something which has a language, which works together with the other theatrical agents. In the shows you mentioned, *Giselle* and *Far Side of the Moon*, you see the human agents interacting with the set around them. I would call the way the set is used in *Far Side* ludic — playful. The actor played with the set and on the set, even though it's all obviously well-rehearsed. I can imagine in the rehearsal room, the amount of experimentation that was needed to see what would happen when the set panels turned. I believe that the final image, which is just stunning, occurred by accident — the man free-floating in space.

Also in *Giselle*, the very first thing that the actors do is to throw dirt on the ground, onto the stage. All sorts of other things are thrown on to it, and they dance those materials into the ground. They make it their own environment — I found that fascinating. I think what is most successful for me is when you don't get the whole environment. We don't need realism — film and TV do that wonderfully. In the theatre when there's just a suggestion of something, it just makes us think. When we see the whole thing we don't think; we just say, "Oh yeah, nice image." If the image doesn't move, if it doesn't have a journey itself, then there's no point having it; it's just pure decoration. I've said this many times — the journey is everything. Where are you taking us? Where is the human agent taking the set, where is the set taking us in terms of communication?

**LEAZ:** Can we move onto another play and its scenography —

*The Shape of Metal*. That production wants to reproduce exactly what this lady's room might have been like, so it closes off and makes a very stiff representation from the beginning to the end. The set was over-charged, and it took poetry away, because everything is set and closed. This is something that amazed me overall. There is also a sense that in the space where Irish drama takes place, there is a dictatorship and everything has to obey the text. But there are other things we have seen, where scenography is more flexible and organic and works with acting, with choreography, with light and sound — the text is part of the whole,



which seems to me to feed into the conversations we are having about Irish identity. In the world, Ireland is known by its dramatists, like Beckett, Yeats, and Synge — you have many Nobel Prizes; it's not so well known for its staging. It is well known for its actors, but it's an acting that is centred on saying the text.

**LF:** What is being said about *The Shape of Metal* reminds me of the scenery of *Performances*. That would be what we are calling decoration, because it was so naturalistic. It was not for me a very complete show. It was surprising to see in the programme that the director was happy to show a picture of Janacek's old studio, and is seeming to say, "Look, we did the same thing — we have the same furniture and the same window and doors." It was just decoration.

**AM:** I think there's more in that set. Because it's white, it's unfinished, it suggests coldness, lifelessness — it's a lifeless space because Janacek is in fact a ghost. The space becomes warm and different and comes to life with the first notes that Janacek plays on the piano, so I can understand some of their choices.

The set of *Performances* is white, it's unfinished, it suggests coldness, lifelessness — because Janacek is in fact a ghost.

The space comes to life with the first notes that Janacek plays on the piano.

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**LF:** Yes, but what I was trying to say was that this was perhaps not helpful for this show. It's hard to do a show with text from one author who is speaking about what another artist wrote, and about the relation between that other artist's life and work. And here to have these quite realistic things in the scenery was not a help. They were trying to say something else with this idea, that maybe it could be an in-between space — it's the place where he lived and it's going to become the place where the next inhabitants will live. I think this was not strong enough; it was not well said. To return to the Lepage, there was a space where everything is used. What was nice is that the set is just an empty box — it was kind of a frame that made you think of cinematography. It became a character, as Yves Jacques was a character himself.

**KF:** An interesting point that came up in a post-show discussion with Yves Jacques after *The Far Side of the Moon* is that he is miked throughout the show, so he can perform quite emotionally intense acting, even though he's in a very large space. This to me is an example of how technology was integrated into how the show actually creates meaning, because the show is about a character who can't get outside himself, who is trapped — and we become trapped in his world, because we can hear him speaking even though he's speaking to himself.

**LF:** It's the same with the video because you can see him from both sides — inside and outside the box. We can be on all sides of the character, and very close to him thanks to the voice and the images.

**LEAZ:** I find a great danger with technology. Very often in Mexico, I see that it's imposed. It's like a fashion — "let's make projections" — but it has to be, as we are saying, meaningful. What happens with Lepage is that he is experimenting with projections as a way of using light, and with a way of measuring the actor. It reminds me of the success of Appia — when light was introduced to theatre, everything changed. Can you imagine theatre with no lights? It allowed new use of perspective, a new way to understand the position of the actor on the stage.

**BS:** To continue on the idea of perspective in the Lepage production — it was created by the dialectic between the macro and the micro. The whole story is very personal and intimate — two brothers and the death of their mother; and that versus the space race. A global story versus a very personal story. On the stage you have this macro machinery, in which very personal intimate little things are being spoken. That for me was the most interesting of all — that it's like a contrapuntal use of space, and I'm thinking of space in terms of sound as well, not just in scenography.



**LF:** There are many open, public spaces in the play — the laundrette, the conference room — and in these spaces he talks about his own life. It's another use of contrast.

**KF:** I'd just like to come back to the set of *Performances*. I've spent some time trying to figure out what meanings they are trying to create with that set. The note in the programme is in fact by the set designer, Joe Vanek, who is Czech; and he writes about feeling very connected to Janacek's music, and about visiting the actual house where this fictional play takes place. There are photographs in the programme of that house, and then there are blow-ups of these photographs leaning on the walls of the set

*Performances* is probably the first time that I've seen a play that is not telling a story, but rather is a debate, a discussion about a story – not the story itself.

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itself. There's also a case where it looks like jewellery would be displayed. There's a sense in which we're in the middle of packing or unpacking.

**AM:** The first time I looked at the set I thought, this is a museum.

**KF:** Yes, so do you think that's what the director, Patrick Mason, and the designer Vanek, and Brian Friel were trying to say: that this is set in a Janacek museum? And the dead Janacek comes back to life in that museum?

**AM:** He's summoned by the student.

**BS:** I think the overriding direction of *Performances* was one of fidelity and preservation. The actor actually looks like Janacek, and the set is so heavily researched: Joe Vanek actually went there. I got the sense that certain parts of the set were wrapped up, and I wasn't sure whether they were being wrapped up or being unwrapped. It created a problem of tense — I wasn't sure whether we were looking at the past or looking to the future. I thought that was interesting; it was insecure in terms of time.

**KF:** So you thought that was a productive ambiguity?

**BS:** Yes, I think so. I mean, when I looked at it, of course like most Gate sets, it's lavish, it's luxurious, wonderful, spectacular. But when you really looked into it, it was troubling. It wasn't quite the past, and it wasn't the future — it was both at the same time. But then again that's what I think that maybe the whole play was struggling with.

**KF:** That conveniently leads us onto the next theme, which is storytelling — the different ways in which stories were told in the productions we saw.

**AM:** When you say storytelling, I think obviously of Irish theatre. We in Romania don't have a tradition of storytelling; we don't have a tradition of the monologue in Romanian theatre, for example, as you do. Even in the street, all my Irish friends tell stories — it's a particularly Irish theme. Through the plays I've seen, though, storytelling has been a bit strange. We are talking about *Performances* — it's probably the first time that I've seen a play that is not telling a story, but rather is a debate, a discussion about a story, not the story itself. That really, really troubled me; I didn't quite understand it. I can see the resemblance of that particu-

lar element with *The Shape of Metal* — again the story is not happening on stage in front of us. We are witnessing another discussion about a story that happened sometime in the past, so that's something for me that was new.

**KF:** Both plays seemed to be preoccupied with determining the truth of stories — did Janacek really love his muse, or was he just using her? This idea of the responsibility of the artist is echoed in the Kilroy. The central character dominates the space with her long, wonderful eruptions of monologue. She tries throughout



the play to tell a story which she finally accomplishes at the end. Do people feel that this strategy was successful in this play — the encounter with past stories?

**LEAZ:** I didn't really find it very successful. That repetition of the same story — it's too much for too little. It's too much weight on just telling the story. But I think it says very interesting things; it is an interesting enquiry, but mainly the problem is that it's told in a very old form. It reminds me too much of Bergman. There is something very interesting and intelligent there, but it's in a form that doesn't allow it to go further with questions that we have asked ourselves for such a long time.

We saw the character in a moment of terror where her world was swirling around her, and suddenly we could see her locate the markers and start to calm down. It was truly exceptional acting from Justine Mitchell.

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**BS:** As much as I would have problems maybe with the structure of the play, I did find that Nell Jeffrey, the principal character's, strategies of telling the story quite interesting. Her attempts to tell the story of Beckett and Giacometti, which she finally achieves in a kind of *pièce de résistance* — but the real stories that matter are the stories about her and her daughters; the parentage of her younger daughter, and what happened to the older daughter. Those are what matter to us on a personal level, and we never really find out what happens to Grace, the younger daughter who is suffering from manic depression. This summed up Nell's character — she could cope with her art, but she couldn't cope with the truth of her life. That battle between truth and life — you could see the absence of the personal story was the result of her humanity being damaged. Her daughters were the victims of her genius.

**KF:** So you're saying that it's possible that it was Kilroy's intent that we not find out the end of these stories, because this is way of commenting on the deficiencies of Nell as a person? Or did you feel, as a theatregoer, unsatisfied — did you want more?

**BS:** Of course I did; I'm just rationalising it now. In terms of dramatic structure, when I did find out who Judith's father was, I thought, "No, give me something more!" I wanted something more dramatic. When Grace, the younger daughter, is turned to metal in the second act, she never appears again — I just feel that she's silenced and her story is frozen. The same thing happens with the relationship between Nell and Judith. They have a huge, explosive argument at the beginning of the second act; this is the high point of the drama, and it suddenly stops and then we have the last 20 minutes of reconciliation which meanders up the garden. The main dramatic questions were left unanswered; I was left unsatisfied, personally.

**KF:** I am aware that we are talking about things formally; we've not talked yet about the most important material elements of productions, the performers. One of the reasons that I was frustrated with *The Shape of Metal* and the fact that we did not get the final confrontation between Nell and Judith was because I wanted more of Justine Mitchell, because she was so good.

**BS:** It's the best thing she's done since *Bash*.

**KF:** The play was lifted by three superb performances.

**BS:** There's a line in the play when Grace is having a fit or

seizure, and Nell tells her to do what the psychiatrist told her to do — look for signposts. In Mitchell's performance, you could see how the character was searching for those signposts in her head. We saw her in a moment of terror where her world was swirling around her, and suddenly we could see her locate the markers and start to calm down. It was truly exceptional acting.

**LF:** I would like to say something about another show, to continue this idea of telling a story. What interested me in the



THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON

Festival was that three of the shows — *Giselle*, *Soap* and *The Far Side of the Moon* — were playing with the idea of telling a story, and the influences of TV and cinema on the older tradition of theatre. *Sharon's Grave* was very classical in the way it told a story; but in *Giselle*, for example, you had a chorus like in Greek tragedy, or rather the leader of the chorus, the older man who leads the storytelling; and after that, you have a lot of very short scenes constructed like a funny play, or stand-up comedy, or cinema. You have the same game with *The Far Side of the Moon* and

in *Soap* — I think it's nice because it depends on a relationship with the audience, a confidence that we all know the rules and we can leave the traditional form of theatre storytelling behind.

**KF:** A kind of visual storytelling was attempted in *Hurl* — the actors wear simple costumes so that they can become many different characters easily; there were some visual jokes like a toy chip van crossing the stage when we went to a hurling match. Did you think this complemented the story they were trying to tell?

Twenty-five  
years ago  
it seemed clear  
to me what  
theatre was for,  
for the Irish.  
Now, it's not  
so clear.  
But I think the  
answer might  
come not from  
the institutions  
but from more  
unexpected  
spaces.

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**BS:** I think it did, in terms of all the different types of popular theatre that were thrown at it to achieve a wide audience. The little miniature trucks and the miniature set, those are famous Barabbas scenographic devices, but essentially the company just used the body to create the environment; the extra bits were almost like gags which helped make transitions. Instead of going to blackouts, we had a miniature truck going across the stage to set up a match.

I want to say one more thing about *The Shape of Metal* — just in case I never have another chance! If we're talking about narrative, for me the most interesting part of that narrative, certainly in the first act, is when we begin to see so many intertextual references to many other Irish plays. It's the last new play on the Abbey stage before the Centenary, and I was watching Beckett meets Tom Murphy — there were references to *Bailegangaire*, and I thought of *Krapp's Last Tape* when she had her diaries in a box. For me, with a knowledge of Irish theatre, I was constantly referring back, and that was a source of pleasure in itself. That intertextual narrative gave me pleasure when other things might not have done.

**KF:** In terms of narrative experimentation, I'd like to mention a show on the Fringe that both Andrei and myself saw — *The Race of the Ark Tattoo* by the American playwright David Hancock. It is one of the most daring experiments with narrative I've ever seen; I don't want to say too much about it, because I don't want to give away the construction of the play and how it creates meaning. It's about memory and about playing with our understanding of what's real and not real. It's a one-man show in the Ha'penny Bridge Inn, performed by David Heap. I thought it was an extraordinary accomplishment — it's a complicated narrative that really unpacks the idea of telling a story, to the nth degree.

**AM:** Yes, I found it very interesting, one of the best things in the Fringe. To say something else about *The Shape of Metal* — the con-

clusion of that play was strange for me, I didn't know it was going to end when it did. That play and *The Race of the Ark Tattoo* focus on the facts of a story and the characters onstage telling those facts, rather than on the stories themselves. In *Race of the Ark Tattoo*, you have a character, he's telling you a story, but the subject of the play is in fact storytelling. I just thought that it's a paradox — in both this small Fringe production and the big Festival production, though they are about storytelling, the dramatic quality is lost — it's transformed into debate about stories.

**KF:** What we seem to be talking about is plays in which conflict is not allowed to happen — we have reported action. We talked in the beginning about how Ireland is becoming multicultural, that it's a society in transition — we see issues of multiculturalism being presented on the Irish stage in a play like *Hurl*. But overall, in the more established theatres in particular, do you see a lack of ability to name what the conflict really is in Irish society right now?

**LEAZ:** I really think that's a great subject; I think it's a main subject. It caught my attention, the way that the institutional theatres here are not addressing the reality of contemporary life and are not asking what theatre is for. Twenty-five years ago it seemed clear to me what theatre was for, for the Irish. Now, it's not so clear. But I think the answer might come not from the institutions but from more unexpected spaces.

**LF:** But I'm not sure it's a question specific to the Irish people —



THE RACE OF THE ARK TATTOO

what is theatre for you? The answer to that question was very clear before, but I think in a lot of countries it's not clear now. Everywhere the forms are changing, and more things are being mixed and crossed on stage; experiments such as working without actors, with leaving out different elements of theatre. It's not specific to Ireland, these questions.

For me, theatre is about action and reaction, cause and effect. And that's what I didn't find in some of the productions in the Festival this year. I mean, I see the effect – I see people talking about the effect – so I see people affected, but I don't see the cause.

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**AM:** It depends on what you think theatre is. For me, it's always action and reaction, cause and effect. And that's what I didn't find in some of the productions in the Festival this year. I mean, I see the effect — I see people talking about the effect — so I see people affected, but I don't see the cause, really.

**BS:** I think when we open up to debate later on we should ask all the students here what they think, as budding practitioners, of this weight of Irish identity being thrown on them. Having to play it out through the medium of theatre is a huge burden, and maybe they don't want to do that through their theatre; maybe they live in different worlds. Certainly in the last 13 years that I've taught here, Irish identity has always been a subject of debate in so many classes and so many various guises — in all the seminars, it all comes back to that. And yet I think it was Conor McPherson who said, when he became famous with *The Weir*, that he writes about ordinary characters because the burden of the nation is too great. It's a millstone around the neck, and writers want to move on from that.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (Tania Dean): Regarding the question of time in *Performances*, the temporal ambiguity. I found that very interesting. For me it turned around the genre of story that we see in soap operas and films, where the dead person comes back and haunts a person's life. Here it was her who was intruding into his world, his studio.

**BS:** For me, I know a lot of PhD students — some of them are sitting in this audience. I don't want to see another PhD student, even a fictional one on stage! Rather than that character, I'd have like to have seen the love of Janacek's life on stage, Kamila, and have her speak for herself and not be mediated by other people.

**KF:** As a piece of text the play is very short — the printed playscript is only 27 pages long. While I appreciate what you are saying, that there was an interesting experiment in it being between two worlds, to me it raised questions, and it talked about questions, but it didn't embody the questions. I would have liked to see its central question engaged with more — to



TOM LAWLOR

**PERFORMANCES**

whom is the artist responsible, what is the morality of art. Fascinating ideas that we associate with the best of Friel's writing. This, though, was just a little sketch of what could have been a fantastic, embodied play. Perhaps I'm being too hard on Friel, and putting too many expectations on him. Maybe he wanted to experiment with putting live music on stage.

*Performances*  
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**BS:** The other famous moment where he uses music on stage of course is *Dancing at Lughnasa*, but there it was the transformative moment of the play; here, it was like a coda. It came at the ending and nothing was transformed. Because I didn't know anything about Janacek, I didn't know how this was personally affecting him.

**KF:** What seemed to me that was happening in those last five minutes is that Janacek is forced to consider the accusations that the student has thrown at him, when she storms out and calls him irresponsible and ungenerous. He is contemplating them as the music plays, and he seems to be taking her comments on board. But it's impossible to know what's really happening because there's no dialogue. It's a huge challenge to give to an actor, to ask them to communicate so much, with no words. Perhaps Friel was trying to communicate that also through the music.

**LEAZ:** I also saw that as the intention of that ending, but I did feel it was a struggle to understand what was happening. A similar thing happened at the end of *The Shape of Metal* — not enough is expressed through the text. Music on stage can be a very interesting thing, but here with *Performances* it felt like a fight between it being a concert or a play, and the fact that the musicians on stage were better musicians than actors didn't help take us through the meaning of the play.

**LF:** There were a lot of good things to begin with in that play, but it ended up being anecdotal. At one moment Janacek says, "Listen, and you will learn more from the music than I can tell you." So why write a play about it at all?

**BS:** I think he was trying to say that the message is in the medium, not in the mediation — that the story may have been mediated through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the actual medium itself speaks the truth. But the truth is unstable, and dependent on mediation.

**LEAZ:** But then the play itself is a contradiction.

**KF:** It's as if what Friel was saying is that the purest expression of this play would have been to play the string quartet. He's almost arguing for his own obsolescence. There's a paradox at the heart of it.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (Redmond O'Hanlon): I think there has been a dereliction of duty on the part of critics around the Friel play. I'm glad to hear that there isn't a dereliction around this table. I was shocked at the critical reaction to what is really just a vague sketch of what might have been a play. It just doesn't work at all, though I'd have loved it to work. There was nothing there, and the music couldn't save it... I wonder why it is very difficult for Irish critics to say that they hated seeing a play...

**KF:** It is challenging for critics to approach plays by writers as accomplished as Friel and Kilroy. These writers have shaped Irish theatre as we know it, and they must be given respect. But it's also the critic's responsibility to say what did and did not work. Is what you are saying when you are talking about dereliction of duty that you felt critics were not honest in their assessment of the success, or not, of these plays?

**O'HANLON:** In some cases it's not that the reviewers are dishonest, but that there are things that weren't being said, that were implicit between the lines of a review.

**KF:** I don't want to speak specifically about individual reviews and reviewers who are not present here. But I do think that it is the critic's responsibility, above all, to be clear about what they're saying. If you are expecting people to read between the lines you are expecting a highly informed audience, when in fact one of the functions of reviews is to inform people who were not there what happened on the night. Clarity and honesty are our first responsibilities.

**LEAZ:** I agree.

**BS:** But we live in such a very small environment; this town is tiny, and we have to negotiate with many different people from many walks of life. Critics and scholars have to engage with people in the profession and vice versa. It's a constant negotiation. I'd also like to point out that the biggest eulogy for the Friel play was actually in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, by John Peter, who is not an Irish critic.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (Patrick Lonergan): To go back to this thing about the outsider who comes in and stirs things up, I think

it's important to make the statement that that's not something that's in any way new; in fact, that's Irish drama, full stop. That's Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World*, that's virtually all of Frank McGuinness' leading characters. I think what's interesting about that is that as we face the issue of multiculturalism we actually do have quite a rich heritage in our theatre already of the use of the outsider character. I do think it's important in dealing with this issue that we realise that Irish society has been dealing with this stuff for well over 100 years and that it's part of who we are, already.

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**BS:** But for what end, though? If you look at *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the stranger in the house... there are different types of strangers. It's not just a singular trope that's used. It's used in many different ways for many different things; it's not always transformative in a positive way.

**KF:** Do we think that there is perhaps too much of an emphasis on new writing in Irish theatre? An extraordinary percentage of plays produced here are premieres. The canon is itself a resource; what about new directorial approaches to existing work, taking works we know and turning them on their head. There's a storehouse of plays that could help us explore Ireland now.

**BS:** I think it's important to note, given the amount of time we've just spent talking about scenography, that there is no professional design training programme in Ireland. And there's no professional director's training programme. There are two schools of acting, but beyond that the training resources don't exist. If you look at all the designs that we saw in these Festivals, how many were by native Irish people? Very, very few.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (David Horan): You're talking about some of the hits of the Festivals, but one you've not talked about is the Spiegeltent. I met the other night with some friends who were non-theatregoers, and they had to leave at about 11 pm because they said you have to get to the Spiegeltent before half-11 or you'll not get in! I have been amazed with how the Fringe have reached so many people who aren't theatregoers with the programming and the club in the tent.

**KF:** I have certainly been struck by how broad public awareness has been of the Fringe this year. It's something that has been growing exponentially since it started. In a very short time it's become a much larger festival than the Theatre Festival itself. Some sort of ceiling of public consciousness has been broken this

year with the tent — the Fringe has happened in a big way all over the city. Is there a tradition of fringe in Mexico or Romania?

**LEAZ:** No.

**AM:** Not at all.

**KF:** But in France, certainly.

**LF:** Yes, in Avignon there is now the Off, which is the big one. Now, any time a festival is created, an anti-festival is created for people who don't have the same kind of money or who are interested in different kinds of theatre. In France we have so many, many companies, so you have always to make new spaces to accommodate them. What has become very clear these last years is that the "In" festivals are always very expensive and quite difficult to access, so people usually go directly to the fringe. For example in Avignon it's very clear: people come first for the Off and if they can they get in, they see one of the festival shows, but it's the Off which is the most popular.

**BS:** In the main festivals, you know what you're going to see, and in the fringe you don't know what you're going to see. And that's the fun of it, the pick and mix, shopping, supermarket culture.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (Peter Duffy): I went to see *Sharon's Grave* on the basis of critics' recommendations, as well as some people who had been to see it. But I feel like the space destroyed the production, and the audience... a lot of the time they were laughing even though things were very dark.

**BS:** I had a different experience, personally, but I know where you're coming from. I saw it on opening night in the Gaiety, and I felt that Frankie McCafferty, who plays Dinzie, was pushing it too hard. It was almost an extreme version of Dinzie; I could see the mechanics of his acting, and I think that was what was provoking laughter around me, just a little bit. I think that the Gaiety space is so difficult — how many times do actors get to play in a space that large? The average Irish actor works mainly in black boxes of 200, 300 seats. Just projecting right up to the top of that theatre is phenomenally difficult, so perhaps the exaggeration that was necessary to get to the gallery might have lost the intimacy that you might have been expecting.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** (Ana Graham): I wanted to ask the



SHARON'S GRAVE

KEITH PATTISON

international members of the panel, do you see Irish theatre heading in the same direction as theatre in other countries?

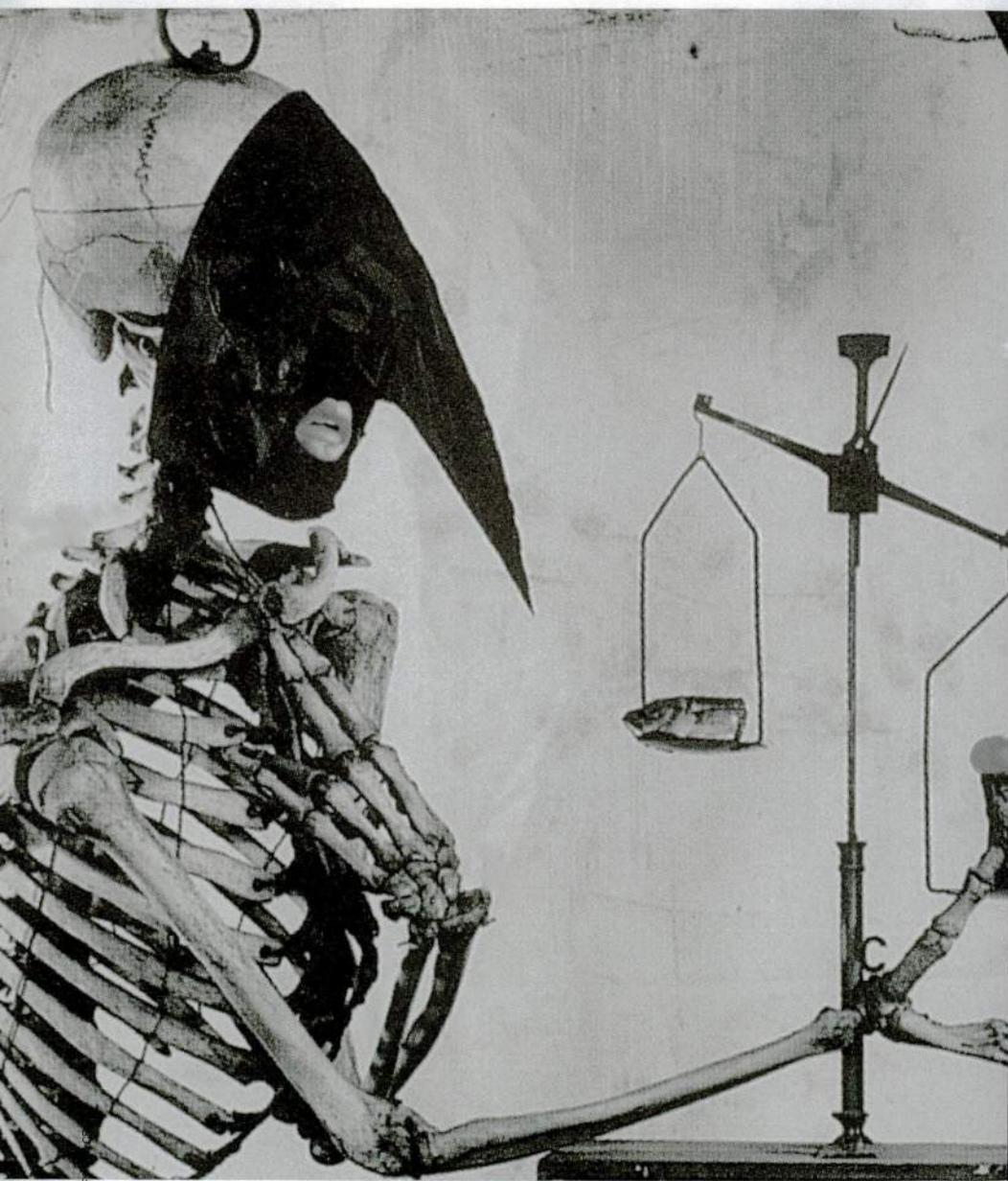
**LEAZ:** Irish theatre has given, as I was saying, a very strong and valuable inheritance to the world. Ireland is a part of the world history of theatre. What I find now in Irish theatre is a critical stage of self-definition. It's searching for new languages. You have the old canon, a very strong inheritance of very good dramatic works; acting and writing are strong, but I don't think the scenography is as strong. Overall things don't seem very clear right now.

**AM:** It's probably the best writing for theatre in the world; to have several generations of writers writing at the same time, creating texts — that is simply amazing to me. I come from a theatre that's dominated by directors, and a theatre that expresses itself through the directors, so this is just really amazing.

**LF:** I would agree with you that there were powerful things happening in the writing we have seen. I was also interested in the acting, but sometimes less interested in the scenery. In *Giselle* there were beautiful images, but what happens with these images? There seems to be a feeling that things were being done here on stages that have never been done elsewhere, but in fact they *have* been seen before. There is a sense of being a bit isolated from the world, not connected to other experiences. There is also a hesitation, a desire to be radical but not pushing it far enough. Are directors worrying that the audience won't go with them if they go further?

**BS:** In one sentence: the history of Irish theatre in the last 15 years. There has been a huge explosion of creativity in Irish theatre since about '93, the creation of lots of independent companies, and an exploration of theatrical form. What we are seeing in the early 2000s is that actors are learning to discover that they have bodies as well as voices — and this is something that's only fairly recent. For me, having gone around the country last year as a judge of the *Irish Times* theatre awards, and now with this festival, for me the most exciting new playwrights in this country are choreographers who have come from dance theatre: David Bolger and Michael Keegan Dolan. They are speaking about Ireland, and writing about Ireland, using all the languages of the actor's body, rather than speaking from an authorial perspective. I think for me that's the most exciting prospect for the future. And I've probably annoyed half the people in the audience by saying that.





# Fringe Follies

*itm* sent six hardy critics out into the Fringe fray. Here's their report on this year's Irish productions.

## PETER CRAWLEY lathers up

T'S A GREAT IDEA, OF COURSE. BUT COMING OUT of the first instalment of Cork-based Playgroup's extraordinarily ambitious *Soap!*, "a live soap opera in ten episodes," one felt that for all its witty recognition of the daily drama form, spectator commitment might be an issue.

Really, there's just so much else to see.

This is endemic with the Fringe. Countless bright-eyed companies flare up with still brighter ideas, only to be subsumed in the glare of the Festival while the breathless innovations of previous years begin to wheeze into grey trends (this year, for instance, it's hard to find a site without some specific) and returning successes struggle against unfairly inflated expectations.

If Performance Corporation's *The 7 Deadly Sins* had been a debut production, it might have coasted by on modest expectations and warm responses. But because Jo Mangan and Tom Swift's comedy followed last year's delicious *Candide* (voted Best Fringe Production, 2002), it was almost destined to disappoint. Even without the lineage, though, *7 Deadly Sins*' promising mix of pop culture and high-mindedness bore the pall of the always-risky "devised" approach, where imaginative freedom can simply run wild.

In place of a plot we get a backdrop: psychedelic portholes

## FRINGE FOLLIES

borrowed from *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, against which the decent, God-fearing folk of Garadice sequentially succumb to seven televised temptations. Neil Watkins' amusingly squeaky-toned Miss Slim falls prey to the gluttonous treats of Mary O'Driscoll's Delia-like cook. Later, a ferociously sexed-up *Come Dancing* skit lures somebody or other (and his wife) into the moral mires of some sort of vice — although this was less clear than I make it sound.

Evidently if you wanted wit and originality from this year's Dublin Fringe Festival, Cork was the place to go. *Be Your Own Banana's* delightfully odd *De Bogman* was ostensibly a one-man show that brought the Seanchaí tradition to pugilistic new heights.

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Almost every creative contribution seems to have been encouraged at the expense of quality control. Entirely random character accents are most egregiously tolerated, while similarly loose "have-a-go" dance sequences (where the excellent Louis Lovett and wonderful Peter Daly's physical disciplines are criminally under-used) see a cast asked to exceed their capabilities. For all that's good about it — boundless energy, several droll observations, and the discovery of actor Liam Hourican — its failings are understandably human. Not quite deadly then, but mortal.

Episode Two, and *Soap!* is scrubbing up nicely. Already exceeding the boundaries of genre parody, writers Ciaran Fitzpatrick and Lynda Radley leave no cliché unturned in their rich panoply of characters, tremendously well served and distinguished by nuanced performances. To the Australian foster family (political exiles, natch), sleepy Irish Pub, school and supermarket, they have added the Hospital, an arena where American soap works itself into a lather. Here, hard-bodied underwear models tempestuously overact their soliloquies, of which there are many. Likewise, the live music establishes and develops distinct motifs for each context while covering the costume changes — functional and funny.

Evidently if you wanted wit and originality from this year's Dublin Fringe Festival, Cork was the place to go. *Be Your Own Banana's* delightfully odd *De Bogman* was ostensibly a one-man show that brought the Seanchaí tradition to pugilistic new heights. Casting an unintelligible simpleton in the role of an epic hero, Brian Desmond and Mairtin de Cogáin's break-neck story followed Declan, a perpetually confused, clamp-jawed mummy-lover, and his oblivious rise through the champion boxing circuit. Made bizarrely engaging by a combination of general absurdity, cheesy music cues ("Eye of the Tiger" in countless versions) and the megaphone irony of de Cogáin's impressively hirsute storyteller, *De Bogman*'s theatrical anarchy did exceed its palatable limits. "But our story doesn't end there," announces Desmond, long after the play should have ended, allowing his potentially explosive theatre to quietly fizz out.

Meanwhile, *Soap!*'s flippant exposition gleefully accommodated newcomers — "After all," as Hilary O'Shaughnessy's Charlie will earnestly say, at least twice an episode, "I'm just a single les-

bian mother with a full-time job, a thesis to complete, and a child to raise." The faithful, of which there is already a growing number, laugh twice: first with anticipation and then with renewed satisfaction.

As their titles suggest, UK soaps thrive on class and location (*Coronation Street*, *Brookside*, *Emmerdale*); American soaps on mindless glamour (*Bold and the Beautiful*, *Young and the Restless*, *Days of our Lives*); Australian on matey communities (*Neighbours*, *Home and Away*); and Irish soap on utter tedium. But in setting itself in a medium, *Soap!* lays claim to every variety, neatly allowing it to switch voice at will. When plot lines converge in the "bold and beautiful" operating theatres, the lingua franca consists almost solely of acronyms and big words. "I'm going to need an MRI, an LBW, an LMNOP, and some PCP," cries Ciaran Fitzpatrick's marvellously straight-faced Dr. Edmund Grant, "An epigram, an epiphenomenon, and an epicurean." Owing to such technical demands, Niamh Shaw rarely strays from the padded fulsome ness of ward sexpot Nurse Katalina and director Tom Creed cleverly exploits a similar suggestiveness with his stage. Doubling characters with life-sized dummies, while allowing hovering costume items to function as character metonyms, he incorporates his busy stage managers to seamless effect. At this point the dialogue assumes an almost transcendent silliness. "My God," gasps Fitzpatrick, "she's peripatetic!"

If history is written by the victors, Joe O'Byrne's *The Battle of the Boyne And by way of interlude The Siege of [London]Derry*, suggested that a stalemate requires dialogue. Nodding to Osborne's *The Entertainer* and any number of Marie Jones's plays, Kieran Hurley's McKeague (Protestant, defiant) and Alastair MacAindreas's O'Brien (Catholic, cheerfully oppressed) are planted in a music hall to re-enact the Siege, delivering historical facts



SOAP!

between cheap gags and traditional songs. Their scattershot narrative routinely succumbs to revision, parody, childish wrestling, and, curiously, one ceasefire. O'Byrne's proletarian design of wooden pallets, washing lines and exposed gable ends awaiting murals is also significant and cleverly manipulated. His scope is just too ambitious for one act, however, the expanse of the narrative leaving his narrators confined to caricature and any resolution doomed to be glib. For all its energy and detail, it becomes history without a lesson.

In *Proof*,  
the Focus  
Theatre's new  
management  
found a perfect  
symmetry  
between text,  
space, tone,  
and appeal.  
Although  
David Auburn's  
apple-pie  
schmaltzy  
Pulitzer  
Prize-winner is  
evidently what  
passes for quality  
American drama  
these days, his  
characterisation  
is appealing  
nonetheless.

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Although Paul Farren's director's note never tells us exactly how long Paul Kennedy's grubby monologue *Gloria* had been sitting in the writer's sock drawer, its fin-de-siècle anxiety now seems as urgent as the threat of the Y2K bug. Declan Byrne portrays Richard, a sort of insouciant lecher, where both his uncomfortably crisp articulation and costume designer Sinead Cuthbert's partly untucked suit-shirt reinforce the character note: "sleazy-does-it." Abandoning his more successful girlfriend, Richard imparts a tale of abuse, displacement and disinterested sexual conquest during Dublin's "vomiting hour." It is a sodden city night, illuminated by Mannix McPhilips' alternating red and blue lamps, as though the narrative is trailed slowly by a Garda car.

"That's what you get for a cheap lighter," Richard tells a woman whose husband unsuccessfully tried to set the petrol-doused woman ablaze. Staggeringly, the audience (at my viewing) chuckle with every tale of degradation. While Byrne imbues his Neil LaButisms with a demotic charm, surely this misogynist with a heart of bitumen doesn't encourage gut-laughs?

Based on a true story, it's unsettling that Robin Keogh's tale of a boy raised by his grandmother, who must then care for her in her twilight years, manages to be so bewilderingly unbelievable in Dark Horse's *Don't Take Your Coat Off!* Narrated by the grandmother's spirit — an angelic Amy Conroy — the dreary solipsism of the author shrugs off the disguise early. "This isn't really about me," Conroy is forced to say, "it's about the person I left behind and how he loved me." Conroy, then forgotten, suffers the indignity of simply sitting onstage, impassively watching her history unfurl.

Once her telephone has been installed, you wonder why Eileen Fennell as Conroy's corporeal alter-ego, Nan, doesn't report this gran-handling ruffian to social services. Has director Donnacadh O Briain failed to notice that Rob Power's dangerously affectionate, startlingly camp Paul is stroking Nan's leg more vigorously than her varicose veins demand? Maybe he hasn't, and that would certainly imbue the music cue for Boy George's "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" with arch appropriateness. Less attention has given to the appalling sight-lines of the Crypt, however,



PROOF

allowing most of the sedentary action to sink behind the heads of the front row as we await an inevitable conclusion for what seems like an eternity: "Sometimes it feels that people are watching and waiting for you to drop," says the sage old woman.

Immeasurably better was *Proof*, where the Focus Theatre's new management found a perfect symmetry between text, space, tone, and appeal. Although David Auburn's Pulitzer Prize winner is evidently what passes for intelligent American drama these days — its apple-pie schmaltzy tale of filial duty and inherited madness all wrapped up in autumnal colour and vague math-babble — his characterisation is appealing nonetheless. Joe Devlin responds with superb casting. Paul Bennett's embodiment of an increasingly addled intellect as the maths professor is dignified and convincing. The romantic leads are attractive: Hazel Dunphy's harangued young genius equating dry wit with sweet longing, while Tom O'Leary finds that an incontrovertible maths geek is still divisible by charisma. The tone of American naturalism, moreover, rescues the Focus's Stanislavski leanings from quaint anachronism, while

the proficiency that Auburn demonstrates with revelation and reversals make his intellectual conjuring act (we never get so much as a glimpse of the much-discussed proof) insubstantial but effortlessly satisfying.

Conversely, Corcadorca's *SNAP*, by Ger Bourke, probably lost something in transition. Compared to its original venue — a disused warehouse — Project is only so cavernous. Sonnie and Nonnie "play house" and breed contempt, concluding grimly, "We have each other," when the last of their brood departs. Isolation from the community deepens, the location, we learn, has been by-passed and over time the dynamics of power and victimhood begin to shift. Engagingly performed but hardly groundbreaking.

Playgroup  
sublimated  
serious content  
into engaging  
comedy, distilled  
hilarious  
parody into an  
emotionally  
involving  
narrative, and  
offered better  
performances  
than any other  
Fringe show this  
writer has seen  
in any year.

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Fresh from the Galway Arts Festival, Poc Productions' *Paris, Texas*, a theatrical retread of the climactic scene of Wim Wenders' film (itself based on a Sam Shepard screenplay), was an exercise in atmosphere. Wisely forsaking road-movie trappings, director Paul Brennan allows a maximum of 10 audience members to be led into an emotional peep show, our private booths lovingly decked out with two-way mirrors and Kleenex dispensers. In their roles, Diarmuid De Faoite as the drifter Travis, and Lara Ní Chathmhaoil as his estranged wife, now an exotic-dancer, offer extremely subtle performances under voyeuristic close-up. But as their revolving stage lumbers around, one often feels that they have had to hold a particular reaction for the benefit of a full revolution, making the drama feel peculiarly static. In spite of its massively sentimental conclusion, the experience leaves you feeling soiled. Naturally, it takes Sexiest Production at this year's awards.

For its showboating final lap, *Soap!* is crammed beyond capacity. If its appeal lay in the knowingness of its approach, then such distance should amuse but not affect, placing every emotion in inverted commas. Glowingly parodic and satirically swiping, Playgroup's achievement was also to be preposterously moving. "Ahhh," sigh the audience at one point, before realising their disarmament with laughter. To every question and criticism that young theatre companies receive, Playgroup responded with panache and intelligence, sublimating quite serious content into engaging comedy, distilling hilarious parody into an emotionally involving narrative, and offering better performances than any other Fringe show this writer has seen in any year. Every memory of its magnificent realisation glows brightly: it is the lustre of a great idea that cannot be extinguished.

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*Peter Crawley is a freelance writer and critic, and is news editor of this magazine.*

# LINDA MURRAY gets physical

**A**NOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER FRINGE BEHIND US, AND as things wind down and life returns to normal the time for reflection approaches. I saw ten shows this year and the following were some of the highlights:

Exit Angel is an ensemble of Lecoq-trained actors and I had high hopes for their production of *Bolt Upright* at Players Theatre, about a young woman and her two charges, isolated on a remote Donegal estate in 1852. Imagine my dismay when the opening scene consisted of an actress, whose voice clearly revealed that she had never known a day over 30, who began hobbling around the stage in a manner that would have put Peig to shame. Eying up the exits, I resigned myself to an hour of another country Irish drama. However, the Crone was perhaps the only real weak link in this piece, because from the moment the faeries appeared on stage, the real talent of this company revealed itself. Aided by phenomenal green costumes by Anastasia Golema that evoked the legends of the fir bolg and the woodlands with their padded bellies and jutting pieces of tendrils and foliage, the actors worked like an impish Greek chorus of Quasimodos, harassing the central character of Mairead with their intangible yet definite physical and verbal jibes. She is a young woman summoned by an anonymous employer to look after of two orphan children whose mother had died under mysterious circumstances.

Grotesque humour was the main vehicle for the plot, which centres around the tragedy of a woman set apart and rejected by society, and brought with it some truly amusing moments including a patty-cake war and the classic line — "During the famine many people died — this left a lot of room for sheep." However, it was Jonathan Gunning's comic turn as Fionn that towered head and shoulders above anything else in the play. His complete commitment to the physicality of the role and his innate sense of timing won him, and deservedly so, the loudest laughs from the house. Other than that, the pro-



**BOLT UPRIGHT**

duction was filled with nice touches such as live music from Bryan Quinn from one side of the stage; apart from the end of the play, which disintegrated back into the lamentable stage-Irish keening of the beginning, the innovative idea of combining Irish mythology with physical theatre along with a strong ensemble performance made this show well worth a visit.

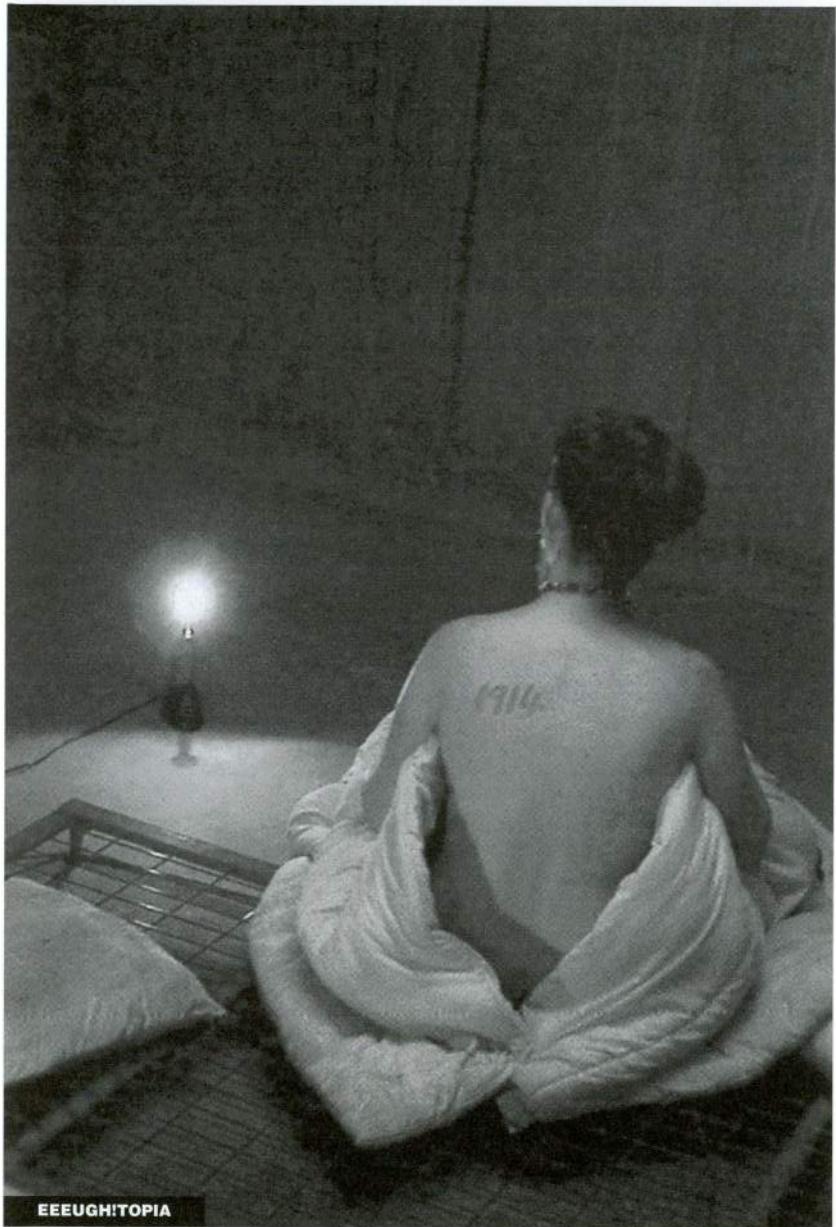
Ably directed by Nicole Wiley, *Mrs. Cherry-Loola's Last Chance* was a devised show on the insignificance of the individual in corporate life, and a less elaborate production (from Gorgô Theatrics) than *Bolt Upright*. Much of the success of this piece relied on the ability of Armelle du Roscoat as the eponymous hero to draw the audience in and suspend their perception of reality. As Cherry-Loola, du Roscoat was charming and she instantly had the house on her side. We smiled sympathetically when she introduced her hand to us as her imaginary horse, Trigger, and giggled with her as she used her office stationary to set up a show-jumping event for said horse. However, these sequences, which were amusing to begin with, and made a clear reference to the play's central concern of the slippage between fantasy and reality, continued too long and eventually became tedious, even with a warm performance. Despite the big themes that this piece tried to take on, it unfortunately never moved past the superficial and unsatisfying.

PunchDrunk Theatre was just one of several companies made up of recent Trinity drama graduates to submit an original piece to this year's Fringe; and *How Jane Brown Grew her Fingers and Toes* bodes well for the future of Irish theatre. On entering the space in the SS Michael and John, Aedin Cosgrove's lighting immediately created a womb-like sensation of warmth and security. Performed by Emma Meehan, Kate Nic Chonaonigh, and Ruth Smith, *Jane Brown* was a highly original piece with a clear methodology behind its construct. A work that focused primarily on stimulating the senses, the audience was coaxed into the world on stage through breath, the inhalation of the scent of fresh oranges being eaten, and hypnotic designs projected onto a large screen. The show had its flaws — a stronger attention to the range of choreographic language used would have raised the impact of the show enormously, and the transition from the cocooned walls of *Jane Brown*'s existence into our world of blaring Kylie Minogue jarred slightly and broke the spell carefully woven by the performers. *How Jane Brown...* was at its best when it was silent; it was in this stillness that we witnessed the real exploratory work of the piece — work that I would like to see more of.

*Eeugh!topia*, another production from Trinity alumni, this one performed in Project Cube, took the two seemingly disparate elements of Solomon's Song of Songs and the testimony of a Taliban

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EEEUGH!TOPIA

City Arts Centre had some of the best shows at this year's Fringe, including the inventive devised piece *Action* from Locus Theatre Company. With more than one nod in the direction of Beckett and Ionesco, the cast of seven find themselves trapped together in their own world and time.

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sex slave as it appears on the site [gayegypt.com](http://gayegypt.com), and then attempted to interweave them. As with director Wayne Jordan's previous production of Sarah Kane's *Crave*, there was a very definable atmosphere prevalent even before the action started: a mixture of soft warm lighting and an almost geometric approach to design which stamps his shows with a recognisable look. *Eeugh!topia*, a combination of movement and disjointed text, had the cast hard at work to keep the audience's attention. They had good kinetic energy throughout which kept the momentum going, but melodramatic weeping and continual sequences of people running around in circles distracted from the human tragedy of the material being tackled. The use of humour in the show was the most effective device, and established a connection between the house and the performers, but overall the production failed to control the enormity of the issues raised in the chosen texts.

Part installation, part performance, Oscar McLennan and Anne Seagrave's *The Quiet Bastard* was a lesson to many of the other performers in the Festival of what can be achieved through creativity. The space at City Arts Centre was unrecognisable thanks to designer Seagrave's imaginative division of the room into a jungle on one side, and a desert on the other, which was hidden to the audience until the interval when we were invited through the tendrils of overhanging vines and into an arid, dusty plain. Supported by slides, McLennan gave a virtuoso performance as a screenwriter looking for the story that will make him millions. The absurd ideas generated by the writer's warped mind are many and varied, the most memorable being a script for a canine lead, Bastard the Dog, and inevitably wind their way into grotesque and fantastic asides where he spits bile and bitterness at the world. For *The Quiet Bastard* is not so much about writing and creativity as it is about human isolation and the darker recesses of the human mind. Salty popcorn handed out halfway through the performance completed the experience.

McLennan and Seagrave have a rare and rich relationship here — and, as I discovered, is not limited to their own projects, but also works to promote the works of other artists. For, as curators, Seagrave and McLennan further contributed an innovative collection of performance art pieces at the City Arts Centre under the title, *Back Up* (a reference to its predecessor *Get Up*). An eclectic mix of installations, videos, films, and performances, *Back Up* featured some very innovative artists. My personal favorites were Anita Ponton's *Unspool*, a dark and fun look at film icons through screen projection and performance, and Anne Troake's film *Pretty Big Dig*, an inspired short of three JCB diggers dancing to a soundtrack of cheesy waltz music. In the midst of a sea of one-hour shows, *Back Up*, provided

refreshing relief, giving the public nuggets of ideas to mull over.

City Arts Centre had some of the best shows at this year's Fringe, including the inventive devised piece *Action* from Locus Theatre Company. With more than one nod in the direction of Beckett and Ionesco, the cast of seven find themselves trapped together in their own world and time. Trying to make sense of their predicament, what ensued was a hilarious and poignant interweaving of dialogue and choreography as each character attempted to establish an identity and motivation for their situation. The scene where the



BACK UP

seven descended ravenously upon a roast chicken was a standout; in the small performance space, the audience could actually smell the meat. Luring us gradually into their world, Locus wove a spell with *Action*. It made for unmissable theatre.

At SS Michael and John, Articulate Anatomy offered a new version by Emma Colohon of Alfred Jarry's scatological masterpiece *Ubu Roi*, titled *Pubu*. It is the best part of a century since that infamous "merdre!" was first heard on stage, and there have been countless performances of *Ubu* since; I was quite interested to see what this company would bring to the text. Laid out like a post-apocalyptic playground, the set made full use of the space, caging in the play area and the actors, and leaving only standing space for the audience around the edges. The actors took a few silent moments to introduce the house to their physicality, also

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acknowledging the presence of onlookers, and then, homing in on the childish cruelty that powers the play, the action exploded into an hour-long romp of pranks and deviousness. Drawing on a wide array of images from popular culture and a wealth of theatrical techniques and references — from *commedia dell'arte* to Monty Python to Bruce Lee to Itchy and Scratchy — the ensemble succeeded in making the humour of the script pop. There was no star in this production, with each member of the cast working with the others to make the jokes succeed and the action progress. It was a joy to behold. Although this production did not offer any new insight into *Ubu*, I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it right down to the fact that I lost sensation in my buttocks from sitting on a cold floor. Watching the lewd antics on stage from a plush chair would have been wrong somehow.

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## COLIN MURPHY gets stroppy

I AM FRUSTRATED AND DISAPPOINTED. THROUGH NINE random shows I sat, and got very bored. I was entertained occasionally, and impressed rarely, and provoked, stimulated, and challenged in very small quantities.

Festivals — and fringe festivals in particular — inevitably and necessarily raise questions of both unity and dialectic in theatre: to what extent is any one show just one element in a greater whole? To what extent are individual shows engaged in a discourse that pushes, challenges, and advances our understanding and appreciation of art and of society?

In the fringe, companies and shows are lumped in with each other in the city centre and forced to confront these questions. An audience rushing between shows and seeking out obscure venues in previously unseen crannies of the city experiences both the city and the theatre in a new, and even disorienting, way. Work is uniquely contextualised.

This is a good thing — work that offers moments of insight as part of a less than complete or accessible whole nonetheless contributes to the experience of the festival and of theatre in the city. The challenge of finding and adapting to new venues and of drawing an audience from the city more generally than from the generic (and tiny) theatre crowd compels companies to reassess their work and the canon. And the nature of an annual festival is

not that it presents the best on offer of the previous year, but that it nourishes the creativity of the theatre community and audience through the following one.

In my experience of this Fringe Festival — hardly comprehensive, admittedly, but nonetheless a more extensive experience than that of the great majority of festival punters — the excitement of experiencing new work in this context was dissipated by the productions' poor quality and unadventurousness. Those that dared, failed to impress me with little more than their style; those that didn't, failed to interest me. I came out of shows in this year's Dublin Theatre Festival, and just before that in the Fringe and International Festivals in Edinburgh, thrilled and invigorated by either sheer quality or by their gutsy inventiveness. Fringe theatre can offer both — student theatre can too, for that matter, proving that experience and resources are not a prerequisite — but in Dublin this year, as far as I am concerned, it failed emphatically.

**B**OOTSTRAP GAVE US *The Pushcart Peddlers*, a gently engaging fairytale of immigrants to the New World. Under the tutelage of a bullish fruit-seller by the name of Cornelius J. Hollingsworth, and inspired by his love for the "blind" flower-girl/con-artist/wannabe actress, Maggie Cutwell, newly-arrived immigrant Shimmel Shitzman undergoes a rapid conversion from timid fruit-seller to would-be Broadway producer.

Unsurprisingly, playwright Murray Shisgal's characters are

PETRA HJORTSBERG



PUBU

larger than life, and were ably handled by the cast; Colin Smith in particular was magnetic as the self-effacing Shitzman. The script, though, is Disney-like and dated; its portrayal of the tribulations of immigration seemed tired and the implicit paean to an America of hard-selling, sharp-tongued, agreeable rogues was anachronistic.

Directed by David Horan and performed by David Heap, the Abbey's production of David Hancock's 1998 Obie award-winning monologue *The Race of the Ark Tattoo* was both more contemporary and challenging. Mr P. Foster runs a flea market, stocked with the debris of his life, all carefully carrying dollar price tags. He proffers a box of curios to the audience, and as audience members select and pass around individual items he tells their story — and, in the process, his story. The setting is naturalistic, the stories fantastical; the result is what Hancock calls "experimental naturalism."

For this to work, however, it depends upon a genuine collision between the authenticity of the setting and performance, and the surrealism of Mr P. Foster's memories. Originally staged in a flea-market in New York, this might have achieved this collision there, but in the bedsit-like venue upstairs at the Ha'penny Bridge Inn, amidst a threadbare if cluttered collection of Americana, *Race of The Ark Tattoo* came across simply as a slight flight of fancy: quirky, momentarily poignant, but essentially remote.

*Panama* was another contemporary American piece that indulged in the surreal, but there the comparisons end. Where *Race of the Ark Tattoo* was assured and crafted, *Panama* was nervous and clunky, but — its saving grace — it still managed to be pretty bloody funny. A cross between *National Lampoon* and *Natural Born Killers* (yes, really), it gave us a car-full of idiosyncratic, exaggerated characters blazing their way across America, death and destruction in their wake, in a comic-book style satire on American values (maybe). Moments of both script and staging were really dreadful, and this second night of their run had evidently come upon them as something of a surprise and rudely interrupted their rehearsal period. But... This was an imaginative production by Tangent Theatre Company, and director Sam Young displayed a fine touch in choreographing the comic-book set-pieces. In an uneven but energetic cast, Daniel Costello and Sarah Burke were particularly funny and, overall, the rough edges were worth it for the laughs.

Where *Panama* was farcical, the comedy of *Hyde and Jekyll* had more serious undertones. The ambitious BDNC Theatre Company gave us the Gothic tale economically transposed to the streets of contemporary Dublin, and made elegant and arresting use of the Crypt's crevices and lighting in a rollicking production.

With *Hyde and Jekyll*, the ambitious BDNC Theatre Company gave us the Gothic tale economically transposed to the streets of contemporary Dublin, and made elegant use of the Crypt's crevices and lighting in a rollicking production.

Yet, despite the production's energy, it suffered from a lack of dramatic momentum: the generally tight, Berkoff-like ensemble choreography was let down by generic swirlies movement routines and an excess of bonking that was more *Podge and Dodge* than *Jekyll and Hyde*, and the narrative was critically undermined by the incoherent choral chanting of key passages. A piece that had the potential to illuminate something of the banal evil that seems to infect our streets at present was thus rendered ultimately whimsical — whimsy with energy, dexterity and imaginative physical comedy, but whimsy nonetheless.

From the whimsical to the banal: *Tales from the Northside* was as threadbare as the venue that hosted it (The International Bar). The venue was appropriate for more than its décor alone: Ronan Carr's script was a collection of vignettes of varying comic quality that clearly aspired more to the comic sketch-writing that the International Bar is more commonly home to, than to drama. The play lagged between gags (some of which were good), and its mildly surreal take on Dublin's relationship with alcohol and violence failed to compensate for the comprehensive lack of stagecraft.

Striking a more ambitious and serious note were Cello Productions' *Grace Before Meals* and Edge 21's *Severance*, both visually arresting and crisply staged. Each used screen projections to good effect in enhancing the set, and the opening tableau of *Grace Before Meals* — an image of a girl on a beach projected onto the lead performer's body — was daring and memorable.

Una Woods' script for *Grace Before Meals* is more a poem than a play: dialogue is critically absent. Lacking a coherent or acces-



sible narrative, the elegant and elegiac staging, and finely nuanced supporting performances by Louis Rolston and Sheila Kerr, were not sufficient to illuminate the production. Ellen Burns' strident performance as the central character, Girl, admitted little concession to variety in tone or mood, and this combined with the abstract nature of the writing rendered the piece impenetrable.

In *Severance*, director Genevieve McGill and solitary actor Pol Penrose produced a performance of intriguing physical craft, creating a beguiling, diffident creature out of an emotionally isolated man named Severance. Emotional remoteness was the abiding characteristic of this production, however: the ambition of Annemarie Curran's script and artifice of Dianne NicAoidh's strikingly beautiful set failed to render *Severance* anything more than an aloof, absurd character lost in solitary recollection.

Despite the flaws in these productions, though, both Cello Productions and Edge 21 are companies to watch; both proficient in stagecraft and with obvious talent at their disposal, they will need to find stories capable of resonating with an audience to produce truly compelling theatre.

Where other shows stumbled through obscurity, Female Parts' production of *The Tenants* wore its heart on its sleeve and its issues blazoned across its t-shirt. Tackling cultic Christianity, alcoholism, abusive relationships, and the iniquities of living in lousy flats, it carried too much baggage to ever take off. Poorly staged in Project Cube and replete with ham-fisted stage entrances and exits and clunky scene-changes, an able cast failed to achieve any momentum, despite attacking their stock characters with evident enthusiasm. Paul Kennedy both wrote and directed, and clearly would have benefited from the objective contributions of a collaborator.

Cathal McGuire avoided many of the pitfalls of dual writing-directing in *The King Sweeney*. Although the plot — writer's block strikes, and is overcome — was unconvincing, the writing hummed with a nervous energy and the young ensemble enjoyed underplaying his gently stammering dialogue. Unambitious and ultimately insubstantial, nonetheless there was a theatrical intelligence at work in this piece that shone through despite both an uneven cast and the constraints of the Crypt. Very low-key, this was still a quiet treat.

This selection of performances demonstrated two key facets of Irish fringe theatre: the weakness of new fringe playwriting; and the failure of companies to stage work that engages in a critical discourse with Irish culture (as opposed to simply addressing the internal concerns of the company with genre, cast numbers and resources).

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THE TENANTS

There is a startling richness of material for dramatic exposition in Irish society at present; internationally, there has not been such a period of sustained popular debate and vehement opposition to the geopolitical status quo since probably the late 1960s. Neither in new work nor in restaging of old was any of this captured or reflected upon in this selection of shows.

A play is not an argument, and no company can be judged exclusively on whether it has ignored or embraced contemporary debates; but in a fringe festival there is both an expectation and an imperative that the body of work as a whole will challenge and provoke — aesthetically and intellectually.

Challenge and provocation — and quality — were thin on the ground. Central to the Dublin Fringe Festival is that it provide a context for Irish companies to seek new audiences through the working out of new ideas. If those companies don't have the ideas, or lack the ability or experience to fulfil them, the Fringe fails in this remit.

Encountering a new company doing radical work in an unknown venue, and having the opportunity to juxtapose this immediately with other work, and then discuss it in a club venue afterwards — this is the ultimate fringe experience. It is exhilarating. When a city-wide audience shares this experience, it is even transformative. When successive shows fail, however, it's just dull.

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*Colin Murphy is a Dublin-based freelance journalist and a correspondent for The Tablet magazine.*

*So Long, Sleeping Beauty, an unpretentious, bittersweet, so human play, held me all the way. The situation was sympathetically captured, the characters finely etched.*

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## LOUIS LENTIN finds transcendence

**A** SECLUDED, RAILED-IN SECTION OF A CITY PARK. A WELL-dressed lady enters, 50ish perhaps. Waits apprehensively. Joined shortly by a well-set man, mid-40s perhaps, casually but nicely dressed. Could he be, could she be? Eventually, are you... are you? Yes to both, and so Isobel Mahon's play *So Long, Sleeping Beauty* begins at Bewley's Café Theatre. An intriguing start.

The hesitant foreplay conversation, full of stops and starts. Then yes, they do have something, or rather somebody, in common. Her late husband, his late lover, recently accidentally killed, leaving both partners empty and alone.

Former wife Glynis produces a packet of late husband's letters

which she has come to give his former lover, Neville. Letters found after his death, otherwise it all might have remained a "secret love." They get on quite well considering the circumstance. Talk about the man they both had in common, their respective lives with him and their loneliness now that he's gone. It doesn't come easy, but they warm to each other. Neville



**SO LONG, SLEEPING BEAUTY**

enthuses about a small holiday place he and his/her former partner shared in Italy, blissfully happy. Her life was, it would appear, rather more mundane. Eventually, great idea: why doesn't Glynis join him there? They both need someone, sounds like a good idea, give it a try. She declines. He presses. But no, challenges like this are not for her. A drink? Better not. So she departs, to return to her empty home, which if not very full before her partner was ousted, was sadly reasonable. Neville is at least left with the letters. The rest is silence!

This unpretentious, bittersweet, so human play — reworked, I understand, from the author's original radio monologue — held me all the way. The situation sympathetically captured, the characters finely etched. Michael James Ford's non-intrusive direction was just as required. Seasoned actors Bernadette McKenna and Philip Judge created touchingly real people. One small quibble, perhaps: McKenna might have allowed herself a little more regret at being unable to accept Neville's offer of Italy — sunshine, wine, companionship, no strings attached, rather than con-

tinue to remain a sleeping beauty. But that's a matter of interpretation. Effective set by Bianca Moore, correct costumes by Joan Sheehy and clean lighting from Moyra D'Arcy. More from actor/writer Isobel Mahon please! Well worth reviving.

Again at Bewley's, Jennifer Keappock sets her play *Working it Out* aptly in a city gym. Gradually, while young Jessica works her rather desultory way through the various exercises, her problem is revealed. Her first big break as an actor... she falls in every way under the influence of the somewhat charismatic leading actress. A relationship develops, which, one presumes from the little the character reveals, was romantic in every way. Rehearsals appear to be going well until, with opening night looming, the director calls the leading actress to task for not putting her heart into it. Leading lady takes extremely strong objection and threatens to walk out.

What is Jessica to do? To go with her love or stay in the show. Who or which does she love more? There's the rub! Now as she "works out" she tries to work it out; who/which comes first? Hecuba or...? What's Hecuba to her? Loves come and go but Hecuba has a tendency to hang in there forever.

I wish I was convinced by the story and the personal argument, which the author arrives at rather late. For far too long I was left to wonder what this was really all about. Jennifer Keappock's performance of her own script went through the physical and emotional motions without convincing me of the pain behind the quandary, or indeed the exercises. No pain, no gain. Director Martin Gogarty, in his professional debut, needed to sharpen things up, and see to it that Keappock — who has it in her — sweated a lot more.

*Tom Crean, Antarctic Explorer* in the New Theatre: a masterful performance and script by Aidan Dooley, re-telling... reproducing, the story of Irish explorer Tom Crean and his incredible, almost foolhardy determination to be part of Shackleton's and Scott's Antarctic expeditions between 1901 and 1916. You'd think the first spell with Scott would have been enough. But no, not for Crean. Out he went again with Shackleton. Fascinating, terrifying, almost unbelievable journeys, amazing bravery.

Simply set, a small old wooden box with a real period sledge hanging behind. Not much else; what more was needed? The talent of this fine actor/storyteller conjured up all the rest. The white waste with its deadly perils. The superhuman journey with Shackleton and four others in an open boat for 600 miles across the South Atlantic. Then in 1916, when all that ended, back with him into the Royal Navy. WW1 remember. Not a man for a rest.

Dooley grabbed and held the audience for the full evening. His colourful performance, often humorous, at times grim, frightening-

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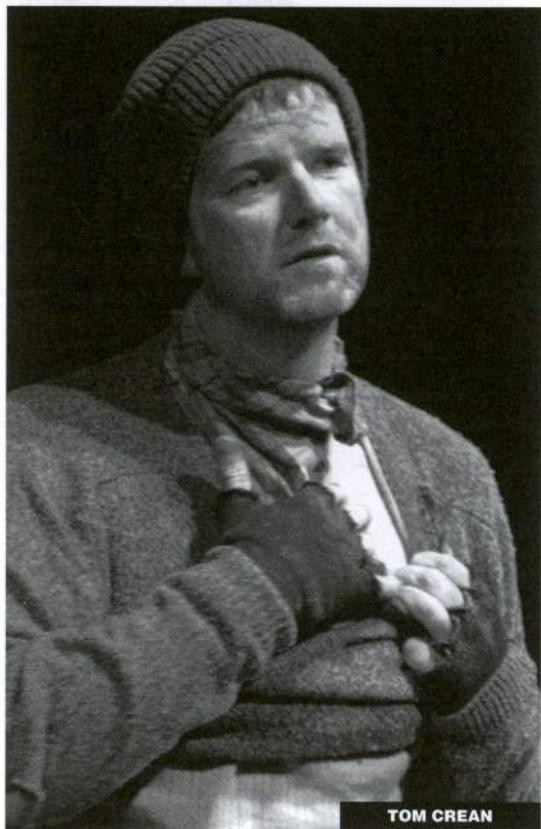
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ing. Real! Tom Crean has been dead since 1938; I have no way of knowing what he was like — but Dooley, clad in the best Antarctic gear of the time, so convinced that it became impossible to separate the man from the performer. Here he was, the man himself, in front of you. I have no doubt I met Tom Crean. Superb!

If Dylan Tighe and his numerous collaborators are going to use one of the greatest love stories in the Bible, that of David's son Amnon for his half sister Tamar, then let it be to some effect. Tighe, credited as conceiver, director, choreographer, costume designer, and performer of *Amnon and Tamar* at SS Michael and John, informed us in a superfluous post-play speech that his only previous acquaintance with the Bible was to wipe his arse with it — but did he have to repeat the obscenity with this mess of pottage?

Contemporary military costumes, when clothed, apart from Tamar. Bleak cellar area, the performance space. A bed, general military-type mess. A winch. Pre-recorded disjointed dialogue to which the actors must lip sync. Why? An opaque plastic screen between audience and players (thankfully) hiding the action most of the time. Why? I presume there was an attempt to draw contemporary parallels — Bosnia perhaps? Difficult to tell. For me an overall opaqueness, maybe not to others.

Tighe exposes himself. Plays with his genitals, why? Degradation of women perhaps? Tamar doesn't seem to take much notice. A presumably commercial pornographic film, with a professionally enthusiastic female, panned in jagged spurts



TOM CREAN

over the back wall. Now you see it, now you don't? Why to all three? Eventually Mr. Tighe achieves an erection — perhaps a better title for the piece. Masturbates! Rapes Tamar!! Mr. T. puts his clothes on. Is hung somewhat erect by his neck. Why not by his ample hanging piece? The essential safety wires obvious, pity. His now humongous erection exposed as a fake.

This so-called "re-birth" of Renaissance tragedy didn't shock, cause scandal or consternation. "...relevance of this style of tragedy is made plain in the juxtaposition of ancient tyrant and modern warfare," etc. etc... (see programme note). The whole thing reminded me of some "postmodern" art where the wall note says it all. Not enough Mr. Tighe, or maybe in this instance more than enough! Grace-Anne Kelly played Tamar, despite a broken leg, providing the character with a pathetic appeal. She deserves considerably better. Otherwise, sound and fury signifying nothing.

*In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields:* A vast outdoor space, round the corner from the City Arts Centre, empty. In the distance the yellow glow of tenement light bulbs. Behind us traffic emits a frequent roar. We sit, thankfully, under a roofed area. Dark now, a few dimmish area lights. No way out.

Way in the distance The Client appears, a slim lightly-clad man, mid to late 20s, out for a stroll. Accosted by a large imposing figure, closely shaven head, mid-Atlantic Orson Welles-type voice; obviously The Dealer. His long coat hiding what? The Client could have shaken off the lightly detaining hand on his arm, walked on; he objects to being stopped, but he stays. Maybe he's seeking more than a stroll.

The Dealer has something to sell; he won't say what — anything the Client desires. For him to "deal" the Client must want something. He may not yet know what it is, but eventually he will; drugs, sex, anything. Once named, the deal will be struck. The Dealer can't exist unless he's got himself a client, a deal; everybody is a potential client. The Dealer invokes all the tricks of his trade. He's kind, he cajoles, humiliates, menaces, but this guy won't play the right ball. So be it, direct confrontation. Stalemate or death? Freeze. Endgame.

Bernard-Marie Koltes' play was, I found, anything but thrilling, lacking any real sense of threat. Constructed of long speeches from each character, one following the other. These may progress the intellectual development but severely hinder the drama. One speaks, one waits — my turn now. And so the argument proceeds, twisting and turning as the relationship changes.

Hope Brown was undoubtedly impressive as the Dealer, as was Laurence Salaun as the wiry antagonistic Client, his performance slightly hampered by a strong French accent. Tom Hopkins, The Facilitator, (presumably director) needed to ensure

In the life-enhancing Broadcast at Project's Cube, Donal Toolan escapes his personal confinement using his talent as actor, aided simply by live or pre-recorded video.



IN THE SOLITUDE...

a strong physical quality in the performances, more inter-relationship, tension; direction that demonstrates. Unfortunately he appeared content to allow speech follow static speech. The terrific space mostly ignored. Pity. Good on radio, on the page. But as staged drama, on this evidence, I wonder.

Donal Toolan/Viki Wreford Sinnott's *Broadcast* has much in common with French-Canadian writer/director Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*, a life-enhancing main Festival production in which one man's desire to vacate the planet is achieved by mirrors. In the equally life enhancing *Broadcast* at Project's Cube, Toolan escapes his personal confinement using his talent as actor, aided simply by live or recorded video.

Toolan is disabled, confined to a wheelchair, a small simple affair which he inhabits like a second skin, manipulating it with

a dexterous flick of the wheels from one stage position to another. To call *Broadcast* a one-man show is erroneous. Toolan alone on stage segues so convincingly back and forth between his four central characters, the only linkage between them being their confining disability.

Lazar, a young inner-city Dubliner with commonsense solutions to his predicament and problems — this guy's no fool, but can't seem to escape the boundaries. Rick, a popular local country radio DJ; obligatory baseball cap, country accent. Live TV coverage of Rick on-air on the large backing screen behind the stage. He chats to listeners, spins the discs, talks to us, the camera watches. Quietly, confidently "right on," Rick makes perfect sense, why not?

Cap discarded, Toolan, head now hooded, meticulously dons black gloves. Cold, enunciated, educated voice, a covert pre-war eugenicist shares his oh-so-subtle, Jesuitical views. What's to be done "with them" ... with people, yes, like Dieter. A flick of the chair, hood and jacket slipped off shoulders, Toolan glides slowly towards us, soft German accent, thin chest clad in a vest, a young man in Nazi Germany regarded as "simple." Taken from his mother, placed in a home for "treatment." I love my mother, why are they putting me in a home. Why can't she visit? Eventually — they are taking us in a bus, where? People go, they don't return. Whatever the authorities say, Dieter's no fool.

Intercutting them, interrupting them, are brief on-screen pre-recorded "bites" from a horde of chattering pundits, The TV presenter who never gets to say anything "and there we take a break"; the rent-an-expert TV commentator; Vulgaria, Dame Edna Average (sic), down-under accent, wig and glasses, A cross section of up-to the minute vapid nonsense constantly broadcast by those "dedicated doctors of spin." Their clichéd "head and shoulders" fill the stage screen as they overflow our "boxes."

With all of them, Toolan making wonderful use of everything he's got. It's a long time since I've seen/heard voice, hands, face, eyes, lips, even teeth used to such ability. By his hypnotic chair-framed performance, plus the brilliant, apt use of "head and shoulders," frame tightened but in effect loosening, the ever-present wheelchair is forgotten, irrelevant, gone! Donal Toolan has transcended it. *Broadcast* avoids polemic, doesn't harangue. Its ironic argument, this is our reality, simply, tellingly rooted by style, times, and characters. Here we are, four of us and there are many more of us ... *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. If only you'd listen, stop zapping, avoid false Gods.

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*Louis Lentin works as both a theatre director and a television producer-director.*

There is  
always lots of  
talent on show,  
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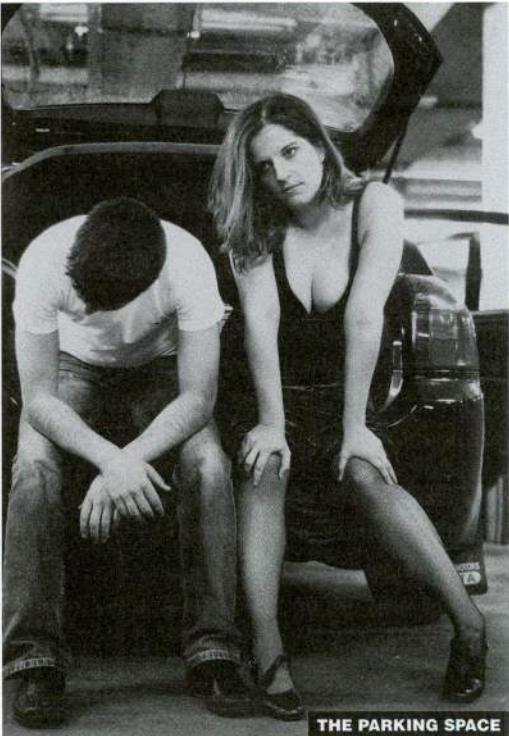
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# SARA KEATING chases butterflies

MURDER. SUICIDE. DEATH BY CHOCOLATE. The tragically short lifespan of the Mayfly. The electric chair... Fringe Festivals are always full of ideas. One thing they often lack is the ability to follow them through. But if the Dublin Fringe Festival is the alternative to the main Dublin Theatre Festival, is it not the alternative perspectives, interrogations, stage spaces, and theatrical styles, rather than the sometime inferior quality of its performers or theatrical conception, that merit our attention? In some instances it is obvious that the solution to these problems would have relied on something as simple as money, and nobody can castigate the poor just for their poverty. There is always, however, lots of talent on show, sometimes even a glimpse of genius, but more often than not the metamorphosis from budding creator to blistering star is incomplete. Having seen ten shows in as many days I was, finances regardless, witness to several fantastic transformations, in which caterpillars turned into beautiful butterflies — and some which didn't turn into anything much at all.

*The Parking Space*, produced by Circus Productions, attempted to blend the genres of thriller, comedy, and ancient Greek drama to create a modern urban tragedy: what it actually created was less compelling than soap opera. Soap opera can be entertaining, but not when it is aspiring to something higher, as was Kevin McGee's script. Ironically, McGee is a writer for *Fair City* but this script

LENA BYRDING



THE PARKING SPACE

In *Time Flies*,  
 we get  
 reality T.V.,  
 hyper-real T.V.,  
 interactive T.V.;  
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 did not  
 use the T.V. as a  
 theatrical  
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 relied in content  
 on what is  
 daily on T.V.

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failed to get its genres right (except perhaps farce, although I don't think that was intentional) and the dialogue was predictable down to the "significant pauses." The revelation of the important "themes" of the work (masculinity, aggression, infidelity) was about as subtle as the stagehands who lumbered on and off during scene changes to adjust the set and caused another significant problem in the production. The action took place in a cordoned-off area of the Fleet Street Car Park and while this allowed the company the use of their crucial prop (the car), it seemed a half-hearted attempt at site-specific theatre and was never engaging enough to allow us to forget that we were in an actual car-park and left us wondering all the time why we were. The value of site-specific drama (a car-park, a car) is thoroughly diminished when the "site" itself becomes the focal point of the drama and an encumbrance to the viewers' pleasure. While the actors (some of them *Fair City* stars themselves, Pat Nolan being the best of the bunch) did their best under the circumstances, the choreography of the stage action was awkward and clumsy. Whether this was due to lack of rehearsal time or poor direction (director Brigie de Courcy culpable surely in either case), the apparent carelessness in this first production of McGee's "thriller" was about the only shocking thing.

*Greatest Hits* and *One for Sorrow*, both at Bewley's Café Theatre, suffered the same problems with genre and dramaturgical construction as *The Parking Space*, as both tried to push the dramatic genres they were working with into something altogether different. Insomnia's *Greatest Hits* was conceived of as a "psychological thriller" but its absurdist slant (Pinter, Pinter, Pinter) totally missed the mark. The performances of Laurence Lowry and Owen Mulhall (whose comedic strengths should not go unnoticed) managed to rescue the production from the fate suffered by *One for Sorrow*. This production by Skipalong Theatre was advertised as a poignant coming of age story, but it was more maudlin than moving; the story of Doreen's release from the stifling small town she grew up in fizzled out in the first ten minutes under the weight of its own attempted pathos.

While *The Parking Space* was badly scripted soap opera, X-Bel-Air's production of *Time Flies* was more *Seinfeld* or *Frasier*. American David Ives' play uses T.V. as both the inspiration and subject of his four slight skits. We get reality T.V., hyper-real T.V., interactive T.V.; and those skits that did not use the T.V. as a theatrical framing device relied in content (let's thank the soap opera again) on what is daily on T.V. Demonstrating how heavily we use television for conversation pieces, decision-making, and guidance in living our lives, the five-strong cast (under the direction of Sarah Brennan) dealt with their material well, transforming the ridicu-



KELLY CAMPBELL

ONE FOR SORROW

lous into the hilarious and never trying to convince the audience that what they were watching was any more serious than what it was: a bit of a skit.

*Rum and Raisin*, a Noggin Theatre Company and Tall Tales co-production, avoided T.V. but was obviously heavily influenced, particularly visually, by film (more specifically, by French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet of *Amelie* and *Delicatessen* fame). A lurid set, fluorescent costumes, and an intentionally botched and blotchy version of the *commedia dell'arte* made the production visually interesting and theatrically adventurous. A flashback sequence at the end of the play, like a videotape being rewound, was a bold move, which paid off for the audience even if it did look clumsy. In *Rum and Raisin* the banality of small-town Ireland is transformed by writers Deirdre Kinahan and Alice Barry into a thrilling black comedy, when Connie the local greengrocer rediscovers his passion for salsa. Maureen Collender and John Anthony Murphy were both excellent (as the irritating Noreen and the frustrated Connie respectively). The favourite touch for the audience was the subtlety of the denouement, when an act of kindness, in the form of a delicious handmade chocolate offered as patrons took their seats, made a second (and less digestible) appearance at the end of the play. It was this sort of subtle trick that epitomised the originality of the play and reaffirmed the success of both the quirky script and the performances.

The performances in *Coyote on a Fence*, wrought under the astute direction of Alan King are a revelation in naturalistic acting as Les Martin and Stewart Roche thoroughly exploit the ambiguities and subtleties of their characters.

Another show remarkable for the unusual nature of its subject matter and the outstanding performances of its cast was *Coyote on a Fence*, presented by Purple Heart Theatre Company in the wonderfully intimate theatre at the Teachers Club. *Coyote on a Fence* is the story of two men — different in every way except in their fate — who await their execution on death row. As their relationship evolves their characters are slowly revealed with greater depth: we learn to sympathise with Randall, the neo-Nazi, as much as hate him, and we come to understand that the liberal John is perhaps more liberal than he should be. The performances wrought under the astute direction of Alan King are a revelation in naturalistic acting as Les Martin and Stewart Roche thoroughly exploit the ambiguities and subtleties of their characters. The spliced set highlighted the closeness of the criminals/victims, while simultaneously underlining the self-imposed isolation of John and the socially imposed isolation of Randall. The combination of Bruce Graham's subtly and ambiguously emotive script with the intimacy of the venue and the strength of the acting made compelling and poignant theatre.

The writer-director and actors in Ursula Rani Sarma's *Blue* at the Project Cube could have learnt something from the subtlety of Purple Heart's production; they played a teenage tragedy for all its

maudlin and sentimental effect. The script was obviously heavily influenced by Enda Walsh, from its use of the Cork dialect to its treatment of disaffected youth, but Sarma ultimately failed to produce any tension in either the relationships between the characters or the plot. While Walsh's plays are both lyrical and visceral, Sarma's writing was neither, and although a number of striking verbal images were evoked, they remained nothing more than pretty words hanging in the air. The acting was simply substandard, and did not help the flawed script. Kevin O'Leary as Joe was



RUM AND RAISIN

quite good, but Corinna Cunningham's overacting and Matthew Keenan's total lack of emotion (not to mention the wavering accents of both) totally overshadowed O'Leary's more compelling performance. The play's reliance on flashbacks sent the characters back to childhood, which the actors evoked with obvious, clichéd gestures that were as irritating as they were unconvincing. Although *Blue* has received excellent reviews and much media attention (both at home and abroad), the nostalgic and sentimental representation of childhood, youth, and innocence just did not convince.

*The Gods Are Not to Blame* presented by Ara mBe at Project was also less than totally convincing but made up for it by offering a new theatrical experience to both the audience and the participants in its creation. This large-scale production, performed by an ensemble of African actors (largely composed of

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amateurs) who live in Ireland, is perhaps the most impressive embodiment of Ireland's multi-cultural reality that Dublin theatre has seen. The translation of the Oedipus story into a Nigerian setting worked smoothly, even if directors Bisi Adigun and Jimmy Fay didn't exploit the visual potential of staging an "African" play. While the actors wore African costumes and the floor was decorated with African patterns and ornamental furniture, the piece was thoroughly static and would have been more effective if it had been staged in the round. While most of the actors obviously lacked professional experience, they made up for it in their focused energy and concentration. Despite some poor delivery, indistinct speeches, and messy entrances, the large cast managed to sustain the tension required in the gestation of the plot. While the production did have a number of flaws it was still an admirable effort.

Michael Harding's one-man show *Swallow* at the Hugh Lane Gallery was also culturally specific: specific to aspects of our culture that much of modern Ireland would prefer to think is long gone. Cyril McAlune is a modern Tarry Flynn: misogynistic, embittered, and sexually frustrated. The monologue encompasses a day in the life (and, sadly, the world) of McAlune, whose daughter is growing up and embracing her sexuality, and whose wife (in remorse for having embraced hers) lies dead on the kitchen floor. Harding, under the direction of Judy Hegarty-Lovett, plays McAlune in a thoroughly unsympathetic vein that only serves to heighten our interest and pity. Revealing that he is totally responsible for the events of the last day, he simultaneously exposes himself as victim. While we are never quite sure what he is victim of (the repressed nature of Irish sexuality, the repressive nature of Irish society?), the pity he arouses is real. If a tragic hero becomes tragic only when he learns how he himself has sinned, Cyril McAlune is far from tragic, and his actions on the day in question are certainly far from heroic, but nonetheless he somehow becomes both. Without any theatrical references or aids, Harding's monologue is a long sigh of regret in a lonely and oppressive world. The language is searing, raw, and sometimes viciously funny; the dramatic mode is Beckettian (cue the involvement of Gare St. Lazare Players, famous for their poignant staging of Beckett's novels); and the material is flawlessly suited to the monologue form — it is precisely its lack of theatricality that makes the play so believable, so touching, and so thoroughly frightening.

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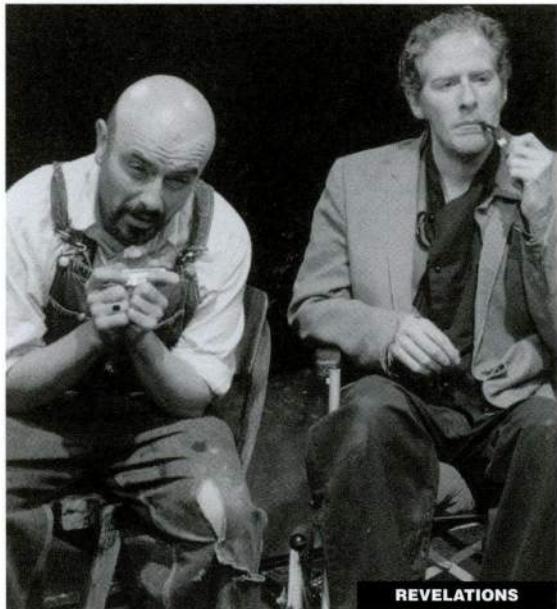
*Sara Keating is researching a PhD on Tom Murphy at the School of Drama, Trinity College and writes about theatre for The Dubliner.*

# BRIAN LAVERY can't find the plot

**B**Y LOCKING TWO MEN TOGETHER IN A SORT OF emotional death embrace, playwright Darren Donohue pays homage to a handful of Beckett plays with *Revelations*, presented by Crooked House Theatre Company at Project. By placing his characters in a post-apocalyptic subterranean setting, he adds contemporary references that make the relationship between the two more accessible and less abstract than Beckett, but also eventually dilute the power of their engagement, with unnecessary distractions from the world outside. Pacing is key: Nick Devlin, the only actor on stage for the duration of the play, is a middle-aged wheelchair-bound man with a posh British accent, who ruminates on childhood memories and sucks on an empty tobacco pipe when alone, but snaps into silence whenever Paul Keeley, his frighteningly jovial companion and captor, is present. Their rapport is polished and well-rehearsed, with witty interjections that could only come from people long forced into each other's company. Donohue also acts as the blind and bloodied intruder who enters their cloistered world (a basement or bomb-shelter) with vague and terrifying news from above. By the end it comes as no surprise that the plot predictably draws on Stephen King's *Misery*, but the play's strength is in the plotless moments, when the tension between Devlin and Keeley becomes an idiosyncratic form of compassionate hatred.

When it worked, *La Musica* — an adaptation of two pieces by Marguerite Duras — evoked the throes of a couple falling out of love. When it fell short,

PETER HUSSEY





LA MUSICA

Olwen Fouéré played the once-adoring, now-hardened lover with the grace and heartache essential to tragic French romance, and Ronan Leahy painfully pined for a love that could have been.

it left audiences bored by repetitive and overlong encounters, and puzzled by the missing links between Duras' original texts. Apparently Anne-Marie (Olwen Fouéré) started speaking in a gravelly voice halfway through the play because she had been strangled to death by her estranged husband Michel (Ronan Leahy). But it would have taken a psychic — or someone involved with the production — to figure that out, especially since the murder was dreamlike and abstract, and the characters continued interacting just as before.

Before that confusion, however, Fouéré played the once-adoring, now-hardened lover with the grace and heartache essential to tragic French romance, and Leahy painfully pined for a love that could have been. Director Selina Cartmell had her actors almost never look each other in the eyes, instead turning away in a sombre style of *commedia dell'arte*. They moved over the broad hardwood floor and through the cavernous space at SS Michael and John boldly, stepping after one another in formal but abstract dance — Leahy's attempts at graceful manoeuvres hilariously collapsed each time, in one of the show's few light-hearted moments. Eerie floor lighting and a beautiful score by Denis Clohessy — performed live on stage by cellist Kate Ellis — helped create an aesthetically elegant, if dramatically unsatisfying, production.

ROS KAVANAGH

Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for The New York Times.

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# Critical Dialogue

**T**HEATRE CRITICISM IS DEAD," PROCLAIMED audience member Eric McKenna, a postgraduate student from Oregon, at October's Conditions of Criticism symposium. He wasn't the only one to take deadly aim at critics and criticism. Cathy Leeney of UCD lamented that in today's world, it's impossible for an artist to reach an audience without the interference of critics; she also argued that certain criticism "amounts to insidious censorship." And according to Sir Richard Eyre, the criticism during his tenure at Britain's Royal National Theatre lacked any substantive dialogue between critic and nation. In fact, he said, most criticism amounted to the following question: "Was it a hit or a miss?"

As part of its week-long Critical Engagement series in October, *irish theatre magazine* hosted a two-day conference on the history and contemporary reality of theatre criticism in an Irish context. **JULIA FURAY** offers a report from the floor.

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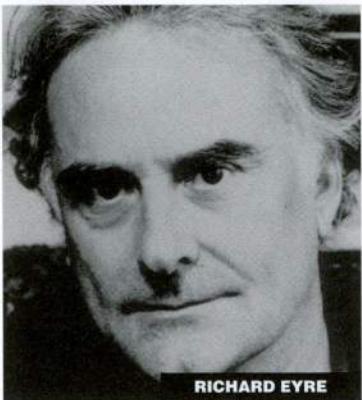
Provocative statements like these — certainly indicative of how many people feel about theatre criticism — demonstrate the potential importance of a conference on the subject. If critics are doing such a lousy job, discussion has to be taken out of the pub and into the public arena. The two-day symposium, held during the Dublin Theatre Festival and Dublin Fringe Festival, promised to do just that. Indeed, the event aspired to foster exactly what Eyre spoke of: a deeper dialogue between critic and nation. Moreover the symposium aimed to forge bridges between critic and scholar, between critic and practitioner, and even between critic and fellow critic. To do so, panellists examined the progression of criticism within Irish theatrical history, and placed Irish criticism — and indeed, Irish theatre itself — within an international context. That context was set by the Friday evening launch panel, with its four international panellists recounting the development of theatre in their respective arenas; Ireland was only discussed peripherally. As panel chair Karen Fricker articulated, the

discussion centred on "the possibilities of theatre criticism in a nation still defining itself."

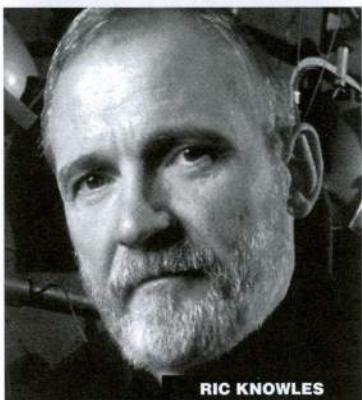
Ric Knowles of the University of Guelph demonstrated that for Canadians, the post-colonial experience is as powerful and unwavering an influence on theatre as it is here in Ireland. He traced the thousand-year traditions of performance in Canada's First Nations, to the initial dramatic productions by the colonising English, to the gradual awakening of Canada as a nation, to today's multicultural theatre practice in Canada's biggest cities. As the nation is so large, Knowles said, Canada has grappled with the contradiction of creating a national theatre for a country in which drama thrives on the local level.

Scotland, too, has struggled with the creation of its national theatre; Joyce McMillan, theatre critic of *The Scotsman*, recounted the recent decision to create a national theatre that is a commissioning body, rather than a building. This comes on the heels of a flowering of innovative, political, visceral Scottish theatre in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For McMillan, theatre is a deeply national form; it never attracted her until she "began to notice theatre as a powerful laboratory" for analysing issues. "Theatre lives when it refers to the world we live in," said McMillan, adding that a critic's role is to write about political context, to be a representative public voice rather than an objective one, and most importantly, "to really care how a theatre speaks to society."

If McMillan spoke of the possibilities and ideals of criticism in society, Richard Eyre countered with views on some of his real-life problems with theatre critics. Noting that Scotland was lucky to have McMillan, Eyre said that there was no critic who wrote well and challenged conceptions while he was artistic director of the RNT from 1988-1997. Ever since the idea for a British National Theatre was proposed in 1848, it has aimed "to achieve a place in which excellence can flourish," he said, "which can only be expressed by what goes onstage." What was needed, he said, was not a simplistic thumbs up/thumbs down judgement, but justified criticism questioning such matters as why the RNT was



RICHARD EYRE



RIC KNOWLES

doing certain works and whether they were representative of British culture as a whole. As a National Theatre — albeit one always regarded as English — it was important that their work also be relevant in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and to question what the idea of "British culture" means. A National Theatre needs a particular combination of political and critical commentaries; Eyre said that the critical discourse on these issues during his tenure was simply not fruitful.

While theatre in Canada, Scotland, and England has gradually defined itself in relation to nation, in Israel the process has been far more volatile, according to Freddie Rokem of Tel Aviv University. Rokem said that 30 years ago, the attitude was this: "If you want theatre, you go to London." Israeli theatre was simply not important enough for academics: it featured hardly any tension between ideology and ethics. But since then, he explained, it's been like "a roller coaster." Even with landmark developments in Israeli theatre, however, criticism has been problematic. One critic reacted to a work by Israel's most significant playwright, Hanoch Levin, by proclaiming: "This is a play which will destroy young people." And today, Rokem continued, the newspapers don't have the room for any theatre criticism beyond very short reviews; the academic community therefore takes on a heightened role in producing serious criticism. Here he was introducing an idea that many came back to during the symposium: the notion of academic criticism as an alternative to traditional journalistic criticism.

At the end of the discussion, Fricker challenged panellists and audience members to consider the questions raised in the evening's discussion the next day, as the focus shifted to theatre, nation, and criticism in a specifically Irish context. As expected, Saturday's discussions featured a selected history of criticism in Ireland — with ample discussion of the highs and lows of critical discourse through the years. More surprisingly, however, the panels also became discussions on Irish identity: how the Irish present themselves onstage internationally, and how, in turn, the international audience reacts to Ireland as it is portrayed in the theatre. By the end of the day, in fact, criticism became almost secondary to the discussion as panellists and speakers from the floor focussed on the topic of identity.

Ulster theatre, for example, has historically had an uneasy relationship with the rest of the Irish canon. And theatre criticism helps us to reconstruct the reasons for this early 20<sup>th</sup> century rift: old reviews "highlight the rupture between localised and nationalised theatre communities." So argued Mark Phelan, of Queen's University in Belfast, during the first panel ("Criticism and the Irish nation: Historical perspectives"). Phelan then delved into an

The value of reviews as historical documents is questionable.

"We can't judge old plays by old reviews," argued Cathy Leeney, "and certainly not plays by women."

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examination of this rift: to begin with, Ulster responded indifferently to works that were to become major plays of the Irish canon, like *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. This, said Phelan, was unsurprising considering the Abbey's historic reluctance to bring its work to Belfast. "The National Theatre can't foster discussion if it doesn't tour," he said. The relationship was further damaged, Phelan argued, when Yeats prevented the Ulster Literary Theatre from acting as a branch of the Abbey. Here was a practical reason for Ulster's vision of Ireland as other: "Regionalism stemmed not from isolationist localism," Phelan said, "but was a necessary reaction to the reductive homogeneity at the National Theatre."

Fellow panellist Cathy Leeney also argued against reductive



THE OLD ABBEY THEATRE

attitudes. Leeney, however, objected not to the Abbey, but instead the critics who failed to do justice to atypical Abbey playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s. She presented two case studies, of the work of playwrights Dorothy MacArdle and Teresa Deevy. MacArdle's play *The Old Man*, produced in 1925, has been lost; therefore all we have today are reviews that do not seem to accept the moral ambiguity of the piece. Deevy's *Katie Roche* faced similarly unsatisfactory criticism; its reviews merely "reflected back conservative values" of a patriarchal society unwilling to listen to what Deevy had to say. The value of reviews as historical documents, therefore, is questionable: "We can't judge old plays by old reviews," argued Leeney, "and certainly not plays by women."

Ben Levitas, of Goldsmiths College in London, however, presented a far more positive model of criticism in Irish history by

looking at the premiere of *The Playboy of the Western World*, and the events surrounding it. In 1907, the Abbey sponsored a critical debate on *Playboy* at the end of the first week's run. The event, said Levitas, effectively "theatricalised theatre criticism itself" by literally putting dissenters onstage at the Abbey. The play itself is also a model of criticism, argued Levitas: Synge's work is a response to critical provocation, to Maud Gonne's exhortation that "inspiration must flow from Gaelic well." While Gonne said that Irish drama should hold a mirror up to the nation going to Mass on Sunday, Synge went deeper: far from being a mere reflection of Irish culture, *Playboy* illustrated an alternative Ireland and acted as "Synge's mirror to nurture."

Chris Morash found positive models for theatre criticism in Irish history. He argued for a return to the 1820s model, in which critics speak for and work to define the diverse audiences of today.

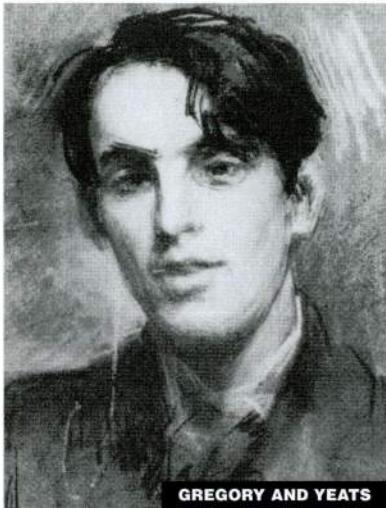
A fourth view of the history of Irish theatre criticism came from Lionel Pilkington of NUI Galway. Pilkington lamented criticism that fails to seize on the dynamic possibilities of theatre, presenting the two figures of P.S. O'Hegarty and Daniel Corkery to elucidate this argument. The two offered opposing views on O'Casey: while O'Hegarty applauded O'Casey for revealing Republicans as phonies, Corkery, who believed that realism was all-important in the theatre, rejected O'Casey's modernist work. "Criticism might be used toward imagining theatre," Pilkington said, himself imagining the powerful utopian potential for criticism. Pilkington argued that critics can help regain the dangerous and dynamic in theatre, so that in a way, theatre functions as the erotic does in our society.

Chris Morash of NUI Maynooth, speaking in the next panel ("Contemporary conditions and perspectives within Ireland"), went even further back to find positive models for theatre criticism within Irish history. He focused first on a vibrant moment: during the 1820s, two separate theatre journals, *The Stage* and *The Theatrical Observer*, published frequent reports and reviews of Irish theatre. These journals are invaluable in reconstructing history, Morash said, but also present a fascinating insight into the relationship between critics, audience members, and practitioners. The editors of *The Stage* aligned themselves with the audience, going so far as to have a fistfight with an actor at one point. Yet by the turn of the century, critics such as Frank Fay and Gabriel Fallon acted as voices of the theatre, as opposed to that of audience. They criticised audiences on behalf of actors; they "turned Yeats's manifesto into a workaday stage ethic." Morash argued for a return to the 1820s model, in which critics speak for and work to define the diverse audiences of today.

Morash's positive model and Cathy Leeney's negative one seemed the most resonant of the historical papers presented. Though all of the historical papers brought forth new insights, Morash and Leeney found particularly fascinating, little-known

models of historical Irish criticism to make their case for a better critical discourse today.

To find an audience, theatre needs to respond to certain contemporary challenges, said fellow panellist P.J. Mathews of St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra. During the Abbey's early days, dramatic performances provoked real discussion from critics and even the world at large. Critics discussed works in terms of how theatre might change the world. Nowadays, it's difficult to do so. Not only is theatre a less dominant force in society, but it has become more difficult for playwrights to make definitive state-



GREGORY AND YEATS

ments regarding our own times. If theatre is going to survive, said Mathews, it has to compete with many other media, and even with the heightened theatricality of our time. In addition to those challenges, Irish theatre must also come to terms with issues of identity: Irish theatrical success in the last 10 years has depended on peddling a saleable version of Irishness to the world, Mathews argued. He gave the example of Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* as a piece that has met and surpassed these challenges; Mathews called it a play that is "mired in Irish tradition, but utterly contemporary."

In the same panel, Jools Gilson-Ellis of University College Cork surprised the audience three times over: by literally dancing her way through her introduction; by pulling her printed presentation out of a girlish red handbag and most of all, by presenting her own unusual brand of criticism-as-performance. Gilson-Ellis read selections from a diary of her association with

director Johnny Hanrahan and sculptor Daphne Wright, in which she documented and responded to Hanrahan and Wright's process of collaboration. Gilson-Ellis's experimental critical response was designed to engage in and respond to the process of making theatre, rather than just the product. "I want to join in," she said, adding that she was trying to be useful, trying to measure poetry by getting down into it. Criticism, she seemed to be saying through her superficially playful presentation, can be just as creative as art.

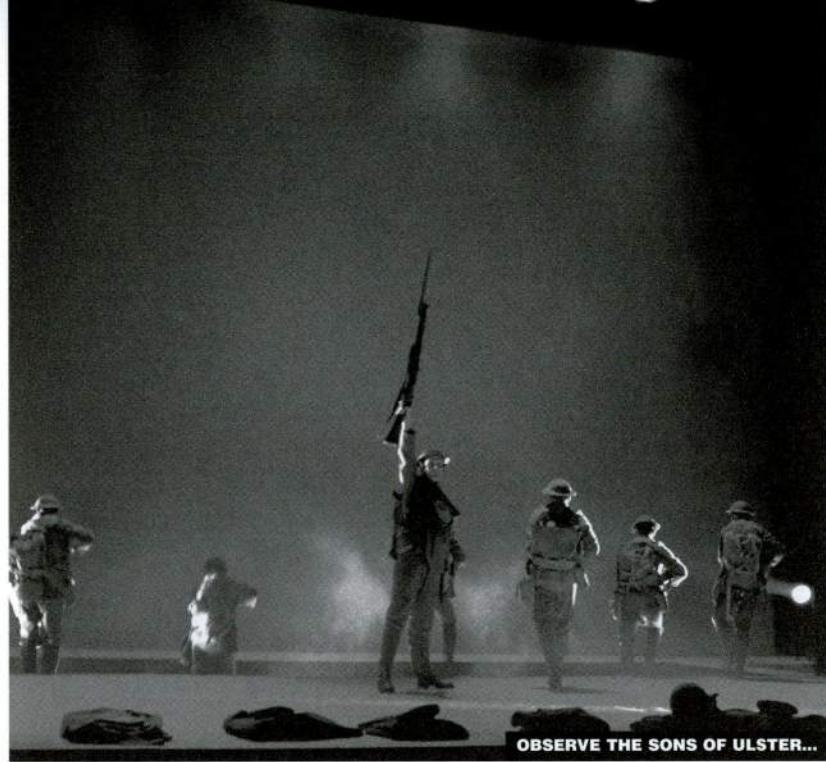
Vic Merriman challenged the notion of Ireland as a prototypical postcolonial culture, as the people who founded the Irish state were "the most conservative revolutionaries ever."

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Shaun Richards, of Staffordshire University, also looked to explore an unusual relationship between theatre and critic; he did so by discussing Field Day. The company themselves certainly acted as social critic — their productions and pamphlets are "impossible to disentangle," Richards noted. To examine their influence, Richards first delved into a word often used to describe Field Day: "postcolonial." He argued that works — especially those of Field Day — are too simplistically described as postcolonial without really examining what the term means. Richards then cautioned against a simplistic annexation of Brian Friel's Field Day plays — specifically *Translations* — into this reductive postcolonial reading. One has to acknowledge Field Day, he said, for their role in instating serious cultural as well as political activity here in Ireland. According to Richards, Field Day's works did far more than act as a postcolonial voice: they "set the terms for debate in Irish criticism."

Victor Merriman of the Dundalk Institute of Technology reflected on postcolonial Ireland on a macrocosmic level in Saturday's third panel ("Edited Out: What doesn't get written about in Irish theatre criticism"). He challenged the notion of Ireland as a prototypical postcolonial culture, as the people who founded the Irish state were "the most conservative revolutionaries ever." What sparked the postcolonial energy for the arts in Ireland, he argued, were the clashes between high expectations for the new Irish state and harsh reality of a poor nation. Moving to today's conditions of criticism, Merriman underlined the influence of new and developing forms of theatre. Ireland — still recovering from a longstanding distrust of the visual — has also had to define a new attitude to criticism, Merriman said. Practically, this means new challenges for critics, who have to find a way to work beyond their pedagogical function. He pointed to the example of Fintan O'Toole's review, in the late lamented Second Opinion column in *The Irish Times*, of *The Business of Blood*: here was a place, he said, where a critic addressed the possibility of art itself; the review even led authors Donal O'Kelly and Kenneth Glennan to re-evaluate their own work.

Merriman's paper focused on the large, underlying theoretical



OBSERVE THE SONS OF ULSTER...

issues in Irish theatre criticism, but Bernadette Sweeney of University College Cork questioned many of the practical concerns with documenting physicality in theatre in a literary form such as printed criticism. To begin with, a piece of theatre itself is filtered through a number of editorial elements that range from directorial decisions to venue constraints. Theatre criticism is just as subject to practicalities. Word counts, production photos alongside the review, star rating systems, newspaper editorial policy — all of these strain the documentation process; these concerns can also overshadow the creative element of theatre criticism. And critical practices, in turn, can also foreground real visual documentation. For all these reasons, then, criticism that is both creative and documentary — Sweeney here mentioned Gilson-Ellis's work — gives reason to hope.

David Cregan of Trinity College cited the example of Frank McGuinness to illustrate the way critics — both journalistic and academic — will sometimes ignore entire aspects of dramatic works. Here, Cregan focused on the fact that very little criticism of McGuinness's works has dealt with the issue of homosexuali-

ty. The experience of being queer informs every aspect of McGuinness' plays, Cregan argued. In *Dolly West's Kitchen* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, McGuinness uses gay characters "to challenge the historical myths which are the basis of both plays," said Cregan. He ultimately called for a critical discourse that is more open to diversity, both sexual and otherwise; here he echoed Cathy Leeney's earlier criticism of "gender-blind" critics.

After this panel, audience members began to wonder just whether criticism as a field would benefit practically from the symposium, as the conference was mostly attended by academics. "Are we just talking to ourselves?", wondered Sweeney. Several lamented the difficulty of jumpstarting critical debate amongst practitioners; panel chair Anna McMullan of Trinity College called for the need "to break up the single voice of the lone critic" in order to create dialogue. Cregan argued that no matter the outcome in terms of dialogue, a critical conference such as this was useful because "critics are influenced by academic interrogation." And Fricker later added that even if critics were talking to themselves, critical discourse is important, especially since scholars are often in the practice of teaching theatre criticism to their students. She also promised that *itm* would begin asking for responses from practitioners to attempt to foster a more engaged critical dialogue.

The discussion highlighted one of the pitfalls of the symposium: the paucity of practitioners and working theatre critics in attendance. A discussion of what gets "edited out" in criticism would seem to require a diverse attendance (in both panel and audience) to call attention to the aspects of theatre that do not get covered in criticism. While the Friday launch panel featured a professional (and even international) diversity, the Saturday panels were far more homogenous.

The last panel ("Irish theatre in an international critical context") began with an examination of the reception of Irish theatre in Prague by Clare Wallace of Charles University. Unsurprisingly, it seems, the Czech people tend to see Irish theatre as deeply linguistic. Czech theatre, by contrast, is not as focussed on new writing, said Wallace; they are more concerned with physical theatre. She praised the Czechs for spending "a lot of time trying to connect with another culture," and challenged Ireland to do the same.

To examine the reception of Irish theatre abroad, Nicholas Grene of Trinity College narrowed the focus to two figures in Irish theatre: Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh. The playwrights are utterly different, he said, and critics generally like either one or the other. McPherson's work, he said, is interesting in the way it keeps "retaining the innocence of the pre-

Patrick Lonergan argued that Martin McDonagh doesn't hesitate to capitalise on real tragedy for a tasteless laugh or reinforce the stereotype that the Irish are either poets or eejits.

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THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE

modern," and derives its power only from language (albeit a language without the lyricism of O'Casey, Synge, or Barry); it gets no support from spectacle. Grene also wondered if critics accepted McPherson's preferred mode, the monologue, because he's from the Irish language-based tradition: "Would a non-Irish playwright get the same reception?" McDonagh, on the other hand, uses "the Ireland of the mind" to take advantage of stereotypes and exploit the possibilities for violence in Ireland. In the face of such violence, Grene asked, "What can you do but laugh?"

Patrick Lonergan of NUI Galway further tightened the discussion, focusing only on the international reception to McDonagh, especially that of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. He compared *Lieutenant* unfavourably to Tim Loane's *Caught Red Handed*, then argued that McDonagh doesn't hesitate to capitalise on real tragedy for a tasteless laugh or reinforce the stereotype that the Irish are either poets or ejits. He illustrated this point by reading excerpts from an exceptionally corny programme note from an Illinois production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* ("The laughter will come of itself. The tears are inevitable"). McDonagh's onstage version of Irishness, argued Lonergan, is a "commodified abstraction" (albeit one from which Ireland benefits) with very little to do with the truth. Further, there is no point, according to Lonergan, at which McDonagh appears to deeply probe into the way he toys

with stereotypical Irishness. Lonergan then posed a question: if McDonagh is exploiting Irishness, what about the audiences that don't know this, and take these stereotypes at face value?

The international panel presentations then expanded into a lively full-audience discussion of Irish identity as it is portrayed onstage, both nationally and internationally. Mark Phelan objected to the way panellists were essentialising foreign audiences, just as they had accused international audiences of doing to the Irish. Furthermore, Phelan argued, the Irish have been trading on their contrapuntal identities — such as the images of the West of Ireland that McDonagh toys with — for a long while now.

Mark Phelan argued that the Irish have been trading on their contrapuntal identities — such as the images of the West of Ireland that McDonagh toys with — for a long while now.

Audience member Tina Mahony, of the Catholic University of America, also argued against essentialising American audiences: she explained that when she chaired a post-show discussion after *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the talk centred not on the Irish identity, but of the plight of the caretaker and the issue of euthanasia. Ric Knowles countered with his experience of seeing Irish plays in New York, which he said was a purely nostalgic experience. Grene used the example of *Angela's Ashes* to respond: the book presents Irish identity as an Other, which means that anyone can identify with it. The Irish presentation of itself as Other, therefore, becomes a commodity.

Shaun Richards argued that the day's proceedings, and Irish theatre scholarship in general, were focussing too much on Irish identity — it is even emphasised in foreign graduate schools. "We are always talking about Irishness and nation," he said, arguing that we need to move on to new approaches and focal points. Wallace agreed: "Can we quit obsessing about Irishness, and instead focus on the play?" These were refreshing attitudes, but it meant that the day ended on the unresolved note of "let's not talk about identity any more" — a frustrating finish to an overall stimulating day.

The "Conditions of Criticism" symposium was ultimately an attempt to examine theatre criticism through the lens of academia. This lens led to many insights regarding the history and legacy of theatre criticism in Ireland, but surprisingly little discussion of contemporary Irish theatre criticism. Instead, panellists focused on the wider and deeper conditions which have led to the situation which critics in Ireland face today. At the end of the day, the symposium was a challenge, a call for deeper exchange of ideas among all of us to whom theatre is important.



*Julia Furay is co-editor of Critical Moments, a compilation of theatre reviews by Fintan O'Toole, recently published by Carysfort Press. Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, she holds an MA in Drama from University College, Dublin.*



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# One More Time

JIMMY MURPHY introduces an excerpt from **THE CASTECOMER JUKEBOX**, premiering in a Red Kettle production at Garter Lane, Waterford, in February.



**JIMMY MURPHY WRITES:** The Castlecomer Jukebox was one of the leading showbands of the late '70s and '80s. Led by '60s showband legend Ginty Maher, the group's best days are now behind them, and some of the members have found themselves on hard times. Nowadays they get by when they regroup every summer and play for visitors to the hotel of an old showband impresario, Hitler Lynch. The band's fortunes are about to change, as an important visitor is coming to the hotel. A lavish dinner is planned, with the band providing the night's entertainment. Media attention will help the band reclaim its glory days,

but at a price. Ginty has to step down for the night and allow someone to step into his shoes – the husband of a local TD, himself a failed musician.

GINTY It's all right for you, Rio. You're always on the radio selling something. Word is that you've got the new music quiz on the telly —

RIO Well, it's not confirmed yet.

GINTY Me? My phone stopped ringing a long time ago. There's days I pick it up to see if it's even working at all.

RIO I'm sorry if I put my foot in it. Whatever it takes, huh?

GINTY Couple of more years and the

bank's cleared. Then I can do what I like, then I'll be back on easy street.

RIO Yeah, me and you, Ginty. Right next door to each other. (*A silence, he's something on his mind.*)

GINTY Listen Rio, I tried calling you — (*Ginty is interrupted as Dixie enters with Val, carrying some instruments which they lay down.*)

DIXIE I wakes up the following morning and the two of them still in the bed, one on this side of me, her mate on the

other and the two of them, gagging for it boy, gagging for it.

VAL And what, you gave the two of them one for the road?

DIXIE Sure how could I? It was twenty to eleven, and hadn't I arranged for this red haired to call to me room at a quarter to!

VAL And what did you do?

DIXIE Knickers, bras, tights, it was like a jumble sale on the floor. As soon as they were half decent they were out that door like a flash. Goodbye!

RIO Same old Dixie...

VAL How are you, chicken? (*Val pecks Rio on the cheek, salutes Ginty. Dixie goes to the side door and peeks out at reception.*)

DIXIE Hmm... fine looking young wan, God bless her.

VAL Said he was up on two 23-year olds the other night.

GINTY I didn't know sheep lived that long.

DIXIE You're just jealous, lads. I mean, look at me, look at me...

VAL I think he sprayed them jeans on, what Ginty? (*Ginty laughs.*)

GINTY Jaysus, don't bend down, whatever you do.

DIXIE I'm often taken for 40, 45.

VAL Around the waist maybe.

DIXIE The Cliff Richards of the show-band scene!

RIO It could be worse, I suppose, could be the Keith Richards.

VAL Jesus, wouldn't you think at your age you'd have had your fill of it by now?

DIXIE Eh, excuse me? What do you mean, my age? That's a delicacy you never lose your appetite for, that right? (*Dixie crosses and shakes Ginty's hand.*)

GINTY So they say, Dixie, so they say.

DIXIE Never lose the taste for the bit of snatch, boys, never.

VAL The oldest swinger in town. I'm surprised that thing hasn't fallen off by now.

DIXIE Ask your missus.

VAL Hey...

DIXIE And your mother too.

RIO Dixie...!

VAL Where's Shaymo? Out at the bar, no doubt.

RIO Don't you know him? Probably crawled out of the bed at the last minute and is breaking the land speed record as we speak. (*Ginty looks a little uneasy. He laughs a little over the top at Rio's quip.*)

DIXIE Well, boys, are we all set for another glorious season? How many broken hearts will I leave in my wake this year, hah? How many beautiful ladies will I

## play excerpt

seduce with my charms this summer?

RIO There's no seduction to it. You just get them drunk and take advantage of them.

DIXIE Whatever works, darling, whatever works. (*Dixie goes to Rio and sits on her lap.*)

DIXIE Well gorgeous, did you miss me? (*She pushes him up playfully.*)

RIO Get off before I catch something off'a you. Yeh pervert.

VAL See that bag. Full of johnnies, he says.

DIXIE And Viagra, boy!

VAL God love them that need it.

DIXIE Don't need it baby... just means Dixie lasts all night long for the ladies.

VAL Bet it's full of dirty magazines.

DIXIE This boy still sends them home sweating.

VAL Glamorous grannies with their false teeth, that's his strength now days.

DIXIE More than you ever get.

VAL You'd want to settle down soon Dixie. End up an old man pulling the ribs out of yourself morning, noon, and night.

RIO Thanks for that mental picture, Val.

GINTY If he's not doing it already.

DIXIE Marriage... and make the same mistake the rest of yous made? I might be one or two things, Val, but one

thing I'm not's a gobshite. Oh, sorry Ginty, didn't mean —

GINTY It's ok.

VAL Listen Buster, I made no mistake... still happily married.

DIXIE The only reason she's still with you is because of your money. Saw you putting all your money into video shops and flats and she thinks, "hello... I think I'll stick around here." But what oul Val here doesn't know is that while he's out on the road she's calling around to the tenants for more than the rent. (*Dixie gets on stage and starts to set up his kit.*)

DIXIE Now I want to know three things before I get going. How much Hitler's paying us, what time are we working to, and who's getting the first round in?

VAL I was wondering when he'd start off about the money.

DIXIE For all we make of it here. And talking about money, Rio, what's all this about the new quiz show?

VAL Oh yeah...!

RIO God, is that all everybody can talk about?

GINTY All the showbiz pages are saying you've got it.

RIO It's not confirmed yet.

VAL She'll have us on, won't you?

RIO We'll see, lads, we'll see.  
(*the play continues...*)



# entrances & exits

**PETER CRAWLEY** notes the coming and goings in Irish theatre

Opera Theatre Company have appointed **ANNILESE MISKIMMON** (pictured) as their new artistic director... The Fringe Festival has appointed **MADHbh NI CHONULADH** as programme co-ordinator, while **KERRY WEST** has departed the Festival to become the new administrator of Calypso Theatre Company... **NORMA LEEN** has departed *irish theatre magazine* and the Dublin Theatre Festival for the role of production administrator with the St. Patrick's Day Festival... **AOIFE FLYNN** (who provides administrative support for this magazine) has left her position as PA in Abhann Productions to become executive development officer with the Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo.

**CAROLINE FITZGERALD** has been appointed artistic director of Galloglass. The company has also appointed **JIM MYERS**, previously of the Regal Theatre, Clonmel and Theatre Royal, Waterford, as its new company manager... Draiocht has appointed **EMER McGOWAN** as its new director. An internal appointment, she transfers from the post of education/outreach officer with the arts centre... **CATHERINE McNALLY** has been appointed to the new position of marketing and project co-ordinator with Big Telly.

Barnstorm has appointed **JOANNE BEIRNE**, previously with the Galway



Youth Theatre, to the new position of outreach development officer... **SARAH DURCAN**, formerly administrator with Corn Exchange, has assumed the position of company manager with the organisation... **KERRY WOODS** replaces

**ORLA McGRADY** as administrator of Tinderbox.... **JOHN ASHTON** has been appointed to the role of general manager of Macnas, transferring from the position of production manager with the company. His old position will be advertised.

**CAROLINE WILLIAMS**, formerly with Glass House Theatre and Books Irish, has been appointed director of the Irish Playography... **STEPHEN BOURKE** is to leave his position as director of technical services at the Project. The position will be advertised... **FIONA DOWLING** replaces **KATIE MARTIN** as administrator of the National Association of Youth Drama... **ALI FITZGIBBON** has departed her position as administrator with Replay to become director of the Young at Art festival, a position briefly held by **OPHELIA BYRNE**. **BRONA WHITTAKER**, formerly of the Belfast Festival at Queens, has taken over FitzGibbon's duties for Replay.... **SUE BAKER** has been appointed project co-ordinator for Meridian. This is a new position... **JAIME CARSWELL** has left his position with the Hawk's Well Theatre to become development manager of Blue Raincoat Theatre Company. 

# book reviews

## CHOREOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS

Edited by Mary Brady

Institute of Choreography and Dance, Cork, 2003

REVIEWED BY CHRISTINE MADDEN

DURING MY UNDERGRADUATE DAYS, a professor once pronounced that "you can go and listen to Beethoven's Ninth, but you still have to talk about it afterward." Being young and in total awe of anyone with a PhD, I was impressed by this. In hindsight, however, I'm not convinced he was fully correct.

While reading *Choreographic Encounters*, I was reminded of this. We rely so much on words that we sometimes end up obscuring meaning instead of illuminating it. To be successful in communicating, any art — including the literary arts — needs to circumvent the literal meaning of words to convey that kernel of intended meaning, what people used to call truth. Part of why dance is such a powerful art is its independence from verbal expression, in its physicality and temporality.

Several of the essays comprising *Choreographic Encounters* grapple with this issue. They were written either by dance-makers or critics. The critics employ language discursively to make points about dance in Ireland; the practitioners sometimes manage to dance around the issue. In his essay, Fearghus Ó Conchúir touches on this difficulty — in fact, it seems to be part of the reason for his turn away from "literary and linguistic theory" to become a dancer. He

laments our overdependence on verbal language, and celebrates the "profound wisdom" of the "corporeality of dancers." Michael Seaver emphasises the need to sensitise "the viewer to the live body, its breath, impulses, organs and weight." He applauds dance practitioners such as Julie Lockett, Liz Roche, and Rex Levitates, and the company half/angel, for emphasising the raw, un-airbrushed body in all its palpable mass.

"A Conversation on Stillness" — a transcript of a discussion among four international dance practitioners — brings the concept of corporeality to a stand-still, so to speak. Mass is at its densest when not in motion, so the still body functions on stage as a full-frontal, in-your-face presence. Stillness also brings into sharp relief the space around the body. "Why the imperative for the dancer to be moving all the time?" asks André Lepecki, countering a "modernist current in dance that believed the ultimate aim was for the dancer to dissolve completely into the dance." Isabelle Ginot cites the example of choreographer Dominique Bagouet, who "had the idea that

dancing erases something of the body" and used stillness as something to take the body into a different state. Myriam van Imschoot mentions Pina Bausch, who would have dancers standing very close to the audience, "so the body seems more present to a spectator who becomes more active in scrutinising that presence." Other contributors playfully use the idea



**PALPABLE** Rex Levitates' Senses

of space, invisibility, or the meditative powers of the mind, as a foil against which the body becomes all the more flesh, blood and bone.

As lively as these viewpoints are, they sprawl too far afield. Even some of the individual essays have trouble with their balance and centre. A bit more focus and structure would make this volume more valuable. Perhaps because dance has been the poor relation of the arts in Ireland for so long, people involved in it are clearly thirsting for the recognition and opportunities for expression they deserve — so this collection covers much ground. Should another volume follow, it would benefit from the adoption of a guiding theme. Designer Nigel Williams and the publishers deserve plaudits for the book's exceptional attractiveness. Featuring arresting black and white photographs by Derek Speirs enlivened with copper punctuation, it is a singularly elegant volume.

*Choreographic Encounters* offers a welcome forum for dance. It makes thought-provoking reading — despite the difficulty of describing an artform so temporal, so mortal that it is, as Diana Theodores entitles her essay, "Being There and Strangely Not." Can you talk, write about dance? Clearly, you can. To a point. Because what Heidegger called "das Wesen" — being as a dynamic, not static entity that resides at the dark heart of artistic medium, where the artist and the art-participant encounter it — is felt in dance through the medium of the body. Writing about dance encircles this experience, can open your way into it, but won't replace that meeting place beyond the fence of words. Not that any of the contributors would wish it to — quite the contrary.

The essays in the book act as a torch, bringing the developing dance sector and

its increasingly startling work into our sight. Discovering the literal vocabulary of dance practitioners can help unlock the physical vocabulary of dance. And then, when we've experienced the meaning beating at the centre of the choreography, we can enter into dialogue and talk about it afterward.

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Christine Madden is a writer, journalist and critic currently resident in Dublin.

**THE THEATRE OF MARINA CARR:  
BEFORE RULES WAS MADE**

**edited by Anna McMullan and Cathy  
Leeney**

*Dublin, Carysfort Press, 2003  
and*

**CONOR MCPHERSON: IMAGINING MISCHIEF  
by Gerard Wood**

*Dublin, Liffey Press, 2003  
REVIEWED BY PATRICK LONERGAN*

WRITING A BOOK ABOUT A CONTEMPORARY writer is a risky enterprise. Tastes change quickly; so do writers' interests — so there's always a danger that a book can be obsolete before it hits bookshop shelves. This, understandably, makes publishers nervous about taking on studies of writers whose reputations are still being formed. Yet at the moment, it's precisely these kinds of books that Irish theatre most needs: many young Irish writers have now produced bodies of work substantial enough to require, and perhaps demand, evaluation and contextualisation. The work of Marina Carr and Conor McPherson certainly merits serious study; the publication of these new volumes about them is thus most welcome.

Carr and McPherson are among the most popular young Irish writers, and share many similarities. The early work of

both was poorly received and misunderstood; both are strongly associated with the form they use — monologue in McPherson's case, myth in Carr's; both are admired for their skilful use of language. But their works have also generated debate: the authenticity of their settings and characterisation has been queried and questions have been raised about how gender functions in their works. And some critics feel that both have exhausted the style of writing upon which their reputations are based. So the task of any book on these writers must firstly be to take stock of their achievements to date, and then to deal with the controversies that have clouded their reception, so that debate about the writers can move forward.

Anna McMullan and Cathy Leeney's book on Marina Carr achieves these aims very well, going a long way towards answering our questions about Carr, while identifying several new areas for discussion. Their collection of essays covers most of Carr's plays, and — in what we may now be able to call the Carysfort Press style — analyses the work in relation to both text and performance. Literary criticism by academics is joined by reports on individual productions by directors and dramaturgs; actors Sarahjane Scaife and Olwen Fouéré write about performing Carr's work; writers Eilis Ní Dhuibhne, Frank McGuinness, and Tom McIntyre discuss her technique and significance; and original reviews of Carr's best plays

are reprinted. Enrica Cerquoni presents an illustrated essay on scenography — which has the virtue of not only elucidating Carr's writing, but also demonstrating the value of a form of criticism that's severely underused in Irish theatre. We also have a reprint of Tony Roche's comparison of Carr with Teresa Deevy — which does the important job of locating Carr in a historical context, while also using her work as a way of getting into contact with a neglected part of the Irish canon. In short, the choice of themes here is about as comprehensive as one could want, and it's a great compliment to Carr that her work has provoked so many interesting and well organised responses.

Gerald Wood's book on McPherson is part of a valuable new series from the Liffey Press on Contemporary Irish Writers and Filmmakers. It is a very short book, with the remit of taking us

through McPherson's plays and films chronologically, concluding with a lengthy interview with the writer. It's animated by the proposition that McPherson's plays, by "imagining mischief", are calls for ethical action — an interesting idea, which Wood usefully contextualises with reference to McPherson's writing and, in a good example of creative research, McPherson's MA thesis on "Logical Restraint and Practical Reasoning: On Attempted Refutations of Utilitarianism." The book will be most useful to non-specialist readers and undergraduate students, especially those who



**INSULTING?** *Derbhla Molloy in McPherson's Come on Over*

haven't seen or read all of McPherson's plays. There's also much helpful information about McPherson's background, and individual productions of his works. One could wish, however, for more analysis and less plot summary; for information about the particular performance style necessitated by the monologue form; and about McPherson's directorial style. Even so, this is a clearly written book that achieves its aim of introducing McPherson's work.

There is often a tendency in books that initiate the study of a particular writer to eulogise and celebrate, rather than criticise — and this is appropriate in many ways. Wood's enthusiasm for McPherson is certainly appealing. He is anxious to defend his subject from the two charges most frequently levelled against him — that he has exhausted the monologue form and that there is a problem with his characterisation of women. Wood shows convincingly that McPherson's use of monologue should not be dismissed — but does not dispel the notion that McPherson might be more interesting writing for ensembles than single performers. To the accusation that McPherson's women are crudely characterised, he reproduces McPherson's statement that such an accusation is "insulting" to the many talented women with whom he's worked. It's not surprising that McPherson views the matter in this way, but this is by no means enough to resolve this argument; more analysis of this issue would have been welcome.

In contrast, the book on Carr is able to make space for dissenting voices. Vic Merriman argues that there are serious problems in Carr's presentation of women from marginalised socio-economic groups, and Clare Wallace's analysis of Carr's reception abroad shows how

Irishness can function in worrying ways when deployed in foreign contexts. A book that allows its contributors to hold opposing views will necessarily deepen the reader's understanding of its subject, since we are offered a choice between conflicting opinions. This is good for the study of Marina Carr; it's also good for theatre criticism in general.

It's not a disservice to either book to state that it leaves the reader wanting to know more. But perhaps it is a problem that readers who want to know more will be unlikely to find answers to their questions anywhere else. I was left with a strong desire to read full-length studies that give Carr and McPherson the kind of detailed, well-informed analysis that can't be achieved in collections of essays, or books for the general reader. We can't criticise these books for failing to achieve objectives they don't set for themselves. But praising them shouldn't stop us from acknowledging that Irish criticism will soon be unable to move forward without a more deeply considered sense of the overall context in which both Irish drama and its criticism are produced.

*Imagining Mischief* offers a useful perspective on McPherson; and the series of which it forms a part is one of the most positive recent developments in Irish publishing. And McMullan and Leeney's book on Carr is valuable and important, basing itself on the foundations of rigorous, well-informed debate and good, clear writing. And, due mainly to its wide range of methodologies and perspectives, it's probably the best book on contemporary Irish theatre to have been published for quite some time. 

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Patrick Lonergan is completing a PhD on contemporary Irish drama at NUI Galway.

## THE COMICAL MYSTERIES

by Kevin McGee

Natural Shocks Theatre Company  
Loose End Studio, Civic Theatre, Tallaght  
2-13 Sep. 2003; reviewed 13 Sep.

BY CATRIONA MITCHELL

BASED ON A PLAY BY ITALIAN SATIRIST Dario Fo and adapted by Kevin McGee, *The Comical Mysteries* tells the Gospel stories from a new and subversive point of view — that of the ordinary people. This production is semi-improvised, presented on an intimate, darkened stage with no set and a minimum of portable props; all characters are played by three male performers who, with their boundless energy and considerable clowning talent, are not unlike the Reduced Shakespeare Company.

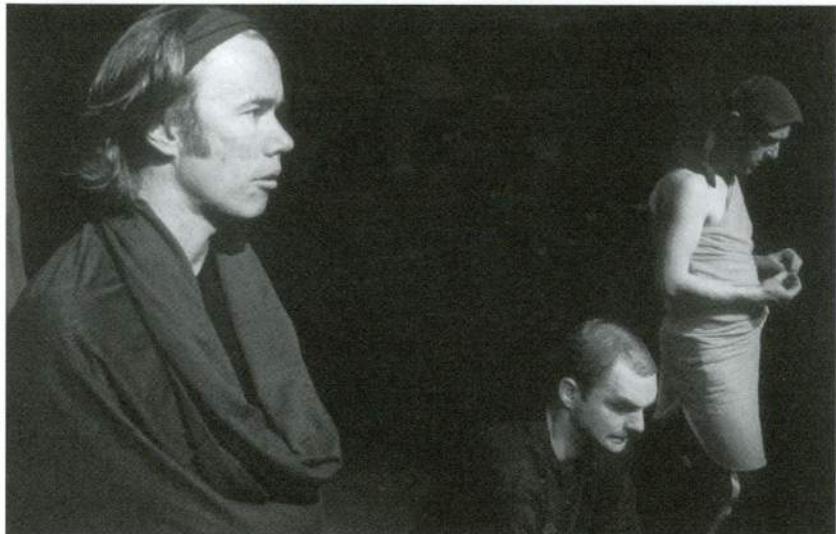
The script is deliciously irreverent, if coarse. It is broken into a series of short, bawdy skits. Each one is informally introduced by a cast member, temporarily out of role, in a direct address to the audience. The first is about the flagellants (guess which lexical games are played there.) John Delaney rips his shirt off to reveal a red bandage wound around his bare torso. Two figures leap out onto the stage bound in stretchy red cloth, writhing and screaming, protruding elbows, fists and knees. A voice booms out: "Judgment is coming to rich and poor. We will all be naked. Let the whip bite..." It is a striking moment for its heightened physicality. The Pope and the king (Stephen Cavanagh and Eoin Lynch) then appear from two Punch and Judy stands on the stage, with only their heads visible. They titter with delight as it becomes apparent there's whipping to be done. Lynch is particularly funny, with his shrill snickers and donkey-brays; his

comical eyebrow-movements are reminiscent of Rowan Atkinson's.

Director Donnacadh O'Briain says in a programme note that "we have tried not to play it safe with our work" — a fact that becomes more than evident in the second playlet. The subject is King Herod's infanticide. Delaney and Lynch are proud Dublin mothers, clucking and cooing over the babes in their arms (represented by bundles of cloth). When a third mother turns up with her child, they exclaim, "Mother of fuck, they'll chop your legs off." Only then does it become apparent the first two babies are dead; their mothers have obeyed orders without question. Enter the men responsible for the killings. One soldier is having a crisis of conscience, however his superior is having none of it. "They lift their babies like olives, and we go around with a cocktail stick," he coaxes. "Just look at what we're doing as a small adjustment to the calendar..."

In a sketch that is pure comedy, ten cured lepers are summoned to a board meeting, to decide how they'll thank Jesus for restoring them to health. Among the group is a junkie fresh off the plane from Amsterdam ("Anyone got any pills?"), a gay man, a snitch ("Do everything through the chair"), and a thug ("I'll put you through the chair in a minute"). Only a hippie do-gooder is truly interested in expressing his gratitude, but he's fighting a losing battle; the chairman himself is only interested in a mention in the *Independent's* social diary. Lynch, who plays all 11 characters here, moves from one to another with astonishing speed and dexterity. The result is uproarious.

Meantime, we are told that Jesus is hanging around in the town square,



**DRAG** Delaney,  
Lynch, and  
Cavanagh in *The  
Comical Mysteries*

variety of ways. Arguments break out over the importance of material wealth. One man concludes that to be rich is a sin: he plans to sell his DVD player, because "everyone hasn't got one." "Everyone hasn't got a penis," counters an irate Dublin property dealer, played brilliantly by Delaney. "I'm not giving mine away."

Despite its farcical nature, *The Comical Mysteries* is not without substance. It exposes not only the hypocrisy of the Church, but also the corruption of secular leaders, and the dangers of placing blind faith in any kind of totalitarian authority. Gags are interspersed with thought-provoking statements, such as "You know who's in power because their hate matters," and "Most of

where he is accruing a great many fans. Unsurprisingly, his words are being interpreted in a variety of ways.

the damage in this world is done by people trying to improve it."

Above all, *The Comical Mysteries* questions the status quo. It aims to make us laugh, but also to think; laughter is the vehicle that drives home a political message. The result is entertaining, and relevant too.

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Catriona Mitchell is completing an M.Phil in creative writing at Trinity College.

**DE PROFUNDIS** by Oscar Wilde

Kilkenny Arts Festival

Friary Hall, Kilkenny

11-16 Aug. 2003; reviewed 12 Aug.

BY SUSAN CONLEY

MADONNA AND GUY, POSH AND BECKS, even, at a push, Nicky and Georgina — as celebrity couples go, none of them have anything on Oscar and Bosie. Oscar Wilde constructed a tabloid personality

that preempts our own red-tops, and he wanted only an angry young (beautiful) man to put the cherry atop his notoriety sundae. It would prove to be a bitter dish, as *De Profundis* recounts — a cry from a soul imprisoned not only in Reading Gaol, but also in the prison of a tragically unhealthy relationship.

Staged during this year's Kilkenny Arts Festival, Joe O'Byrne directed Philip Judge in a solo performance of great depth, passion, and pain. Experience of modern monologue made one approach with unnecessary caution: unlike the colloquial and chatty "c'mere and I'll tell you a story" tone of the works of contemporary Irish writers, Oscar here speaks only to Bosie, and what a world of difference that makes. Listening to Judge can be painfully like eavesdropping at times, and watching him cycle through a daunting repertoire of feelings is often uncomfortably voyeuristic.

For Judge-as-Oscar is far from alone on that stage: not only is Lord Alfred Douglas there in all but body, Oscar is kept company by his persona — his public self, the well-born wit who can declare nothing but his genius. Despite his incarceration, and the meanness of his dress and surroundings, the posturing dandy can't help but be channeled into the battered shell of Prisoner C.3.3. The torrent of language comes not only from the heart, via a letter written to Bosie, but also from the head that orchestrated the "Wilde" brand.

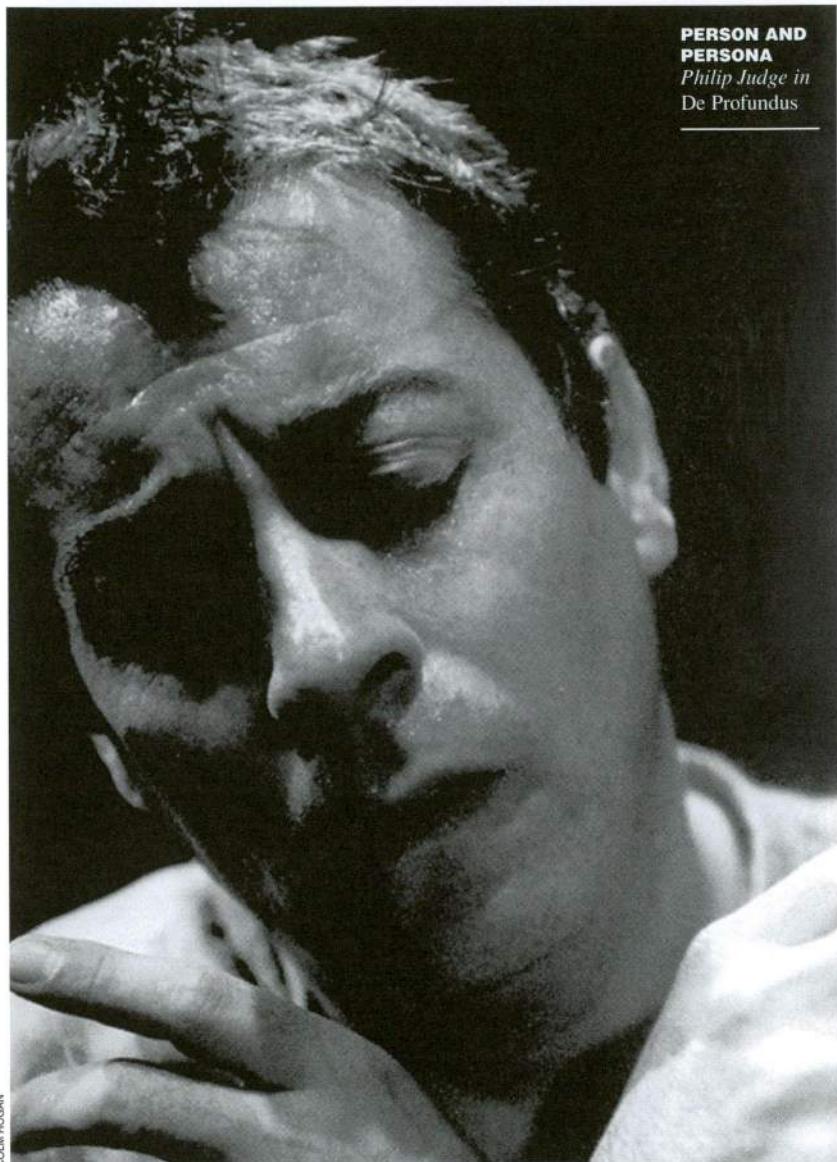
But it is the heart openly on display here, as Wilde reveals the sordid story behind the trial that found him guilty of "gross indecencies." If Wilde was nominally at liberty before, he had always been unmistakably prisoner to his passion for the emotionally abusive Bosie: he was

helpless in the face of his own need to "help" his young lover — to "help" him become an artist, to "help" him act out against his father, to "save" him after threats of suicide. In the end, Oscar was easily sacrificed in Bosie's drive to humiliate and punish his father, and the younger man never made contact with Wilde during the two years he spent in gaol.

O'Byrne creates a rhythm in which Judge can play a full range of emotion, and strikes a good balance between visual and physical variety and the monotony and regularity of prison life. He attempts a design that conceptually embodies Oscar's incarceration: a black box complete with ceiling, with a rectangular opening like a window that allows the audience to see in — the entire show is performed within this box. It works up to point: when Judge is pacing restlessly, using the entire space, it creates interesting and fragmented stage pictures. When, as he is for the majority of the piece, he is sitting at the "window," writing, his static posture is reminiscent of a news presenter, a visually uninteresting composition, and one that transforms a verbally and emotionally complex performance into visual flatness.

Despite the awkwardness of the staging, Judge is superb. The sheer weight, depth, and breadth of the text is daunting, but the moment Judge begins, we know that we're in secure hands. Words and meaning are fully embodied, as if he has had the text embedded in his marrow; he effortlessly hits every note of this operatic cry for understanding. He is compelling, theatrical, and fully human, and gives us a much welcome insight into the secret life of Oscar Wilde.

"Oscar," as a construction, was an unassailable monolith of words, style,



**PERSON AND  
PERSONA**

*Philip Judge in  
De Profundus*

COLM HOGAN

and pretense. Oscar as man was often irretrievably overshadowed by that persona. If there's any trace of the sensitive soul in his works, look to his fairy tales, and see him as the swallow in *The Happy Prince*, or the nightingale in *The Nightingale and the Rose*. These creatures sacrificed their lives for love, and their actions were sneered upon by the self-absorbed humans they died to help.

In *De Profundis*, Oscar impales himself on the thorn of his love for Bosie, and sings himself beautifully to death; the offering, the perfect red rose of his self expression, was heartlessly cast aside. A copy of the letter was sent to Douglas, which he threw into a river. Later, he would spend 40 years trying to block its publication. Watching Judge perform this piece, one feels grateful that Bosie didn't succeed.

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Susan Conley is a novelist, filmmaker, critic, and is art director of this magazine.

#### **DECADENCE by Steven Berkoff**

Spike Productions  
Civic Theatre Tallaght  
19-30 Aug. 2003; reviewed 21 Aug.

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

IT IS STEVEN BERKOFF'S VIEW THAT upper class identity in England is constructed through a warped infantilism, pleasure at the expense of others' pain, and through accent and voice ("squashed so as to release as little emotion as possible"). His 1981 play *Decadence* gives dramatic expression to this hypothesis. Berkoff's play comprises two alternating dramatic dialogues played by two actors. Characters Helen and Steve are conducting an affair and speak of public schools, the thrill of riding the hunt, and extravaga-

gant late suppers, while Steve's wife Sybil urges her lover/private detective Les to eradicate the philandering and money-seeking Steve. In this admirable production by a trio of Bull Alley Theatre graduates calling themselves Spike Productions, the couples are played by Katherine Murphy and Tom O'Leary, who perform with impressive energy and stamina throughout the 90 minutes of Berkoff's verbal class warfare. Director Alan Kinsella's effective choreography, in which the actors move sensuously around, over, and on the red leather couch at centre stage, affords a strong visual component to sustain audience engagement with the often relentless dialogue. Kinsella is faithful to Berkoff's emphasis on exaggerated movement twinned with the play's verbal acrobatics and relentless bitter satire.

The artifice of the play's language, spoken in rhyme and rhythm, can be wearying, demanding, exciting, and challenging. The play exhibits a Wildean indulgence in language itself, in a pleasure of speech. On occasion, the speed of delivery in this production, rather than the actual words, places demands on the audience. Yet the direction overall demonstrates a real appreciation for Berkoff's linguistic virtuosity by amplifying the original stage directions, to mime drinks and cigarettes with emphasis to show absurdity, in adding sound effects by the actors ("swish," "ker-chunk"), a wonderfully punchy aspect of the production's sense of exaggeration.

The graphically sexual language finds a counterpart in vulgarity of gesture. Playwright and actor Berkoff is a keen observer of movement as well as language, and the farcical physical behaviour of the actors arises from his amusing



perception that the English ruling classes normally move in clipped jerks. Parody of the upper classes in *Decadence* hinges on this use of language and movement together is illustrated in a horse-riding monologue during which Helen celebrates hunting while astride Steve who acts as galloping horse. The comic scene is performed by Murphy and O'Leary with physical vigour, the sexual rhythm of the mimed horse-riding complementing the rhythm of the dramatic verse.

Kinsella acknowledges the artifice of Berkoff's style in his apt choice of white-face for the actors; the face paint not only emphasises the grotesquerie of the play's racism, but also underscores the fact that while the characters are given names they are, more pertinently, caricatures. A dig at the audience delivered by Helen ("give me realism that's what I'm paying

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**ARTIFICE** O'Leary and  
Murphy in *Decadence*

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for!") demonstrates the self-consciousness of the play's sense of artifice, and at the same time this artifice interestingly taps into a *fin-de-siècle* cultural tendency towards decadence not unfamiliar to Wilde.

The issues of racism and fox hunting are not the only contemporary notes sounded by this play first produced more than 20 years ago, and very much aimed at its own time. Inevitably this production raises the question as to whether a play satirising the English ruling classes can speak to contemporary Dublin. Certainly references to Maggie and to Charles and Di, for example, suggest an '80s piece, and the play does importantly capture a specific *zeitgeist*; but its treatment of materialism, driving individualism, and sheer indulgence moves the play's relevance beyond the borders of England. Steve's excretory monologue on

drink and Sybil's thematic comment that "Money's the best lubricator" strike one as regrettably familiar in a "maturing" Ireland. Berkoff is uncompromising where he perceives life being lived without social responsibility, altruism, or love beyond throwaway sex. In order to expose the upper classes as a construct of word and gesture, a construct to be dismantled, he delivers in *Decadence* an elegantly fierce dramatic assault.

Audience reactions overheard on leaving the theatre — "excessive," "exhausting" — were ironic proof, if such were needed, of the success of the production by this talented team. The unremitting pace of the performances and the script's vulgarities hissed with precision: Berkoff would surely approve. The strong performances alone were worth the circuitous, poorly-lit route to the Civic Theatre, and the actors and their physical stamina truly deserved far greater applause than that mustered by the sparse but appreciative audience.

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**THE DRUNKARD by Tom Murphy  
(after W. H. Smith & A Gentleman)**

b\*spoke theatre in association with  
the Galway Arts Festival.

On tour; reviewed 18 Jul. 2003 at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway BY BRIAN SINGLETON

A THEATRICAL "PIONEER" MAYBE, BUT one would never have associated Tom Murphy with any kind of Temperance movement. Although many of his own ex-patriot male characters find comfort (and self-destruction) in alcohol, he never preaches. A moralising melodrama on behalf of the burgeoning temperance

caucus in 19th-century America is the source for his adaptation to an Irish setting of the story of a young gentleman (Edward Kilcullen) who tumbles headlong into alcoholism. Kilcullen forsakes wife and child and is brought to further ruin by the avarice of a financial predator who fuels his thirst.

In its original social context, the play's message was the thing, and it no doubt would have connected with its audience, despite its extreme polarisations of good and evil. Both its form and its morality are time-specific, and one wonders what currency this play has now in a country whose alcoholic products are embedded in the mythology of its national identity. In its day, this play would have spoken to the masses in need of conversion. Those audiences are no longer in the theatres, but ensconced in front of their television sets, watching the soap operas which have usurped melodrama from the stage. And audience taste, too, has changed: alcoholics and philanderers are favourites of the soaps nowadays, not the innocents and philanthropists of politicised melodrama.

In the first half of b\*spoke's production, the play groans under the weight of its own simplicity and creaky dramaturgy. We watch how Edward (Rory Keenan) is set up swiftly as a good man who rescues his tenant family from eviction and marries the innocent daughter, only to start rushing headlong to his demise on his wedding day. The remainder of the first half is a catalogue of cartoon-like scenes which display predictable moments in his downfall.

It is only in the second act that we are rescued from banality. Edward's fall continues as he signs over the deeds to the family home to an avaricious solicitor,



Phelim McGinty (Stephen Brennan). But it is the subplot which catches our interest, that of Agnes Earley (played with her characteristic sense of comedy by Pauline McLynn), a woman who went mad after her betrothed died on the eve of their wedding. Her elevation from that state is engineered by philanthropist Sir Arden Rencelaw (Nick Dunning) who helps her through education not only to live in a present reality, but also to discover love once more (i.e. him!). It is Agnes who then, in a newfound clairvoyance, helps to locate the disappeared Edward, and the original title deeds which McGinty is

**HIS DOWNFALL**  
*Dylan Tighe and  
 Rory Keenan in  
 The Drunkard*

about to inherit. There is no surprise in the world being set to rights, and evil punished. We leave with a smile on our faces, into the bars for a nightcap or several, blissfully unaffected by the play's once potent message, despite it being hammered into our consciousness.

If the form and the message of the play fail to affect us, it is director Lynne Parker's style which draws the attention. The cartoon characterisations are pushed to extremes in a highly physicalised choreography which is a delight to behold. Not since the early 1990s, high-camp Restoration comedies of Parker's Rough

Magic company have we been treated to such an unrealistic style. The young Arabella, wife of Edward, is played by Sarah-Jane Drummeey with a constantly shifting foot-pattern which is never distracting but complements with a light foot a light-headed innocence. Brennan strikes a series of angular poses and often in profile to exaggerate his evil intentions. Keenan charts his downfall with a succession of stylised tumbles to the floor, some in slow motion. His physical and vocal mastery is the discovery of the evening, in a cast uniformly revelling in their escape from realism. And the whole business is held together by Nick Dunning as Sir Arden, "God's representative on earth," whose goodness is played with a subtle hint of irony which brings 21st-century cynical relevance to the drama.

Ellen Cranitch and Hélène Montague's live score punctuates the dialogue and reinforces the points where our sympathies should lie. Songs also feature, some of which seem influenced by the music of Kurt Weill, giving the occasional feel of a Brecht *Lehrstück* in the second act. And so the music, together with the acting style, lifts the experience out of the original moral project, while Murphy's text at times is wittily scathing about Irish society and its hypocrisies, including our own philanthropic celebrities. And so in the absence of any real drama, there is a plentiful supply of theatricality and textual topicality, played with integrity and style, in a romp to delight and entertain.

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## ENTERTAINMENT by Alex Johnston

Bedrock Productions

Project Cube, Dublin

3-20 Sept. 2003; reviewed 8 Sept.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

THE DAY AFTER HAVING SEEN ALEX Johnston's new play *Entertainment*, two friends are having a conversation:

You go out last night?

*Oh yeah, went to see this one-man show, kind of comedy thing, yeah.*

Yeah, what was it called?

*Oh, um... The Entertainer or... something, I, uh...*

Any good?

*It was all right. Some of it was OK. Some of it was a bit fuckin', you know.*

What was it, like a comedy gig?  
*Sort of. It was a bit preachy.*

By way of a show synopsis, review, and critique, this exchange is as insightful as any that Bedrock's bemusing production will receive. Of course, it really should be; Johnston wrote and performed the conversation during the show. From behind a microphone, his anticipation of such vacant responses is delivered in hypnotically deadpan tones. With it, Johnston lulls the audience into complete capitulation, recognising its successes with muted enthusiasm, preempting (but not answering) each criticism with quiet disdain.

For all its rich ideas, engagingly recherché elements, and Johnston's compelling comic persona, *Entertainment* snags on such conspicuous distrust reserved for its audience. Where theatre or stand-up comedy offer a contract to the spectator which can either be negotiated and applauded, or breached and heckled, *Entertainment* feels like a done deal — just sign there and don't ask questions. At times, our



responses are more than guided — they are played out for us, dictated.

That this is my abiding feeling is a shame, because without the vacuum-wrapped presentation we might have found a world of opportunity in Johnston's meditations. Freed from narrative demands and plot coherency, the stand-up mode would seem to suit Johnston down to the ground. In previous works, his characters can often resemble hollow ciphers for the convictions of their author, but the comedy gig allows him to revel in subjectivity. And given the self-mocking tenor of political dissidents, where irony is the currency of impotence, laughs are also about as productive a response as you can desire. But moving from "bit" to "bit," sighing over the shortcomings of his material, not finding anything particularly funny and returning to thoughts of

#### DYING ONSTAGE

*Alex Johnston in Entertainment*

his deceased father, Johnston's faltering comedian seems to be in the grip of a crisis: "I think he's having a crisis," agrees a heckler, played by Johnston.

The crisis is pertinent, though, connecting the dots between a morally moribund society, human mortality, and the flogged dead horse of comedy: "Now, that is what we call dying onstage." As a study of comedy, director Jimmy Fay has caught the specifics and the trends while allowing Johnston room to step outside the frame.

When his obligatory political snarling moves from the left-wing book section and a (very good) George Dubya impersonation, his voice finds affinity with two extraordinary polemicists: Jonathan Swift and Bill Hicks, updating both the Dean's still bristling "Modest Proposal" and Hicks' movie metaphor for US Foreign

Policy (but where America was cast as the villain in *Shane*, Johnston sees Ireland as an anonymous henchman. "When the final shoot-out happens," he says, "we get killed in the distance.")

There may not be a rigid spotlight (the Project Cube can't really provide one) but both the comedy and Lee Davis's lighting remain resolutely hard-edged.

In the routine, Johnston impassively finds evidence to suggest that the universe is, and always has been, a place of malevolent indifference, where evil exists but consequences do not. Even his understanding of religious doctrine serves only to expose moral loopholes. If a medieval child killer repents, then according to the theological understanding of Johnston's Lutheran father, he is saved. If a Rwandan warlord can justify a massacre to himself, then he has done the right thing.

When Johnston's approach softens slightly, his father's ghost imparts advice either in a mock Jewish accent or impenetrable German. And not for the first time does Johnston conclude his entertainment with the potency of cheap music, singing Blur's "The Universal" as a salve, his head wrapped in sellotape. Although he tries to explain the gesture ("Right, a quick word about the sellotape..."), it is one of the few loose ends he affords us, where too-frequently the show staggers under self-consciousness.

During this crisis we are bystanders, watching a person unable to find redemption, tortured by definitions of morality and mortality. In the vernacular of comedy, the stand-up might see success and failure in the same terms as the warlord. Onstage, he can either kill or die. But Johnston dulls the subtlety of his exercise with too much commentary, like

a good joke destroyed by an explanation. Honestly, we would have gotten it.

#### **GAGARIN WAY** by Gregory Burke

Prime Cut Productions

Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

4-15 Sep. 2003; reviewed 5 Sep.

BY HELEN MEANY

"THIS IS POLITICS," A DENIM-JACKETED tough guy declares, waving a gun. He could be a character in a Gary Mitchell play, venting his frustration in the manner he knows best. Gregory Burke's first play, written at the age of 29, opened to critical and audience acclaim at the Edinburgh Festival two years ago, transferred to London's Royal National Theatre and the West End, and has since been translated into 19 languages. The disaffection of a group of factory workers in Fife, and their sense of being washed up by history has found local echoes around the world, including, with its Irish premiere, in Belfast.

Even if the specific predicament of a community which can no longer define itself by its socialist credentials might not fully translate to other cultures and contexts, the play's blend of violence, irony, and black humour has, since Quentin Tarantino, become an immediately recognisable response to urban alienation. While he claims never to have watched a play before he wrote *Gagarin Way*, Burke had certainly been to the movies. He uses the narrative frame of a heist that goes wrong to ask a series of questions about the ways in which individuals — men, in particular — can find purpose and identity in a society in which they have lost their voice and their political will.

The play's strength is its language, which meshes Scots idiom, slang, explen-



tives, and a barrage of sharp one-liners — most of which are delivered by Eddie (Brian McCardie), an eloquent factory worker who is contemptuous of everything and everyone around him. In the opening scene, he expounds his comically scathing views on Sartre and Genet to the nervous young security man, Tom (Jack Tarlton), a recent politics graduate. McCardie's performance has a pent-up aggression that

**FULL OF CONTEMPT**  
*Brian McCardie in  
Gagarin Way*

initially engages, but goes on to overshadow the rest of the cast, as if the director, Jackie Doyle, was also somewhat intimidated by his powerful stage presence.

When Eddie's colleague Gary bursts in, leading another man at gunpoint, the horrified Tom is trapped in the factory storeroom — a stripped space strewn with boxes and crates. Stuart Marshall's simple and effective set is lit with appropriate harshness by Tina McHugh. Gary is as much a prisoner as the kidnapped man, a visiting business consultant, who is held with a bloodstained pillow over his head. The kidnapping is Eddie and Gary's protest against the disempowering force of globalised capitalism, a gesture in a post-ideological vacuum.

Gary (played by John Kay Steel with impressive conviction) preaches his doctrine of revolutionary anarchism to the prisoner. He is convinced that this is the only response possible in a world where communism has become irrelevant and he, Eddie, and their colleagues are condemned to drudgery in a factory making computer components for multinational companies.

When the kidnapped man, Frank, (Finlay Welsh) is revealed not to be one of the usual visiting Japanese or Europeans ("big, tall fuckers who speak ten languages"), but a local man who now lives in Surrey, his captors are unnerved.

When he proceeds to argue with them calmly, point for point, he punctures their rage and disarms them. He knows all about Fife's proud labour traditions, the 1921 lockout, the communist party membership, the streets named after Russian cosmonauts (*Gagarin Way*), the miners' strikes.

His cynicism and world-weariness deflates them. "Anarchism has always appealed to impressionable minds," he tells Gary, dismissively. "You don't live in a revolutionary society." The dialogue in this scene plays with the audience's sympathies and expectations, as Burke teases out the implications of the fact that Eddie and Gary are not confronting a faceless enemy, but one of their own. As Tom sees an opportunity for civilised discussion with Frank and the possibility of a non-violent outcome, the ground shifts.

But, while the fragments of political debate are absorbing, the potential for dramatic tension and subtle modulations in tone are diminished in this production by a slackness of pace and the capitulation to Eddie's series of gags. In this performance, he becomes a stand-up comedian with a gun. Doyle's direction does not give Burke's tightly wrought writing the suspense and dramatic force it requires, and the sense of flatness is compounded by the occasional inaudibility of the performers.

Even in this disappointing production, *Gagarin Way* is an impressive debut, in which irony and black comedy finally give way to a portrayal of nihilism. No consolation is offered in its final, disturbingly violent scene — as Frank's warning that killing him would be "a meaningless act" is revealed to be true.

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Helen Meany is a freelance journalist and editor.

**GHOSTS by Henrik Ibsen,  
in a new version by Conall Morrison**

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

12 Sep.-11 Oct. 2003; reviewed 16 Sep.

BY BRIAN SINGLETION

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DARWIN AND Emile Zola's theories of naturalism, Ibsen ripped open European middle-class society's cankers and scratched its sores, exposing greed behind benevolence and hypocrisy under moral rectitude. His drawing-room dramas presented a fragile Norwegian protestant society, shored up by intransigent religion, a temperance movement, and strict class and gender divisions. Sobriety and thrift were the key tenets of the day.

Shifting the setting of *Ghosts* to Northern Ireland, as Conall Morrison does here, requires no major leap of the imagination. The morals of the late-Victorian middle classes of County Down slot well into Ibsen's societal ambit. Morrison does not rely on accents alone to relocate the play, but renames the characters (Mrs Alving becomes Irving), and place names become local. Location is crucial in this play as a sense of entrapment geographically mirrors social and religious constrictions. However, the natural world of deep, perennially gloomy fjords, which affects and motivates his Norwegian characters, could hardly compare to the soft, undulating landscape around Strangford Lough. East Down is far from hell on earth.

Sabine Dargent's set design picked up the importance of location, and the interior/exterior dichotomy which creates a tension in many of Ibsen's plays. Her conservatory design was made completely of glass, leading off not to an outside world but to a further inside enclosure of



hothouse vegetation. Dampness and green slime seeped over the glass, partially obscuring our view. It was an environment of nature/nurture but also one of unnatural botanical experimentation. It was a transient meeting space between the further interior of the house (kitchen, dining room) and the outside world. It was also where the middle-class Irvings encountered their working-class servants, the Armstrongs, and where the boundaries between the two classes were transgressed with disastrous results.

Morrison scraped away all ambiguity from Ibsen's text in his direction. Indeed,

**HI MOM!** *Damian O'Hare and Stella McCusker in Ghosts*

the sexual chemistry between Oswald Irving and servant-girl Regina was matched by a novel exposure of Mrs. Irving, played by Stella McCusker, as a sexual predator, who made several unrequited moves on the Reverend Webster, friend of her late husband. The Reverend's moral dilemma after discovering that his late friend was an unashamed philanderer who had fathered a child (Regina), not only out of wedlock, but also with a servant girl, was compounded by seeing the widow sexualised in front of him. McCusker's "moves" were anything but subtle, and the Reverend (played by Scottish actor Sandy Neilson) could only

match it by an exaggerated rebuff. Cue the laughter. To further her excess in these new moments of passion, McCusker often paused before the final word of a sentence, tantalising the man with her text. Cue more laughter. This attempt to push a possible subtext to the point of prominence shifted our attention away from the tragic consequences of action (Irving's original sin being perpetuated by his son Oswald) and inaction (Webster and Mrs. Irving's lack of insurance on their orphanage which is razed to the ground). What we saw instead was situation comedy.

Oswald, played by Patrick Kiely lookalike Damian O'Hare, exaggerated his illness (syphilis) from the outset. The physical and psychological effects on him were writ large as he paced the conservatory like an animal trapped in a cage, succumbing to occasional violent outbursts of passion and anger. The actor further seemed trapped by a directorial decision to push his rage to an extreme. What we saw, then, was an illness played by a man rather than a man who happened to be ill. He didn't reach a manic march by the end of the play, but rather hit the note from his first appearance and had to retain it virtually in monotone throughout. The impropriety of the excessive choice was exposed in the final act when Mrs. Irving asked him: "Has all this disturbed you badly?" We reeled in our seats with our incredulity at her ignorance and blindness. By the time we came to the final scene when she prevaricated over putting her son out of his misery, we came to the realisation that exaggerating characterisation to the point of melodrama has the same effect as administering an overdose of morphine.

### **GISELLE** by Michael Keegan Dolan

Fabulous Beast Dance Company and

the Dublin Theatre Festival

Samuel Beckett Centre, Dublin

28 Sep.-8 Oct 2003; reviewed 28 Sep.

BY HELEN MEANY

In his adaptation of *Giselle* in 1982, the Swedish choreographer Mats Ek located the second act of the ballet — the afterlife sequence — in a lunatic asylum. Michael Keegan Dolan's new adaptation for Fabulous Beast has reversed this sequence, creating a mortal world in the first half that is so luridly dysfunctional that it is a relief for Giselle to escape into the ethereal realm.

The temptation for a contemporary choreographer to puncture the high Romanticism of a 19th century ballet such as *Giselle* must be immense, and Michael Keegan Dolan wholeheartedly succumbs. The idealised medieval village of the original is replaced by a vision of (vaguely contemporary) rural life in "Ballyfeeney" overshadowed by inbreeding, insanity and sexual repression. A bare stage is dominated by a telegraph pole, on which the narrator is perched. He fills us in on local girl Giselle's troubled background, while the versatile, multi-racial cast members enact a series of scenes from rustic life, projected against a white screen. Theatrical antecedents could be found in the "Irish gothic" school — from Tom McIntyre's adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* to Patrick McCabe's *Frank Pig Says Hello* — but the tone of the narration and dialogue here is less comic, more uneasy. Some of the attempts at humour are ill judged — the references to the family members' bi-polar depression, cancer and suicide are delivered as if



these have potential for black comedy.

Outbursts of song are heavy-handed attempts to lighten the mood, but what lingers is the characterisation of Giselle's brother Hilarion (Michael M. Dolan) as a menacing, buck-lepping, axe-wielding abuser who ties her to the telegraph pole and locks her in a cellar. In the original ballet Hilarion is Giselle's long-suffering suitor who is displaced when she falls in love with the disguised prince, Albrecht; that Hilarion is re-cast here as her brother immediately introduces a suggestion of incest that is amplified by the direction. And, as if the cards were not already stacked against her — with chronic asthma thrown in, for cumbersome plotting reasons — Giselle (Daphne Strothmann) never speaks. Keegan Dolan has surpassed his 19th-century forerunners by not only portraying a beautiful victim

**ROGUES' GALLERY** *The company of Giselle*

who enacts the ultimate female sacrifice — to die for love — but in a production that combines drama, music, dance and dialogue, he has denied her a voice.

What Giselle can do, of course, is dance; this is the *raison d'être* of the work in any version, and when this production finally dispenses with a lot of unnecessary exposition, it soars. These dancers have dazzling qualities of discipline, athleticism, fearlessness, and wit, which the choreography highlights. In one breathtaking sequence, Giselle is broken in like a wild animal by her brother, who has tied a rope around her ankle. As he yanks the rope, she trips and twists, rolls, rises, spins, falls again. It's painful to watch, yet exquisite — an original and macabre *pas de deux*.

When the mysterious dancer, Albrecht, from Bratislava, arrives and introduces line

dancing to the village, the results are irresistibly inventive, with Giselle becoming the star of the class. She falls in love with Albrecht, unaware that he is pursuing male sexual partners when he is not with her. Keegan Dolan's interpretation of Albrecht's secret life in terms of bisexuality seems crudely cartoonish, even prurient: it certainly isn't inevitable that his homosexual desires have to be satisfied in the most sordid, brief and brutal ways possible.

Giselle's escape into the world of the dead, to join the spirits of women who have been wronged by men, frees the work from any obligations to naturalism. Here, in the "White Act," visual and physical invention take over and the designer Sophie Charalambous and composer Philip Feeney let rip: trap doors open in the stage, white limbs emerge in clouds of chalk dust, ropes descend in the blackness. The androgynous spectres rise, swinging in great arcs across the stage, suspended in nooses, accompanied by the sepulchral singing of a counter-tenor (the dancer Angelo Smimmo) and some simple piano phrases. First Hilarion is set upon by the women, then Albrecht. When Giselle rushes to protect her lover, their duet comes as close to a homage to the ballet's Romantic origins as this production allows: as she eludes him, spinning lightly before returning to him, both dancers create fan-like forms, intertwining, overlapping, coiling, in a lyrical, moving attempt to transcend the distance between them. The final image of the airborne Giselle bouncing from a mattress is more eloquent than so much of what has gone before. Let's hope this work will be heavily edited to let the movements have the last word.

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*This review, of the final preview of Giselle,*

*was originally printed in the Irish theatre magazine online newsletter.*

**THE HAPPY PRINCE and THE  
NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSE**

**by Oscar Wilde**

Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin

14 Jul.-16 Aug. 2003; reviewed 31 Jul.  
and 8 Aug. **BY BRIAN LAVERY**

OSCAR WILDE FIRST ACHIEVED LITERARY success with his collection of children's stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, published in 1888. Simple and straightforward, they feature the knack for social parody that would follow in Wilde's later works, and a direct moral message.

Now that we have long graduated from the Victorian era, that message, while quintessentially Wilde, is of dubious value for children, and it is not a particularly powerful driving force for drama. Two of the stories, which were presented in theatrical adaptations at Bewley's Café Theatre this summer for an appreciative audience of tourists and parents with children, are heavy-handed emotional exercises, in which Wilde heaps on maudlin sentiment and glorifies martyrs. The protagonists' preoccupation with a single ideal makes them painfully one-dimensional characters. If kids were to open these tales at bedtime, Wilde's doomed characters — deliberately marching towards their tragic (but spiritually pure) fates — would likely make young readers cry themselves to sleep.

In "The Happy Prince," an ornate statue instructs a swallow to pluck the sapphires from his eyes and the flakes of gold leaf from his skin during one cold and snowy winter, and to bring the jewels to the poor. The process leaves him bare, an ugly leaden carcass that is promptly melt-



ed down by churlish town councillors. The unfortunate swallow, meanwhile, freezes to death because he stayed loyal to the prince instead of migrating to Egypt.

Another noble bird features in "The Nightingale and the Rose," where a nightingale helps a feckless student to woo a flighty girl by obtaining a red rose. To do so, the bird sings all night while impaling herself on a thorn so deeply that blood from her heart flows into the rose-bush. Unlike the Prince's sacrifice, the nightingale's is useless in the end: the student is spurned by his love, and throws the gorgeous flower into the street, where it is crushed by a cart's wheel.

Fair play to Michael James Ford, Elizabeth Bracken, and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh for injecting some life and humour into the stories, in two one-hander shows. Ford directed Bracken in

#### BIRDWATCHING

*Bracken and Ford  
in Wilde's plays*

"Nightingale" and took to the stage himself for "Prince," in which he was directed by Ní Chaoimh. Both actors handled the assorted characters and caricatures smoothly, and kept things animated by moving deftly around Bewley's small triangular stage, decorated by an elaborate backdrop of a walled garden and city towers beyond.

Given the material, their performances were necessarily distilled to the basic art of storytelling, with more emphasis than usual on facial expressions and precise movements. (The scripts came directly from Wilde's text, unedited.) It was easy to imagine them taking place in front of schoolchildren sitting cross-legged on the floor — and perhaps trying to stifle their sobs.

Bracken's slightly strained voice made her intentionally irritating characters all the more annoying, from a laughing pro-

fessor's daughter to a maniacal lizard, but she moves with a easy physical grace. (Her nightingale's flowing wings bore a striking resemblance to Donal O'Kelly's seagull in *Catalpa*; I kept expecting her to blurt out, "Fwip, fwip!")

Wilde aims to deflate the pomposity of Victorian personality types, and Ford, in black tie, shone with his wide-eyed impressions of the ornithologist peering at the swallow, the mayor disparaging the bare statue, and the mayor's ever-flattering town councillors. Even as a romantic himself, Wilde mocks romance, with his portrayal of the student's ill-fated infatuation, and the swallow's unrequited love for a coy mistress: a reed in the river, which danced for the wind no matter how fervently the swallow courted her.

In these stories, Wilde idealises a chaste love for humanity. In "Nightingale," the bird asks that the student be a true lover, and her song reaches its peak when she sings of "love that is perfected by death... that lives beyond the tomb." Like Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, the nightingale can only achieve true spiritual love through the moment of passion and sorrow that comes with death. The poor bird isn't around to see the student rejected and the precious rose trampled, and Wilde intends that the beauty of her action is greater than the events surrounding her, even if she sacrificed herself for a worthless passing fancy.

This Catholic philosophy smacks of indulgent self-pity and narcissism, since the protagonists are glorified for leaving behind a good-looking corpse, or the memory of a beautiful deed. Thankfully, in these productions that lesson was largely overshadowed by intense performances that emphasised devoted story-telling, rather than the stories themselves.

## HURL by Charlie O'Neill

Barabbas... the company

Black Box Theatre Galway, 14-17 Jul. 2003;  
reviewed 14 Jul. BY PATRICK LONERGAN

MINUTES INTO A GALWAY PERFORMANCE of *Hurl*, Charlie O'Neill's play about a multi-ethnic hurling team, a ripple of discomfort sweeps through the audience. On stage, a man and woman have entered the house of an alcoholic ex-priest; understandably, the place looks like a pigsty. "Irish men!" declares the woman, with gentle disdain. The line generates laughter, but there's also audible disapproval, as if something inappropriate has been said. This is because the speaker is black, and from abroad. And some audience members clearly take offence at her character's delivery of a line that would have passed without comment if uttered by a white Irish woman.

This is a great example of *Hurl*'s strength. An exploration of how "an Ireland of difference has made a different Ireland," it plays skilfully with Irish audiences' confused attitudes to ethnic and racial differences, showing that prejudice is rarely as straightforward as we might think. Premiered in July 2003 at the Galway Arts Festival, where it played to mixed reviews, it was re-worked for a Dublin Theatre Festival production in October. I attended the Galway production, and have also been able to watch a video and read the updated script for the Dublin performance — and here will discuss both.

According to the 2002 census, over 10% of the Irish population was born abroad — an increase of 150,000 people since 1996. Many Irish theatre companies have tackled the issue of "difference" that arises from this demographic develop-



**EN GARDE** Alan  
Wai in Hurl

ment, but most attempts to do so have been atrociously bad. Multi-ethnicity is always presented as a problem to be solved, and characterisations of people from other cultures constantly rework the same two clichés. There's the (usually black) boyfriend who is brought home for dinner, to prove to a conservative father-figure (or the audience?) that he is really "just like us." And there's the outsider as victim — usually an asylum seeker whose deportation should make "us" hang our heads in shame. Such approaches do not promote respect for difference, but instead ask an audience presupposed to be white to sympathise with an abject black other. Ethnicity is simplified as being about race, and an "us and them" mentality is strongly reinforced. In short, many Irish plays that present themselves as anti-racist end up

ROS KAVANAGH

working as examples of how deep-seated Irish racism actually is.

*Hurl* brings some much-needed sophistication to this genre, showing that Ireland's new demography cannot be treated simplistically by presenting characters notable for their variety, rather than their deviation from Irish notions of "normality." Some members of the hurling team at the centre of the play are asylum seekers, others are refugees, others are Irish-born children of immigrants, and we meet characters from Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America — and Ireland too. So *Hurl* makes clear that no single

narrative can encompass the experiences of immigrants in our society. This complexity is illustrated in one particularly effective scene, in which two Bosnian schoolfriends meet by chance in a Dublin lap dancing club — the man as a customer, and the woman as a dancer. Their awkwardness together exposes one of the fundamental truths about Irish immigration: Ireland is for many a refuge from war and poverty, but it has disgracefully exploited many immigrants, paying them poorly to do jobs that Irish-born people won't take. *Hurl* makes both points clearly, and deserves praise for doing so.

The mode of performance, directed in the best Barabbas style by Raymond Keane, emphasises versatility. The playing area is empty, with only a goalpost at the rear of the stage — so the actors use boxes to create sets, as required. The cast switches easily through characters and

accents, men playing women, black and Asian actors playing white characters — enacting the idea that identity doesn't have to be fixed. And the style of narrative shifts from storytelling to the use of miniature sets, tableaux, puppetry, and dance. We are shown that there are many ways of presenting the same story — which supports the play's theme very well. And the use of hurling as the vehicle for all of this proves in numerous ways a great choice.

However, we do run into problems with the narrative, a standard "team wins against the odds" affair. This is a plot that offers little room for originality, and the best recent example of it — John Breen's *Alone it Stands* — worked because it told its audience the match's result before the action began. But here the narrative is presented as if the outcome might be in doubt, making lines like "no-one could have guessed what was going to happen next" play like authorial wishful thinking. *Hurl* might have been more effective if it tackled its inevitable predictability more directly.

But a more serious problem is in the play's presentation of many Irish characters. Sophisticated characterisation isn't needed for this kind of drama, so it's not a problem that we have a melodramatic villain, and a coach whose gruff exterior belies a heart of gold. But there is confusion here between narrative type — which is acceptable — and social stereotype, which is not. We have a character from Fatima Mansions, who is (of course) inarticulate and prone to violence. We have the standard jokes about the Christian Brothers' "skill" with sticks. In the Galway production, the audience is asked to laugh at the pretentiousness of Dublin TV presenters; in the Dublin pro-

duction, the presenters are from rural Ireland and therefore are inept. Many rural characters are described as "ignorant" and "muck savage," and the play's villain, Rusty Cox, is your standard culchie as caveman, with red hair peeking out under tweed cap in what can only be called the Irish version of blackface. So this quickly becomes another Irish play in which the terms "rural" and "backward" are presented as synonymous.

Barabbas didn't invent this stereotype, and they're not the worst offenders in its use — but this feature of Irish discourse does actually affect the way that real people in our society are treated. Although the effect of this characterisation is that the audience will relate most to the play's non-Irish characters — powerfully undermining Irish attitudes towards otherness — we are still stuck in an "us against them" dynamic. And that allows audiences to dismiss Irish racism as existing only in the so-called "arsehole of rural Ireland," and not in the country's businesses, government and media. Or, for that matter, in themselves.

The development of the play from Galway to Dublin retains the production's strengths, but cannot overcome this inherent difficulty. But that development is nevertheless praiseworthy. We change from a sometimes undisciplined and unfocussed two-act play to a tighter 90-minute one-acter. A lot of sentimentality is jettisoned, and much of the plot streamlined and clarified.

Characterisation is generally stronger, as is the flow of the action. Acting and movement remain first-rate, and the play's warmth is maintained.

The end product is often wonderful to watch, performed by a cast whose conviction and enjoyment quickly become

infectious. The play has its problems, but it also has a lot of fun bringing things to the Irish stage too rarely seen in the past. And it has the courage to point out that asylum seekers in Ireland are given only 19 euro a week, to audiences who have spent 20 euro per ticket to see a play that is in large part about those asylum seekers. So *Hurl* knows that it is, ultimately, an act of ventriloquism, speaking on behalf of people who have no voice in Irish culture — including our theatre. I left the play with a strong sense that what's needed now is for Ireland's recent immigrants to be supported in speaking for themselves, and to each other. By making that case, *Hurl* is a very important step in the right direction. But we — and I use the word intentionally — still have a long way to go.

#### **KEEP COMING BACK** by Rynagh O'Grady

Stray Dog Productions

On tour; reviewed on 3 Sep. 2003  
at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY BREANDÁN DELAP

STRAY DOG'S PRODUCTION OF Rynagh O'Grady's gritty short play raises many questions about the much maligned "nanny state." When a society plays a part in the degeneration of some of its citizens, should it not logically follow that it owes them an immense debt? Though each of us has an individual responsibility for our own actions, must we also take the responsibility for the pain inflicted by others?

It is evident that the author sees her characters more as victims of circumstance than authors of their own demise. The stories they tell read like a potted history of the assorted ills of contemporary Irish society. There are tales of rape, pros-

titution, dysfunctional relationships, criminality, child abuse, and the heavy-handedness of Christian Brothers.

This is not exactly uncharted waters on the Irish stage, and there are no particularly new insights offered or innovative takes provided in *Keep Coming Back*. There are times too when the monologues seem more suited to a pulpit than a stage.

Yet who can deny the veracity of the testimonies given by the play's three characters? According to the programme notes, author O'Grady met with real drug addicts while researching the play and listened to their stories. The testimonies are based therefore on the first-hand experiences of people whose lives have been irrevocably damaged not only by drug addiction, but by the formative experiences of their youth.

The play is set in a drug clinic where three recovering addicts come for their weekly rehabilitation session. Each patient delivers a monologue outlining the extent of their problem and the underlying unhappiness in their lives. The play lasts barely over an hour and there is very little interaction between the three characters. All three stories cover a broad sweep of Irish society — working class and middle class, man and woman, urban and rural — that underlines the universality of addiction. The problem with this approach is that there are times when the characters resemble more case studies than genuine people. But the writing is tender and compassionate, and all three stories carry the tang of truth. You can genuinely believe that today is the first day of the rest of their lives.

Les (Feidhlim Cannon) is a working class inner city Dubliner whose life follows a trajectory not uncommon

amongst his peers — crime, prison, and heroin. Colm (Dara Clear), on the other hand, is middle class and educated, and has turned his back on the opportunities presented to him; his dependency on drugs and alcohol not only ruin his life, but has a drastic effect on those closest to him. Nora (author/director O'Grady) debunks the hoary myth that drug addiction is largely an urban problem — the preserve of working class estates and trendy nightclubs. Her story is one of sustained abuse and constricted horizons. She has been addicted to prescription medication since the age of 15 and is living in the country with her mother as she approaches middle age.

All three testimonies are told with a heartfelt honesty that is both moving and harrowing in equal measures. The characters live in an unforgiving world that is on our door-step, yet remains distant from most of us. It is a world where contracting Hepatitis C seems not so terrible by comparison with what is euphemistically referred to throughout the play as "the virus."

O'Grady's characters aren't paraded as freaks but as volatile chemicals that need to be handled with care. Cannon is superb as the hapless Les, while O'Grady and Clear are also convincing in their parts. The pace of the monologues falters at times, though, and you can't help feeling that the stories could



#### **ABJECTION** *Keep Coming Back*

dovetail more closely.

But the overall feeling is one of hope. These are survivors in the truest sense of

the word; people who have changed their lives and have the courage to persevere. They have been brought from the depths of despair to the threshold of hope. *Keep Coming Back* is a highly thoughtful, quietly powerful, and affecting examination of ordinary people whose

experiences most of us will never know.

*Breandán Delap is a programme editor with Nuacht TG4. He was recently awarded the ESB Media Award for Journalist Through the Medium of Irish.*

### LOVE IN A TIME OF AFFLUENCE

by Neil Watkins

Gentle Giant Theatre Company

The Crypt, Dublin

5 Jul.-9 Aug. 2003; reviewed 21 Jul.

BY SARAH LING

THIS NEW PLAY, A VERSION OF ARTHUR Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, depicts Dublin as a place where "married men are sad men" and the possession of money brings great sexual power. Catherine Siggins performs alongside the play's author, Neil Watkins, presenting 10 characters between them in 10 intimate situations. Unfortunately, these few cannot fairly represent the great diversity of people living in this city.

The piece opens as a posh, cool, journalist — an "It boy" type — returns to a cab office in search of his coat. It's the day after the night before, which he spent schmoozing in Dublin's nightclubs. He meets "Cab Girl," the cleaner; she is feisty and will not release his coat without a bargain. The rich guy has money and power, so he pays her for cheap sex and leaves with his coat. This scene is plausible, and the characters feel like people you might meet in Dublin city. However, as the play continues, characters such as the "milky

stick boy" (that's the "milky bar kid" from when we were young) and the "knife artist" become more and more absurd, and the point of the interlocking scenes is lost.

In his writing, Watkins captures beautifully many dialects of "Dublinese," and relationships are defined as some characters speak the same language and others seem to come from different planets. Cab Driver and his wife, Cab Girl, understand each other perfectly as he refers to her as "minge bag" and "mingy gee bag" with a sort of affection. We know she loves him back when she calls him "fat cunt" and "fat fucking pig"; their passionate relationship is built on a constant stream of verbal abuse (until they can't resist any more and just

have sex in the car). The next scene shows a (stereotype of a

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**SEXED UP**  
Siggins and  
Watkins in Love  
in the Time...



OPERA BASS

foreign) lap dancer who is learning her Dublin slang; she refers to herself as "such a fuck of eejet." She is new to the city, beautiful and easily taken advantage of by the same cab driver from the

previous scene. The language is the most enjoyable part of Watkins' play; but in the second act, characters become cartoonish and fail to capture the atmosphere of today's Dublin.

Every one of the scenes is a contest for power, and a sexual encounter closes every. The show is pitched (according to programme notes) to "look at the state of romance in a post Celtic Tiger Dublin" and to expose Dublin as an "image and financial (sic) obsessed society"; but very long lap dancing scenes and excessive female nudity convey a strong anti-feminist message. Its approach to the subjects of sexism, racism, and class systems in Dublin are too light-hearted. It's far too simple to say that money and class equal sexual power; with this message, every scene becomes too easy to predict. The loosely connected scenes are amusing, but unsurprising towards the end; the structure of the drama becomes too repetitive. The scenes best serve as a showcase for the wonderful performers; they show a range of characters they can play with ease and skill.

The production is excellent. John O'Brien directs his players to work to their full potential; designer Orla Bass has made great use of the Crypt's space and natural archways; and Eamonn Fox's lighting and Claire Fitch's original music are imaginative and atmospheric. The play has good comic moments and very sharp performances. It is refreshing that the male characters are not always the most powerful in this play, but perhaps it's wrong to say that real romance is dead in Dublin's fair city.

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*Sarah Ling is company manager for Bedrock.*

### **MAMMY'S BOY**

**adapted from Frank O'Connor's writing**

**by Jim McKeon and Peter Dineen**

Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork

20-30 Aug. 2003; reviewed 27 Aug.

**BY ALANNAH HOPKIN**

THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *MAMMY'S BOY* was part of the celebration of the centenary of Frank O'Connor's birth. Where more appropriate to stage this tribute than in Cork City, home and inspiration of the short story writer and man of letters?

The Everyman Palace, restored to the red and gold glory of its Victorian heyday, was the perfect venue. Corkonians came out in force to pay homage to their city's famous son, and even mid-week the buzz of anticipation for the advertised "night of colour, song and dance," was mighty.

Hopes were further raised by Patrick Murray's set which was visible as the audience took its seats. A flat-topped cut stone arch, centre stage, was flanked by two flights of steps, recalling both the military architecture of O'Connor's childhood home near Cork's barracks, and the up-and-down topography of the city. Above the arch was a backdrop of an aerial photographic view of Cork. The set was hung with lines of washing. The washing disappeared during the dimming of lights that preceded the action. The play began most promisingly, with a rousing entrance through the auditorium of a real bass band (The Mayfield Brass Band), followed by circus performers.

Alas, the promise was never fulfilled. The adaptation from the O'Connor's writing by Jim McKeon and Peter Dineen (the latter of whom also directed)

resulted in a leaden script, which even the best efforts of a large, hard-working cast could not rescue. McKeon is an expert on O'Connor, having written a biography, performed his one-man show, *An Only Child*, all over Ireland, and lectured widely on the writer. Garvan McGrath played Frank O'Connor in this production: a middle-aged man in overcoat and trilby hat, he introduced the action, and also commented on it. O'Connor's autobiographical stories rely largely on the personal voice for their effect, but this voice failed to make the transition to the stage, its realism evaporating in highly polished aphorisms. Lines that read amusingly on the page proved impossible to deliver, for example, "Some kids were sissies by nature, but I was a sissy by conviction."

The child Frank O'Connor, Young Michael, played on the night under review by Jack Moriarty (alternating with Don Morrissey), acted out scenes from the stories with an impressive combination of verve and composure.

The supporting cast was led by co-director Dineen as his father, Big Mick, and Mary Condon as his doting mother, Minnie. The use of the material contained in *My Oedipus Complex*, one of O'Connor's most famous stories, illustrates another problem with the script. The story describes the child's struggle

JANICE O'CONNELL



#### HE OF THE TITLE

*Jack Moriarty in Mammy's Boy*

to adapt to the return of his father after his long absence in the First World War. His father objected to the child's habit of getting into his mother's bed in the early morning and talking about his plans for the day. This subtle piece of writing is recast as pantomime-like smut, the implication being that the child is interrupting his parents' attempts to make love. The incident is repeated not once or twice, but eight times.

In spite of the hard work of a large supporting cast, many doubling or trebling roles, and a partisan audience, such over-stretching of material meant that there was seldom any applause at the end of scenes. The juveniles in the cast were excellent: energetic and well-rehearsed. The adults were less impressive. Dialogue was a weak point, with long gaps where razor sharp repartee was called for.

After the interval pantomime and pageantry gave way to a darker tone as O'Connor faced up to his father's alcoholism, and the resulting poverty. The script was so inept that one left the theatre doubting whether O'Connor's reputation was in fact deserved. Only at the very end, a rousing ensemble rendition of Father Prout's "The Shandon Bells," did one glimpse of what might have been. But by then the emphasis had shifted from Frank O'Connor to glorification of Cork City itself. There may well be a musical in Cork, but this was not it.

There was one consolation: no matter how badly things went dramatically, *Mammy's Boy* remained a visual delight. Costumes by Sheila Healy caught the period mood, veering nicely between dowdy and colourful. Murray's set proved endlessly versatile, enabling the actors to deliver lines from different heights, adding a welcome element of unpredictability. The lighting by Paul Denby was dramatic and appropriately atmospheric, and the starry-sky cyclorama that replaced the view of Cork City in the night scenes was a marvel.

Alannah Hopkin is a writer and critic for publications including The Sunday Times, The Irish Examiner, Time Out, and The Financial Times.

**MISERY, adapted by Simon Moore from**

**Stephen King's novel**

Prom Productions

On tour; reviewed at the Pavilion Theatre,

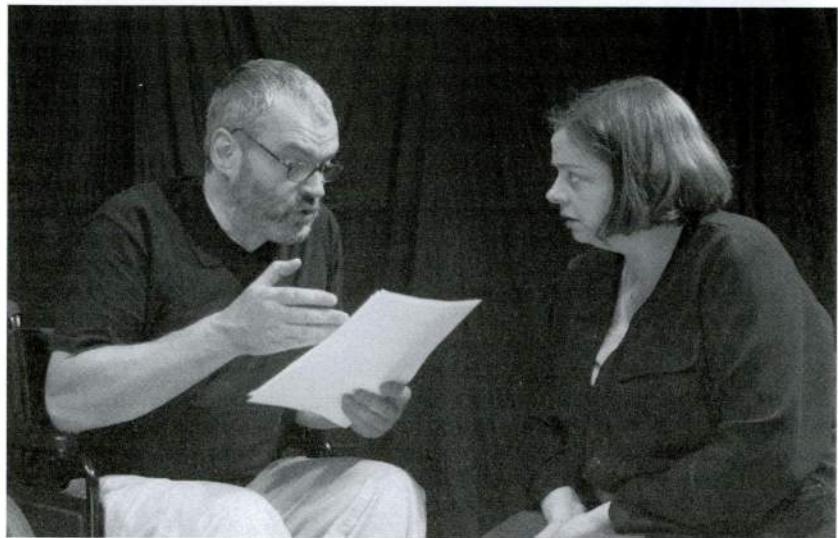
Dun Laoghaire on 4 Sep. 2003

**BY PETER CRAWLEY**

*TWELVE ANGRY MEN, ONE FLEW OVER The Cuckoo's Nest, The Usual Suspects, Misery...* can a Dublin theatre adaptation of *Jurassic Park* be far off? Doing what neither Stephen King's chilling book nor Rob Reiner's gripping film could achieve, Prom Productions drag the story of a jaded romance fiction novelist and his psychotic "number one fan" into hitherto unexplored depths of tedium, alleviated only by what one only hopes is intentional silliness.

At the 26th annual Romantic Fiction Awards, author Paul Sheldon tells us (for we are placed in the odious ranks of his Misery devotees) how he hit upon the idea for his pot-boiling franchise. Sitting in an airport he noticed a headline pertaining to unexpected weather conditions: "Misery in Paradise." What if Misery was a person, he wondered? Even King had a better excuse for his own novel, inspired by Evelyn Waugh's short story, "The Man Who Loved Dickens," in which a prisoner must read the work of Dickens to his captor. "I wondered what it would be like if Dickens himself was held captive," mused the horror writer.

There are oceans of significance in a genre fiction author like King writing a novel in which a genre fiction author is held captive by a fan and forced to write the dross he abhors. But in Simon Moore's adaptation for the stage, such subtext is lost, together with almost everything interesting about the text.



Where the narrative of a novel can represent its characters' consciousness, and the shots and editing of a film can at least play games with perspective and time, the leaden realism that Moore and director John P. Kelly employ for the stage is bound to sacrifice the finer details of the fiction and run into severe (or should that be sever?) problems when representing the larger ones.

Former nurse Annie Wilkes rescues the hapless author from a car crash in the remote peaks of Colorado and tends to his horribly disfigured legs in her remote house. Here Sabine Dargent's set painting suggests a disjunction with surface realism, where sketched wood panels slump across a dull brown background, while grungy fittings are decked out with sinister pink curtains. It looks like the characters have fallen

#### TEXT AND SUBTEXT

*Ryan and Norton in Misery*

into a cartoon cell. Evelyn McGrory's discordant music and Paul O'Neill's lights, bright primary colours seeping in at unexpected angles, attempt to break free from the confines of realism. But almost every other aspect of the production — from direction and performance to audience and material — faces the same predicament as Sheldon. Namely, we are trapped.

Limited to this room, Kelly soon grows stir-crazy, repositioning the bed at every opportunity, illuminating concealed rooms futilely, and generally attempting to shake free from the stasis. Helen Norton's Annie avoids an impersonation of Kathy Bates, alternating between girlish excitement and priggish sternness, but her slow drawl is indicative of the production's pace. Already a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic,

when Annie discovers that Jonathan Ryan's groaning Paul has killed off her beloved Misery, the title character of his Mills and Boonish fiction, her small remaining thermos flask of sanity is quickly jettisoned and she commands that he resurrect her and abandon his profane exercises in serious fiction. He's not in a position to argue. But first, she leaves him alone for several days. Someone has deemed it necessary that we are made to experience each one of them. Paul talks to himself indefatigably: "Well Paul... you always wanted to know... what it would be like... to drink your own piss." Euuggghhh!

Things don't improve much when he gains a wheelchair and some mobility and is forced to pointlessly narrate his thought processes: "C'mon Paul, you've got to get out of here," he tells himself, dispelling all notion that he might redecorate the place. "C'mon Paul let's get back into bed, before she gets home," etc.

Naturally this approach becomes irredeemable when it comes time for the famous hobbling scene. Between coy blackouts a foot is severed and dropped into a wastepaper bin. "Oh for God's sake Paul, I'm a trained nurse!" shouts Wilkes, and the audience hoot with laughter. For the remainder of the show Paul wheels around with a large, bandaged, foot-shaped stump employing all manner of, "I really have to put my foot down about this" gags, and finally it seems that they're having some fun.

But with all the action taking place in Sheldon's pages, the liberty of the stage is simply forfeited and the production buckles under the realist demands of its source material. Misery by name and by nature.

### MUD by Maria Irene Fornés

The Corn Exchange  
Project Space Upstairs, Dublin

28 Aug.-20 Sep. 2003, reviewed 1 Sep.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

CUBAN-BORN AND AMERICAN-RESIDENT feminist avant-garde writer/director Maria Irene Fornés' 1983 play *Mud* is a tightly organized polemic centred on the tribulations of one Mae (Simone Kirby) a woman living in evidently oppressive circumstances who is doubly lumbered by two males who actively frustrate her desire for advancement: her seemingly half-witted but highly physical "mate" Lloyd (David Pearse) and the "educated" but petty Henry (Liam Carney). Carefully and powerfully wrapped up in its linguistic specificity, the play is rich with symbolism, paradox, and associative imagery drawn from a compact trio of characters in almost constant conflict.

There is arguably a core simplicity to the play which suggests the stock methodology of the *commedia dell' arte*, which The Corn Exchange's production nominally takes as its inspiration. The plot is relatively straightforward, the situation of the characters is not unfamiliar, and the characters themselves are recognizable as basic "types." Yet from the moment the audience is confronted with Kris Stone's impressively arid set evoking the original setting of Dust Bowl America, the fixity of the environment seems altogether too literal a space for performative improvisation. Yes, there is a quality of surrealism to the effect created by the dimensions of the stage relative to the space used by the actors, but it seems closer to a naturalistic setting than is entirely



comfortable for a *commedia* experiment.

This problematic schism between ethos and execution continues throughout the play. Though each of the actors evidently works hard to create physical and gestural tensions through movement and deportment, there is nothing of the clownish exaggeration which marked the company's *Lolita*, where a nominally "closed" text (a screenplay) was opened through the application of *commedia* techniques. *Mud* is arguably too tightly

**OPPRESSED** Simone Kirby and David Pearse in *Mud*

expressive a piece of writing to yield too much reinterpretation, and the limited dramaturgical space created by reframing the action

through the use of Irish accents is more confusing than stimulating (especially when the set continues to evoke America rather than Ireland).

The decision to use Irish accents echoes the production's overall embrace of connotation alongside more traditional signification. Director Annie Ryan explains in a programme note that she was "interested

to hear how this American play would sound in the mouths of Irish characters." The idea of touching on the more realistic context of Irish poverty as opposed to the abstract way in which American drama treats the same subject also appealed to the director. "It seems closer to the bone," she says.

Certainly it is interesting to hear these words from the mouths of Irish actors and to attempt to relate their experience with that of characters in the Dust Bowl, but in spite of the accents, these individuals resist parochial appropriation. The audience is as likely to hear the speech rhythms of the American midwest as the West of Ireland. The play still seems fixed to its original setting as hard as the production is trying to separate them.

Though there is certainly a polemical value in the collision between text and context, this never really raises the production aesthetic above the core values of the play. This *Mud* does not so much engage with Ireland as a context as skip across the surface of issues tackled more directly by Martin McDonagh and by Garry Hynes' recent productions of John B. Keane. The tricks and devices brought to bear on the play yield only superficial results in terms of how the audience responds to what is valuable in the work itself.

I think it is fair to observe that many of the spaces created by the production (between set and actor, between visible and hidden, between language and accent, between text and context) represent artificial gaps between the play (which remains at its best as a text in its own right) and the production (which is ambitious, but unsuccessful in substantially re-envisioning that text).

There may be enough performative elements in this production for audiences to enjoy and admire, and it is technically well mounted in respect of set design, lighting, and acting. David Pearse is, as always, wonderfully expressive both in body and in voice, and he tackles the role of Lloyd with a great degree of discipline. Yet even this seems both more and less controlled than it ought to be if performance is to explode the boundaries of the text and challenge the conventions of characterization in a way consistent with the *commedia* ethos, something which was certainly seen in *Lolita*.

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#### **THE MYSTERIES 2003 by Vincent Woods**

Macnas/Belgrade Theatre Coventry

NUI Galway Tennis Courts

Galway Arts Festival

15-21 Jul. 2003; reviewed 19 Jul.

**BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

MORE THAN ANY OTHER COMPANY in Ireland, Macnas is particularly associated with its style of performance; it's also unusually closely linked with its home city of Galway. The strength of the company's "brand" has brought it much success — but that success has also led audiences to develop preconceptions about what a Macnas performance should involve. This leaves the company with some tough questions to answer.

Most of the first generation of independent companies, founded in the 1970s and 80s, have found themselves in similar situations. Such companies were



usually established to fill institutional vacuums — the need for regional or street theatre, for example. But, sooner or later, those companies have had to redefine themselves — due to success, sectoral change, company members' need to develop artistically while ensuring financial security, and so on. And with those redefinitions, the vacuums the companies originally filled have often reappeared, leaving audiences confused and sometimes resentful.

Underlying this apparent clash is the structural inefficiency at the heart of Irish theatre: we expect creative groups to behave like institutions. It's clearly not reasonable to expect Macnas to endlessly repeat a formula first developed almost 20 years ago. But if Galway audiences have had a parade almost every year since 1986, they are entitled to expect a parade almost every year in the future.

**THE MASSES** *The Macnas company in The Mysteries 2003*

So companies like Macnas risk being imprisoned by their remit and reputation, while audiences in Galway and elsewhere are frustrated by a perceived absence of locally-focussed work.

This is the context in which *The Mysteries 2003* was produced and received. A co-production with Coventry's Belgarde Theatre, it's clearly an attempt to explore new ways of working, while remaining loyal to the central Macnas tradition of community theatre. Unfortunately, uncertainty about the company's direction — combined with the inevitable absence of cohesion that international co-production involves — makes the show disjointed. This is most evident in its unwillingness to establish a firm grip on its biblical subject matter.

Mystery plays were originally performed by people who regarded the sto-

ries as literal truths; but audiences now have little sense of religious mystery. Faced with these stories' simplicity, most artists opt for one of two techniques: they either have fun with the material, or they attempt to complicate it. And both approaches can work, as we see in everything from *Jesus Christ Superstar* to *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

*The Mysteries* 2003 works most successfully when the biblical stories are performed in carnivalesque style, performed by an amateur Galway troupe and a core of professional actors. Set-pieces such as the building of Noah's Ark are examples of the best of Macnas: performed in a vast outdoor space, brilliantly utilising movement, puppetry, dance and song to connect with the spectators on the level of pure sensation. The use of mime technique (presumably the work of Mikel Murfi, who co-directs with Richard Hayhow) adds interestingly to the traditional Macnas style.

However, the attempt to blend this style with narrative just can't work. Vincent Woods' script complicates the story of Christ, using a sophisticated narrative structure of flashback and metaphor, together with poetic dialogue, to give us writing that's compassionate and, at times, beautifully constructed. But it deserves a level of concentration that's disrupted by the visual exuberance of the outdoor performance.

The setting also creates problems. Audiences form two long lines on either side of the NUIG tennis courts — a space that is acoustically poor and difficult to fill. The narrative structure means that moving around is impossible, yet no seating is provided; instead we must stand, in the rain, on a hard tarmac surface, for over an hour. This is not conducive to the

appreciation of serious theatre.

Appallingly bad weather, leading to the cancellation of two of the play's nine Irish performances, didn't help either. This of course was bad luck — but it could be argued that making the success of your one annual show dependent on nine consecutive days of good Irish weather might also be a case of bad planning. One sensed in this choice of venue an absence of firm decision-making.

That said, there's lots to enjoy here; the problem was with trying to enjoy all of the different elements together. What is most clear is that Macnas still have a lot to offer — great storytelling, a close relationship with their community, brilliant technique, and much more. But they cannot please everyone all of the time — which is, it seems, what they tried to do here. What they now need is to move forward decisively, with confidence, conviction — and support.

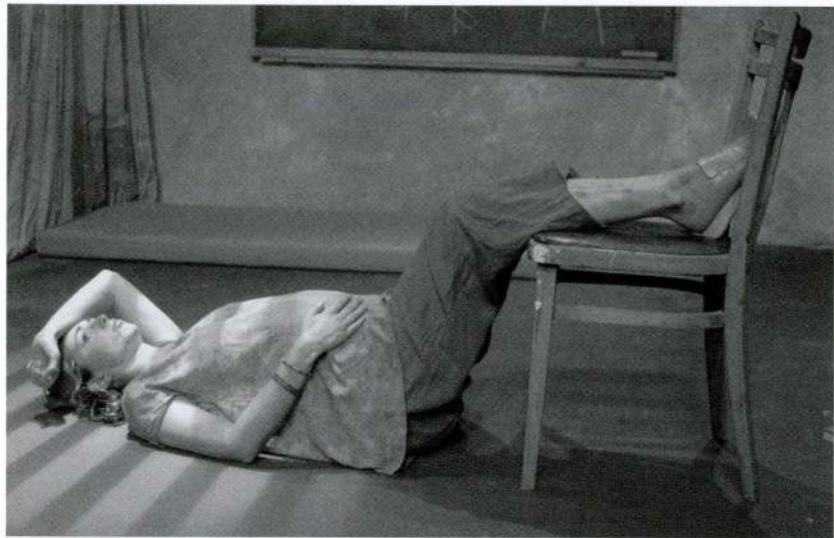
#### **THE OTHER SIDE** by ReadCo

Project Cube, Dublin

13-30 Aug. 2003; reviewed 13 Aug.

BY BELINDA MCKEON

ON ANY GIVEN EVENING AT THE THEATRE, certain contextual details make a great difference to the experience of an audience member. Not just the quality of the writing or the performances, or the comfort of the surroundings, but our mood, our company, and the situations from which we have come and to which we will return are all part of what constitutes a production. Theatre is a place and a convention and a set of expectations just as much as it is an art form. The beauty of ReadCo's *The Other Side* is that it nudges us into an awareness of these considerations while managing to



maintain, as its core, a strong, emotionally gripping line of narrative — an old-fashioned stress on solid storytelling. This means that the idiosyncratic and experimental elements of the piece stimulate, rather than alienate. While the piece limits the choices of the audience, forcing us to forfeit vision of half the action by remaining on one of two sides of a canvas partition, in so doing it reveals to us our complicity in giving meaning to that action, our imaginative contribution to the shape and the sense of the evolving scene.

In fact the piece, devised by Michelle Read with Tara Derrington and Natalie Stringer, draws attention to the manner in which, at the theatre as in most other situations, we make and limit our own choices. The decision we make when we enter the foyer, between a red ticket and

#### ONE PERSPECTIVE...

*Stringer* in *The Other Side*

a white one, and between sitting alone or with a companion, sets down the foundations for what we

will and will not see, and for what we will be forced to create in our own minds. Depending on the colour of the ticket we choose, we will watch the story of two women in a distant, riot-torn country, detained for their own protection in neighbouring cells, from one or other side of a purported prison wall. I found myself facing Dervla (Sile Nic Chonaigh), a smartly-dressed Irish businesswoman smacking of efficiency, indignant at her situation; from beyond the wall there came noises of the activity of Kate (played by Stringer): we heard the sound of her English accent, of the stories she told, and we heard the responses to her words, her actions, by the other half of the audience. Dervla's story, as it emerges, and as powerfully



conveyed by Nic Chonaonigh, is an affecting one; she has come in search of the twin sister who went missing in her childhood, and

as her imprisonment lengthens and her relationship with the unseen Kate develops into a complex emotional bond, her efficiency crumbles to reveal an injured, deeply vulnerable core. Hints of vulnerability sound from Kate's side, too — sounds of hunger, of troubled breathing, of nightmares — but since she has established herself as the sassy, fibbing type early on in the play, and since we cannot see her and fully realise her predicament, we, on Dervla's side, side with Dervla. We are momentarily swept up into Dervla's blind hope, when she desperately wants to believe that Kate, who says she was adopted at the same age at which Dervla's twin went missing and has no information about her earlier

#### **..AND ANOTHER**

Nic Chonaonigh  
*in The Other Side*

childhood, is actually the lost sister. Without verification, there is always possibility.

But *The Other Side* alerts us to other equations also, more disconcerting equations by which we operate not just as audience members, but as members of society. We realise that without being faced with the actual bodily presence of other people, we feel less empathy. Without being alert to the quavers in another's voice, to the flickers in their gaze, we remain ignorant of the hidden truth of things, of the crucial messages they might, despite themselves, attempt to communicate to us. We must make up our own minds, must respond by ourselves, with no way to take readings from another's reaction, no way to know how things look from their side. And without the intervention of new and unsettling and unfamiliar situations, we stay in the dark about our own role in the

HUGH MEVIEEN

generation of meaning, in the creation of stories about ourselves and other people — those both on our side, and against it. To engage with a moving, humorous and stylish piece of theatre while at the same time to become aware of questions like these, and to walk away still questioning, still debating the truth of what has been seen, is a rare and deeply satisfying experience.

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#### **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD**

**by J. M. Synge**

Yew Tree Theatre Company in association with

Cork Opera House

On tour; reviewed 24 Oct. 2003

at the Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise

**BY BETH NEWHALL**

HOOTING, HISSING, AND GENERAL RIOT famously greeted the premiere of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre in 1907. Nestled among restive students at a recent Friday matinee of the same play, I got a taste of what that first performance must have been like.

Although the audience was daunting (and kudos to the brave actors for facing them), I was actually encouraged to see so many young people at the theatre, even if they were there under duress. To groom future audiences, and artists, we must give them such access to professional productions, theatrical and otherwise. Therein, however, lies the rub. Mounting as canonical a work as *Playboy*, and including weekday matinees, is a maneuver that all but guarantees school attendance. While

adding security to a company's season, such a show does not always serve the truest artistic aims, as, sadly, was the case with this bland production. We saw a polished performance, but — perhaps in rapport with my fellow the- atgoers — I did not really know why I was watching it.

In the programme notes, director John Breen calls *Playboy*, "a wild burlesque comedy," and this comic take constituted his main directorial conceit. Breen does acknowledge the play's darker elements, asking in his notes, "If a violent act is what is required to redeem a man, what does that say about the world of the play?" Not a new question for *Playboy*, but certainly a meaningful one if thoughtfully explored. In this production, however, the comic took precedence onstage, overshadowing the play's deeper implications.

Wild slapstick moments and pratfalls, imposed over the comedy that is, certainly, there in the script, undermined Synge's irony and actually detracted from the play's humour. Although some sequences, like the villagers' attempts to harness Christy and drag him to the gallows, did earn genuine laughs (gallows humour?), most of the physical comedy just felt contrived.

The emphasis on farce also led to largely one-note performances from the principals. Michael Hayes as Christy Mahon chose to grimace and gesture his way through his misadventure, foregoing any real humanity. As Pegeen, Emma Moohan's bristling hostility and acerbic wit, although right on target at first, soon grew tiresome; the broad comedy of the production refused her the nuance to stray far from that initial attitude. Breen focused the "burlesque" aspect of his



**WESTERN LOVE**  
*Hayes and Moohan  
in The Playboy...*

comedy on the Widow Quinn, but Nicole Rourke's comic timing was off throughout the performance, making her sexuality awkward and ineffective.

With leads more like caricatures than characters, connection with their conflicts was impossible. Ironically, some of the truest and most genuinely humorous moments came instead from the ensemble. Seemingly left to their own devices, they produced much more natural scenes. Most notably, Aileen Mythen as Sarah Tansey proved an incredibly warm

and engaging presence onstage, notwithstanding her small role.

Pat Murray's costume and set design also added dimension. Careful use of colour in the costumes subtly reinforced the text. Throughout the play, for example, the women wear skirts lined in a bright, primary red. Although we learn from Christy's father that the sight of a "red petticoat" used to send Christy "to hide in the sticks," in his new "Playboy" persona, Christy gamely stands his ground. The set design, dominated by a platform centrestage, with smaller platforms in the bench and bar on opposite sides of the stage, helped Breen to his most successful interpretive realisation. Using these three "stages," Christy and the other characters performed their various stories for one another, affording Breen a visual metaphor with which to bring up the issue of speech acts and the power of performance.

Ultimately, however, the very issue of performance constituted the play's greatest failing. The farcical nature of the violence and the one-dimensional characterisations constantly underlined the unreality of the action onstage. Breen may ask what the violent act says about "the world of the play," but the more significant question would be, what does it say about *our* world? It was precisely this suggestion — that Christy, Pegeen, et al could exist in the reality of

MARK O'SULLIVAN

the audience — that led those first Abbey viewers to riot.

We have a responsibility to share with students works, such as *The Playboy of the Western World*, that shape and pervade our culture. But part of that obligation entails making those works meaningful and resonant. If this production had dared to hit a little closer to home, then, truly, our experience would have been closer to that of the original audience.

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*A graduate of Harvard University, Beth Newhall is studying for an M.Phil at the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin.*

#### SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

by Oliver Goldsmith

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

23 Jul.-6 Sep 2003; reviewed 29 Jul.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

AS THE THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE WHICH greeted the curtain of *She Stoops to Conquer* at the Abbey rang in my ears, my friend leaned over and remarked "It's like being at the theatre 200 years ago. It's like Beckett never happened." I thought about it. She was right, of course, but I wasn't entirely sure that this was such a bad thing. Oliver Goldsmith was far from contemptuous of higher art, but he made a conscious decision to oppose the conventions of 18th-century comedy by going for belly laughs.

First staged in London in 1773, 100 years after the death of Molière, *She Stoops to Conquer* embraced a boisterous sense of humour at a time when a more "sentimental" approach was in vogue. Unimpressed by mild-mannered plays in which characters were portrayed in terms of their good qualities and frustrated by circumstances which tested their

virtue, Goldsmith espoused instead what he termed "laughing" comedy in which the characters' own flaws and vices were the cause of narrative complication.

In itself the play is a well organised piece of comic writing, employing familiar conventions of mistaken identity and inappropriate behaviour to expose hypocrisy and satirise the social mores of its day. It is simply and clearly constructed, featuring likable and entertaining characters, and there is certainly nothing which requires contextual deconstruction before it can perform its comedic and polemical functions. This Abbey production further simplifies the matter by eschewing the updating of recent outings like *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*. It is performed in full period garb and even features the unfortunate Phelim Drew as a dancing bear who makes bafflingly irrelevant appearances from time to time as a lurking symbol of rustic otherness.

Patrick Mason's production subtly redirects the polemical energies of the original text. The director takes a wide view of the action, shifting focus away from the subversive aspects of the play's construction of 18th-century English society onto a more universal comic canvas. There is a great deal of energy on stage, including a musical troupe who open the show in parade carrying a banner with the play's title emblazoned across it. Paradoxically, relatively little use is made of Paul McCauley's set. Other than a useful chair featured near the front of the stage and one desk which doubles as a tavern table at one point, there might as well be no furniture at all, and the decor, though easy on the eye, seems to confine the actors to a relatively limited space at the centre of the stage.



The production never seems static though, and there is always enough going on to hold the audience's attention. Movement is still a telling feature of the production, as characters enter and exit with confident timing and propel the action with verbal and physical liveliness. This vigour is needed to sustain the good humour, and by and large the pace holds

#### **NOT AT ALL**

#### **STOOSED**

*Justine Mitchell  
in She Stoops to  
Conquer*

throughout.

Narrative and thematic weight seems very evenly distributed among the game cast, and though there are few scenes with more than three characters on stage at once, the overall production gives a pleasing sense of an ensemble attuned to its needs. Des Cave gets perhaps too many long, slow takes as he reacts with dumbfoundedness to the increasingly outrageous behaviour of Patrick Moy in the role of Marlow, and Anita Reeves' accent seems to veer left and right of the Irish Sea more or less at will as Mrs. Hardcastle. But with Moy effectively alternatively blustering and stammering his way through the appropriately two-faced Marlow, Justine Mitchell skilfully joyful as Kate, and Aaron Monaghan restlessly bounding and skipping about the stage as the impish Tony Lumpkin, bonhomie abounds. Though the shower of confetti and the sing-song which marks the finale seems more like the kind of thing we would expect from a Christmas production, it is hard not to smile.

Even Beckett was far from above a good laugh, and as the National Theatre's summer box-office engine, *She Stoops to Conquer* is old-fashioned in a way which energises rather than deadens, which is certainly no bad thing.

TOM LAWRENCE

**SKIN DEEP by Paul Meade**

Gúna Nua Theatre Company

Project Upstairs, Dublin

16 Jul.-2 Aug. 2003

Reviewed 16 Jul. BY SUSAN CONLEY

"MULTIMEDIA," THAT SUSPECT TERM that has littered funding proposals and PR documents for the last decade or so, has gradually worked its way up from the lowly slide projector to extremely intricate live feeds. If theatre was formerly a bi-media undertaking — live actors and maybe the use of music — the incorporation of filmic techniques has become the vogue. It makes a sad sort of sense, as the episodic structure of cinema and of television has long since made its mark

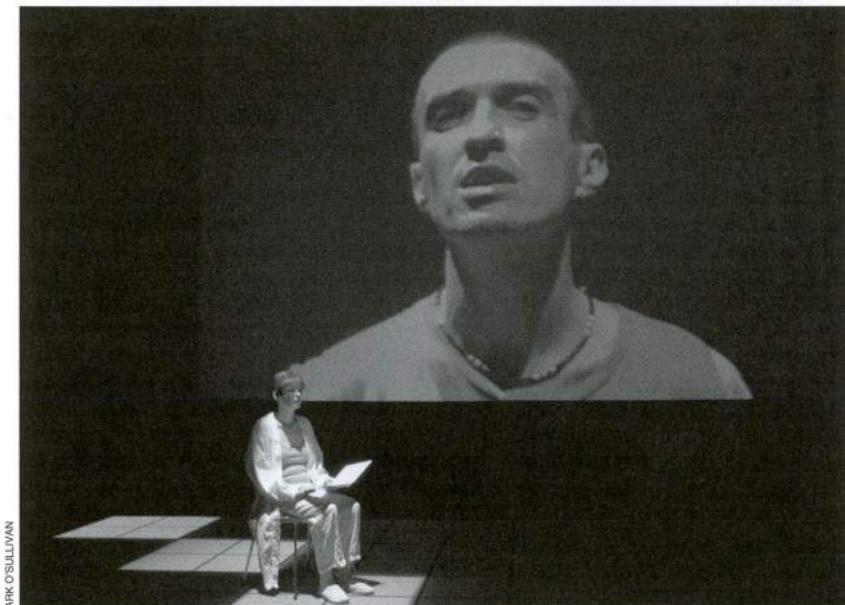
on the way theatre tells stories.

But what is the point in using multi-media techniques in theatre? Have the stories become so large that bodies and furniture can't tell them anymore? Is it the cutting edge of creativity, or actually evidence of a lack of imagination? Does it push the boundaries of storytelling or does it, damningly, point up the inability of the practitioners to deliver a clear narrative?

These are several of the questions that spring to mind during Gúna Nua's *Skin Deep*, a production that doesn't quite add up to the promise of its parts. There are far too many opportunities to ask oneself these questions; one would have hoped that the combination of live performance, taped performance, live

**UNDER HER SKIN**

O'Dea and O'Halloran  
in Skin Deep



MARK OSULLIVAN

video performance, and intertitles might have kept the brain occupied for two hours.

Paul Meade's play, devised by the company, is structured very much like a film, and David Parnell's direction is a nuts-and-bolts approach that manages to elegantly handle the numerous scene and location changes. Short blasts of information are sometimes set up via the use of intertitles (designed and executed by One Productions; lighting design is by Sinead McKenna) that are projected on the big upstage screen, and sometimes by Paul McDonnell's music. Chairs and tables and bed and refrigerator glide perfectly into place, the result of Emma Cullen's well-conceived set design, which allows the actors to flow on and off the stage. Scenes are "cut" together and linked by the changing projections, and sometimes, Karl (Mark O'Halloran) shoots live footage.

Karl is an avant-garde artist who wants to make a splash in the art world. His friend, Susan (Emma Colohan), is a med student whose financial resources are being stretched to the limit. When Karl pays her a tidy sum to smuggle a body part out of the morgue in which she works, he says he is interested only in sketching "from life"; but actually videotapes people's reactions to the sight of the foot in his freezer. His flatmate Dan (Anthony Brophy) seems less freaked out by the foot than by the fact that Karl owes him loads of back rent, and Dan's ostensible girlfriend (Jennifer O'Dea) is openly appalled — but as a journalist overcomes her disgust and is soon hot on the, er, heels of a story that promises to get her byline onto the front page.

The treatment of the story is so brisk as to prevent any of its big ideas to develop

(What price fame? What exactly does friendship entail? Is the body disposable or should it be revered until it disappears, naturally, on its own? And what is it with the Gúna Nua guys and scorned women?). The actors, an accomplished bunch, are made to move set pieces around, and enter almost every scene at an emotionally high pitch — something that, in film, would have been the editor's job to achieve. Consequently, one never gets the sense that the actors are actually feeling anything that's going on; as they rush from moment to moment, there's never any cumulative sense of relationship. Only O'Dea manages to elicit sympathy, as her character is diagnosed with a brain tumour, at which point a reviewer can only throw up her hands at the appearance of yet another plot twist.

There was only one major technical hiccup, a split-screen telephone call between Colohan and Brophy, in which the marriage of technology and live acting failed to rise to the occasion. Then again, the big screen in the back was rarely called upon to do more than flash some titles (very sporadically employed, and typographically mundane) and hold on scenic images of the hallway of a hospital or the view outside Dan's window. Such elements have little meaning: what's the point of projecting a still image using technology that's meant to present us with movement?

If multimedia is the future, then Gúna Nua's production is a bridge between those slide projectors and ultimate potential. If it's an example of the present, than it's caught between two stools, and the actual meeting point between film and theatre — the story — falls down between them.

**SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH****by Tennessee Williams**

The New Theatre at Liberty Hall, Dublin

1-27 Sep. 2003; reviewed 24 Sep.

**BY BELINDA MCKEON**

FACED WITH TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' documented dissatisfaction with *Sweet Bird of Youth*, his 1959 drama of loss, nostalgia, and corruption in a bigoted Southern town, as a "dreadfully overwritten" affair, should a cast and director cut their losses and look elsewhere in the Williams canon, or should they strive on to make what they can of this elaborate, contradictory play?

Director Tim McDonnell and the New Theatre are to be commended for having taken on *Sweet Bird of Youth* and given it its Irish premiere. They have done well, too, to have drawn out from the plot's morass the threads of some quite affecting portraits of the human spirit forced to exist in a pressurised environment, and to have presented those individual portraits to their audience with genuine feeling and conviction that seem grounded in an awareness of how this play can speak to modern society.

McDonnell has said that he chose the play because the relationships between its individual characters are so complex — and they are certainly that. Aspiring

actor Chance Wayne, who has long since turned to hustling in a desperate bid for stardom, has returned to his home town of St. Cloud with an ageing Hollywood star, Alexandra del Lago, in tow; both are embittered by the loss of their youth and the failure it represents. Wayne has come to reclaim vitality through reunion with his first love, Heavenly, the cherished daughter of wealthy politician Boss

**YOUNGER MAN***Fox and Hayden in Sweet Bird of Youth*

CARMEL WHITE

Finley. But since their last encounter, Heavenly has been broken by a traumatic hysterectomy to remove the venereal disease for which her father, Boss, holds Wayne responsible, and in symbolic retribution for which a random black man has already been savagely castrated. As soon as Wayne sets foot in St. Cloud on Easter Sunday he begins moving not towards resurrection and glory, but towards the same bleak fate.

While McDonnell's central cast — Anthony Fox, Maria Hayden, Elaine Jordan, and Patrick Joseph Byrnes — all achieve robust realisations of their characters and of the play's most evident themes, this straightforward approach cannot tap into the subtexts of confused sexuality and dangerous religious fervour which drive this play and create its peculiar, frightened air. The camped-up interaction between Wayne and del Lago, intended to suggest his repressed homosexuality, has to be very skilfully handled by actors to portray a relationship based on melodrama rather than simply slipping, itself, into the same. Immense, too, are the challenges of maintaining a confident performance whilst playing actors of dubious talent whose ability to act away reality is steadily crumbling. And just as a portrait of sentimental fatherly affection cannot capture the undercurrents of incestuous desire which whisper through Finley's possessiveness of his adult daughter, nor can a depiction of frank disgust with his working-class mistress point to Finley's insecurity about his own humble origins and his proximity to the underprivileged people he so despises.

The weight of *Sweet Bird* can be car-

ried only by the realisation of complex human interactions, not individuals, and it is here that McDonnell's production falls short. Poor technical details don't help. Six weeks of voice training was not enough to prevent accents from slipping and projection from faltering, and the play itself is over-long, as are the complicated set changes. More mystifyingly, many of Williams' instructions on set and lighting seem to have been ignored, and, as the musical "Lament" intended to signal crucial moments of regret and revelation, a sample Philip Glass track makes little impact. Scenes are too often over-lit, rather than carefully shaded and nuanced.

Ironically, the final scene of the play, in which a re-invigorated del Lago departs in search of one final burst of Hollywood glory, while a weary Wayne stays behind, practically inviting castration by Finley's crew, is delivered just as Williams must have envisioned, Fox earning the sympathy of the audience by stepping forward to ask, not for pity, but for recognition. Yet this is the most confused moment in an ultimately incoherent play, representing not simply a grating stylistic and structural leap, but also an inexplicable endorsement of martyrdom over courage which suggests that Williams was unhappy with the idea of del Lago, rather than Wayne, as the hero. It is pity that McDonnell could not find a way to re-imagine this feeble denouement. But then, given the short time which he and his cast of 20 had to tackle a script rife with loose ends and contradictions, to have carried the play off with even a one-dimensional coherence is an achievement.



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