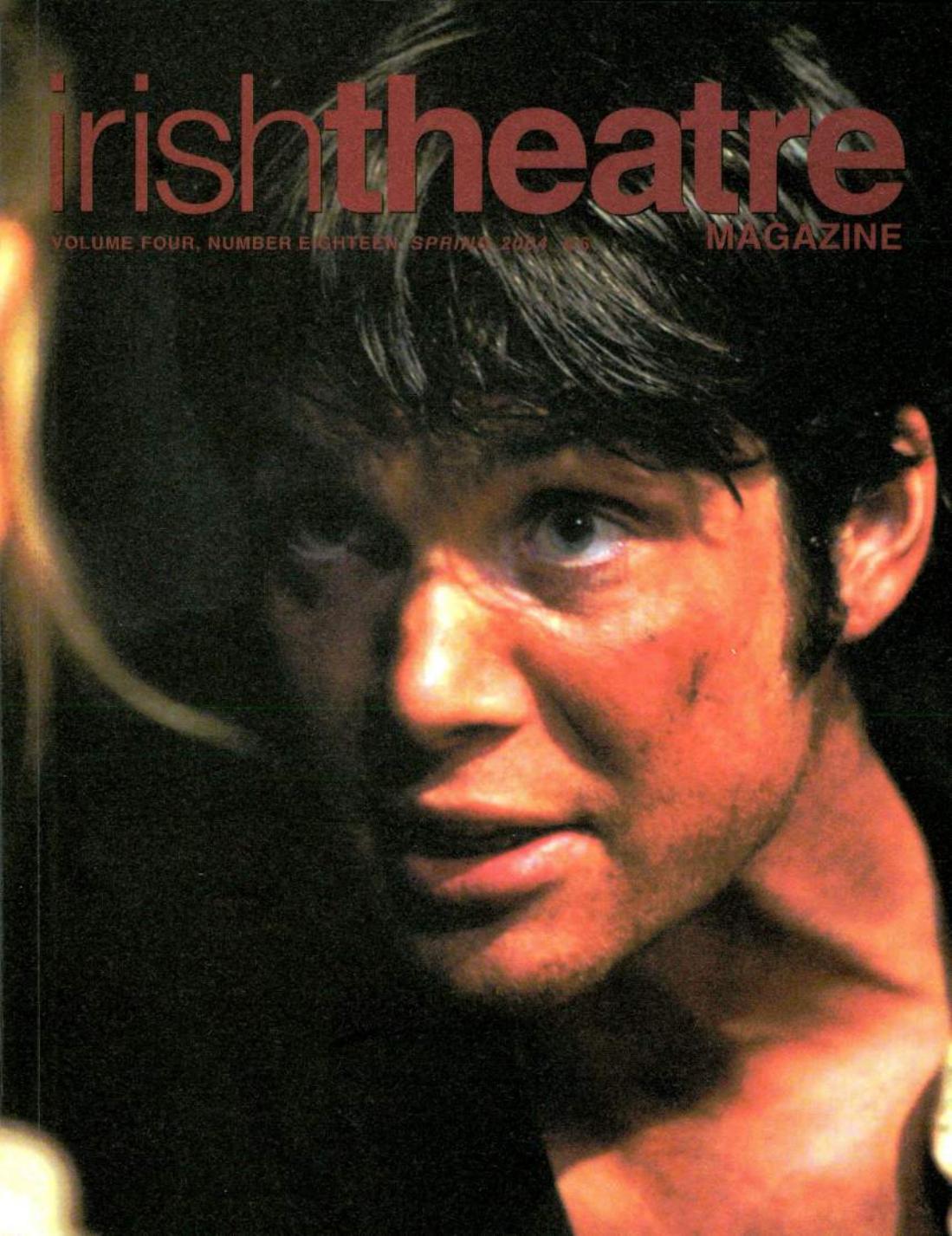


# irishtheatre

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MAGAZINE



# draíocht

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# Talking and Listening

A THEME OF "MAKING YOUR VOICE heard" had already emerged in this issue of *itm* when, only days before we went to press, a series of explosive events set the Irish arts world on its ear: the abandonment of the Arts Plan by the Arts Council and the resignation, a day later, of its director Patricia Quinn.

The Council is "setting aside" the Arts Plan because, in its view, the Plan is not responsive to the needs of its clientele, and instead is framing itself as a body that, in the words of chair Olive Braiden, is "there for artists." We at *itm* are certainly in agreement with the former assertion: a year ago (*itm* 14) we criticised the Plan as an "inadequate document," and like many in the sector, will hardly mourn its demise. The question emerges, however, of what will take its place, and what role the sector will play in shaping the future of the Arts Council. The lack of an articulated alternative to the Plan, and the role that the Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism could be playing in these events, are issues for serious concern, as we argue in the forthcoming pages.

Like many in the sector, we at *itm* will hardly mourn the demise of the Arts Plan. The question immediately emerges, though, of what will take its place.

In issue 14, we urged the arts sector to let the Arts Council know what it thought of the Council's policies and decisions. We reiterate — and expand — that behest here. There has been a marked increase in lobbying by artists and artists' support organisations over the past year which helped ensure an increase in arts funding from Government, and the retention of Section 481 tax incentives for film production. We need to keep talking — to the Council, to the Minister, and to Government representatives — about the specific concerns and requirements of the people who make art happen in this country.

Speaking of mouthing off... There have been an unusual number of "talking shop" events in recent months, which we cover through brief and opinionated reportage in our news section. And this issue sees the launch of our year-long series of submissions from yourselves about how you'd like to celebrate 100 years of Irish theatre and anticipate 100 more. This first set of contributions is irreverent, passionate, and outspoken. More of that please!



# The Post-Plan Era

A WEEK IS A LONG TIME IN POLITICS. ON MONDAY, 8 FEBRUARY, in an interview with *The Irish Times*, Olive Braiden lit a slow fuse that, by Friday, had led to a detonation. "We can't follow the steps of the Arts Plan," said the Arts Council chairperson. "We've inherited it and it looks like, we don't know for sure, but like we'll need a new one." On Thursday the Council knew for sure, announcing its intention to "set aside" the beleaguered Arts Plan 2002-2006. The following day, Patricia Quinn, director of the Arts Council for eight years, tendered her resignation.

At the centre of these events lay a document widely considered redundant by arts organisations and, it now seems, by Government. The Arts Plan 2002-2006 had proposed (and delivered) a radical restructuring of the Arts Council, which incorporated extra staff. It redefined the Council's role as a developmental agency, a policymaker and an advocacy body for the arts, rather than a simple conduit for state funding. It also projected substantial

year-on-year increases in expenditure to serve its objectives, grant programmes and administrative costs.

By 2003, however, the slash in Government funding for the arts rendered the Plan virtually unworkable. But other problems about the Plan had already begun to surface. The core of Quinn's strategy to "professionalise" the arts, its policies were considered too prescriptive by many in the sector. Controversial as it was, Quinn fought hard to create, institute and publicise the Arts Plan. Clearly, she would not give up on it. That it was dumped without an agreed alternative and that its demise was



THE ARTS COUNCIL

announced with little diplomacy surely prompted the bitterness in Quinn's letter of resignation: "... in circumstances where the Council's precipitate action overturns Government policy and is contrary to the considered advice of its executive, I am in honour obliged to give notice of my decision to resign my position as director."

Government policy, however, was far from definite. Support for the document has worn away since the then Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht, and the Islands, Sile de Valera, approved the Plan in 2002. Dissatisfaction with the Plan emerged at the highest level, even before the appointment of the new Arts Council. "The Arts Plan is Government policy at the moment," de Valera's successor as Minister, John O'Donoghue, told *The Irish Times* last July, before adding that such policy depended on sufficient funding. He

also queried the arts community's "ownership" of the plan: "... some of them are detached from the provisions of the Plan itself, as if it were made up by somebody else and they had no say in its formulation ... it's not something that has been a nuance, it has been bluntly said at times."

Resistance to Quinn's Plan would become more blunt. In a move designed, perhaps, to counterbalance the perceived bureaucracy of Merrion Square, the Minister (aided by arts advisor Fiach MacConghail) appointed a new Council drawn predominantly from the professional arts with Braiden, a one-time Fianna Fail European Parliament candidate, as chair. An immediate and vigorous campaign to restore the funding sought by the Arts Plan proved largely successful, procuring €52.5 million (of a requested €53m) for the Arts Council in

## what's news

2004. The next job for the Council was to face its first round of funding decisions, only two months after having been appointed, a process which Braiden told *The Irish Times* was a "baptism of fire." And then, it seems, Council energies became focused on the Plan — specifically, its weaknesses. Braiden's articulation of these concerns hews closely to those of the Minister.

"Why be reliant on something that isn't absolutely accepted by a great majority of people as being their Plan?" Braiden told *itm* on 12 February. "We believe, or we're told by people, that it's seen as a Plan of the Arts Council but not a plan of practitioners." The arts sector, she thinks, "didn't feel ownership of the Plan." This familiar phrase begins to resemble something from a party line — but it is also a view widely held in the arts, regardless of political affiliation.

Braiden's other reason for ditching the Plan is that it is simply out of date. "That plan was written for a certain time," she says referring to the economic boom years of the 1990s, "when particular funding was promised on a multi-annual basis." Given Braiden's proximity to the Minister, it seems unlikely that O'Donoghue would disapprove. Government policy, like a favourable economy, is subject to change.

Our interview took place the day after a terse press release juked the five-year Plan in three short sentences. What the Council proposes as a replacement, however, is far less succinct. "We have to come up, in a very short time frame, with

our list of priorities," Braiden says. Those priorities will be determined through consultation with the arts sector. The Council's development-agency ethos, meanwhile, is "still a very important part of our work, but we have to balance the role as a development agency with the need to be more supportive of what artists want to do."

This all sounds ridiculously permissive, shaping policy to cater to the desires of artists, but surely such support requires structure. Although Braiden reminds us that the process is ongoing, and that until they re-establish their goals the Arts Council will adhere to the Plan, she is careful not to suggest the provision of a new plan, or anything even resembling one. "You don't need an exact plan," she says, adding that their new document may even amount to "bullet points of priorities." When the document may not even com-

mit to a grammatical structure, such a lack of clarity is worrying, particularly as the Council finds itself directorless. Having dismantled the rudder, the ship has lost its captain.

Given her close association with the Plan, however, Quinn's departure can hardly be considered unexpected. It is now in the Council's interest to make a swift appointment, lest it seem truly at sea — which raises the question of the terms and conditions under which this appointment will be made. Under the 2003 Arts Act, the Minister gained greater influence over the Council than under previous such Acts, particularly in the troublingly



**DEPARTING** Council  
director Patricia Quinn

open-ended Section 5(3): "The Minister may, in relation to the performance of its functions, give a direction in writing to the Council requiring it to comply with such policies of the Minister or Government as are specified in that direction."

The appointment of a new director is a defining moment for this Council, already widely known to be in harmony with this Minister's approach. The presence of this clause leaves little doubt that his hand could be felt in a decision of this importance. This is surely a matter of serious concern to the arts community, if we agree that a Council that is independent, strong and impartial is a priority for the sector. It is surely now at the forefront of worries of Arts Council employees, already worn down by the relentless change and controversy which have wracked the organisation over the last five years; more recently alarmed by the prospect of decentralisation; and nursing suspicions that — the ultimate endgame — the Council may eventually be subsumed into the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism.

In the meantime, though the Arts Plan was effectively scrapped because of the demise of multi-annual funding from government, Braiden doesn't accept that financial security for Arts Council clients is unattainable. "It's not impossible. We have to be really careful to assure people that it's not impossible. You can't give funding one year and then just cut it back the next year," she says. "We cannot say exactly what we will give you next year, but for most people it will be the same as last year and maybe an increase. That's what we're hoping." High hopes indeed — are such vague and overambitious promises what we are to expect from a plan-less Council?

In conversation, Braiden praises the expertise of her Council and that of the executive, including "a very experienced director who was there when the Plan was drawn up and who has lived through funding being cut at a very difficult time. We didn't have to go through that, but we learned about it from people who felt their lives were devastated by it." Braiden's is a statement of vanishing praise for Quinn, which backs out into a gesture of empathy for the wounded arts sector, and concludes with a sting. Minutes after our interview with Braiden ends, we learned that Quinn had resigned. "We really do want to be the voice of the artist and arts organisations," Braiden has just told *itm*. "This Arts Council means business."

The arts community may not rue the demise of the Plan, but it cannot abandon tyranny for chaos. The community must decide what it now wants from the Arts Council. For the moment, they are all ears.

#### **ABBEY AXES ASSOCIATES**

THERE IS NOTHING SINISTER, BEN Barnes assures us, in his decision to dissolve the associate directorship of the National Theatre. Indeed, it was such "a complete waste of time" according to one participant, that few are sorry to see the back of it. On 11 February each of the Abbey's eight associate directors — Martin Drury, Jimmy Fay, Mark Lambert, Paul Mercier, Conall Morrison, Lynne Parker, David Parnell and Gerry Stemberge — received notification by post that their services were no longer necessary.

Launched at the start of Barnes' tenure as artistic director in February 2000, the associate directorate comprised theatre directors with formal links with the Abbey. Today, though, Barnes plays down the for-

## what's news

mality of the arrangement. "We had a fairly loose associate directorate here for two years," he says. "The agreement ran out at the end of 2003 and I decided not to renew it because all the people on the associate directorate were working here anyway." Ultimately the reason to abolish the programme, he says, was that they were unable to have regular meetings, "because everybody was so busy."

While it was intended that the ideas of the associate directors would feed into the theatre's overall policy, Barnes believes that this happens anyway through *ad hoc* meetings. "Anyone who works here has an impact on the way policy is shaped," he says.

However, *itm* has learned of a growing frustration among the associate directors about a perceived lack of impact on the the-

atre's policy. "That spectacularly failed to happen," recalls Lynne Parker. "We put forward various proposals, none of which were taken up." Like Parker, Jimmy Fay agrees with the decision to dissolve the directorate, saying that it was an experiment that had already failed a year ago. "We were more talked to, or talked at, rather than talked with," Fay recalls. "We certainly never collectively explored things."

David Parnell, however, feels differently. "It's important that Ben [Barnes] is commended for at least attempting to get something like this off the ground," he says, agreeing that meetings had proven "surprisingly difficult" to arrange. Parker is less certain: "Of course there's a bit of juggling to be done to work out everybody's availability, but that's not rocket science. The meetings were well attended and we were all perfectly eager to have other ones. I don't think that's really an argument."

Meetings were infrequent — about three a year — and in the view of some, represented a sounding board for already-formed programmes. Frustration peaked a year ago when the panel queried programming decisions, later to discover that the programme had already been released to the press. The directors drafted a letter urging that the panel be more participative, respectfully asking that Barnes re-examine their role.

According to Barnes' letter of dismissal, however, this "understandable desire on the part of the [associate] director to have a real, rather than a theoretic, input into policy and play choice is always going to



**DIRECTOR**  
Ben Barnes

## Courses & Schemes

Rough Magic have advertised for submissions for their second SEEDS programme, which will develop not only playwrights but directors. Deadlines are 24th Mar (writers) and 31st Mar (directors). Information on [info@rough-magic.com](mailto:info@rough-magic.com). The Drama Studies Centre at UCD Blackrock is hosting a workshop/seminar series on Meyerhold Directing, 25-27 March. Info at (01) 716-8049... Loose Canon is running a workshop centred around the rehearsal of scenes from classic plays from 10-21 May. Email [info@loosecanon.com](mailto:info@loosecanon.com) for more information.

be at odds with the primacy of the single-vision artistic direction ethos around which the Abbey currently coheres."

Today Barnes stresses the word "currently," highlighting that his letter also refers to radical proposals for the reorganisation of the theatre beyond 2004, which are in the process of being drafted. Of these proposals, Barnes told *itm*, "I would see it as very important that the theatre have associate artists, whether it's associate directors or actors or both, so that the voices of the artists are heard within the organisation." The dissolution of the panel, then, serves to begin such reform "with a clean sheet."

Barnes doesn't entertain criticism that the theatre has failed to nurture young directors, who, despite the theatre's previous training programmes, are conspicuously absent from the Abbey's mainstage and most Peacock productions. Barnes points to an upcoming season of play readings, "Reading the Decade", as a corrective to such complaints: "We're approaching a lot of young directors to be involved with this series ... quite a lot of them are women as well. So that should make everybody happy."

Although Barnes regrets "not pushing to have more meetings," the associate directorate now seems to have been so misguided an initiative under the "single-vision" ethos that few involved are sorry to see it abandoned. "At the end of the day you can listen to what other people have to say," says Barnes, "but I'm being paid to make those decisions for this period of time and that's what I have to do. You would, I'm sure, agree that you can't run a theatre by committee."

MARC ROYCE



MARK MORRIS DANCE COMPANY

#### DANCING AS FAST AS WE CAN

The second International Dance Festival Ireland runs from 4-23 May in venues throughout Dublin. Visiting companies include the Mark Morris Dance Company (US) and Rosas from Belgium (at the Abbey); Stephen Petronio (US), and Jonathan Burrows (UK). The Irish programme includes work by Liz Roche and Dance Theatre of Ireland. For details visit [dancefestivalireland.ie](http://dancefestivalireland.ie).

#### SO EURO IT HURTS

The Irish EU Presidency cultural programme is supporting three Irish theatre companies to travel to the 2004 Prague Fringe Festival which runs from 1-6 Jun: Fishamble, Noggin, and BDNC. For further details visit [www.eu2004.ie](http://www.eu2004.ie) and [www.praguefringe.com](http://www.praguefringe.com).

# what's news

## UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

As the Abbey's centenary celebration, abbeyonehundred, continues, Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (after *Antigone*) plays on the mainstage from 31 Mar-1 May. Next up is the International Dance Festival Ireland, featuring the Mark Morris Dance Group (4-5 May) and Rosas (7-8 May). Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana then presents Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 12-15 May. Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* runs from 27 May-31 Jul. At the Peacock Theatre, Stuart Carolan's *Defender of the Faith* runs 16 Mar-24 Apr. The Peacock's spring season closes with *Savoy* by Eugene O'Brien (5 May-12 Jun).

This spring, AboutFACE Theatre Company stages their fifth production, *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, at the Space at the Helix (12-15 May) and the Civic's Loose End (18-29 May) ... Barabbas presents Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Veronica Coburn, at Project (25 May-12 Jun) ... Travelling Entertainment: Bedrock's production of Alex Johnston is touring the country through 27 Mar. The company's next production is Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, playing at Project this summer ... Asylum Theatre, in association with the Woodford Byrne Cork Midsummer Festival, takes Ursula Rani Sarma's ...touched... on tour in May and Jun ... *The Lost Letters of a Victorian Lady* by Michelle Read plays at Bewley's Cafe Theatre through 17 Apr ... Big Telly's multimedia comedy *The Thief* tours the North and the Republic through 26 Mar ... Having opened at Andrew's Lane, Calypso's production *Five Kinds of Silence* by Shelagh Stephenson plays at the Mermaid, Bray from 25-27 Mar ... The

Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival runs this year in Belfast from 29 Apr-9 May. Theatre highlights include the world premiere of Ransom Productions' *Protestants*, by Robert Welch, playing 29 Apr-9 May at OMAC, and Aidan Dooley's *Tom Crean — Antarctic Explorer* (5 May). Full programme details of the CQAF will be available on 1 Apr ... The Civic Theatre's production of Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys* plays through 24 Apr, and will tour to the Pavilion (26 Apr-1 May) and the Everyman Palace, Cork (3-8 May) ... Druid tours *The Playboy of the Western World* along the west coast and Aran Islands, ending at Siamsa Tire (6-10 Apr) ... The Everyman Palace Theatre hosts the NT Shell Connections Festival from 18-22 May ... Fishamble's latest is Michael Collins' *Tadhg Stray Wandered In*, playing at Project from 22 Mar and then touring through 1 May ... Focus Theatre presents *Very Heaven* by Ann Lambert from 4 May-12 Jun ... Galloglass tours Jennifer Johnston's *The Desert Lullaby* through Mar, ending at the Everyman in Cork on 3 Apr ... Gare St. Lazare Players are touring *Swallow* by Michael Harding, starting at the Belltable, Limerick (1-2 Apr) and finishing at the Derry Playhouse on 28 May ... Graffiti is touring Enda Walsh's *Fishy Tales* to primary schools through 2 Apr ... Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* continues at the Gate from 19 Feb into Apr, followed by Arthur Miller's *The Price* from 6 May, and Shaw's *Pygmalion* following in the summer. The Gate and the Royal Court in London are co-producing *Shining City*, Conor McPherson's new play. It plays at the Royal Court from 4 Jun-17 Jul and will be the Gate's Dublin Theatre Festival production this year ... Guna Núa presents Tom Stoppard's *The*



Real Thing, in association with (and at) Andrew's Lane, from 15 Apr-22 May ... Kabosh's latest is *Todd!*, a new version of the Sweeney Todd story by Karl Wallace and Conor Mitchell, playing the Old Museum, Belfast (18-25 Mar) and touring NI and the Republic through 24 Apr ... The Lyric presents the world premiere of *Paradise* by Padraig Coyle, Conor Grimes, and Alan McKee (4 Jun-3 Jul) ... Machine Productions in association with Scott Rellis tour *Shirley Valentine* through 15 May ... Tom Sullivan's *Songs for Twilight* plays at the New Theatre (27 Apr-29 May) before the venue closes for renovations ... The Olympia Theatre hosts Upbeat Productions' *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* by Roddy Doyle from 23 Mar-2 Apr ... Pan Pan's *Mac-Beth* 7 plays at Project from 14-24 Apr ... Prime Cut presents Neil LaBute's *The Mercy Seat*

PAUL McCARTHY

and Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* in a double bill at the Lyric (7-24 Apr) ... POC Productions is touring *Herman* by Paul Brennan through 24 Mar ... After its premiere at the Cathedral Quarter Festival, Ransom's *Protestants* is touring to the Traverse in Edinburgh (13-15 May) and in NI through 24 May ... Red Kettle tours with Jimmy Murphy's *The Castlecomer Jukebox* through 8 May ... Replay tours *Flaming Fables* by Mary McNally until 2 Apr ... The latest from Storytellers, in association with Cork Opera House is *Rashomon*, adapted by Ivor Benjamin. It plays at Project, Dublin (1-3 Apr), then tours, ending at the Opera House from 11-15 May ... Tinderbox wreaks *Revenge* (Michael Duke's new play) at the Assembly Rooms in Belfast (22 Mar-3 April), the Derry Playhouse (5-10 Apr), and Project, Dublin (3-8 May).

# 97 Years and a Day

On 14th February, Druid Theatre and the NUI Galway MA in Drama and Theatre Studies hosted a day of discussion about Synge's *Playboy*. **BETH NEWHALL** reports.

**T**HE ROOM MAY HAVE BEEN COLD (I COULD SEE THE BREATH of the man in front of me — Arts Council, please give Druid a heating grant!), but the discussion in Druid Lane on Valentine's Day never lacked for passion. Participants sat rapt through six papers on the history of productions of *The Playboy of the Western World*, and an engaging roundtable discussion of Druid's current rendition. ■ Approaching the

play in a chronological order of sorts, Paige Reynolds of the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts began proceedings with complex insights on the furore that greeted the original 1907 Abbey production. Particularly compelling was Reynolds' parallel between the location of authority in the play and figures of authority in 20th-century Dublin. Next up, John Harrington, editor of Norton's *Modern Irish Drama*, offered a lively overview of *Playboy's* production

history in the U.S. In one of the day's most significant contributions, Harrington focused much of his paper on the question of "What will come?" now that, as he argued, the play's politics and language have been addressed and re-addressed in so many productions. He suggested that issues of performativity offer a fresh lens through which to view the play, as well as new productive possibilities for bringing *Playboy* powerfully into a 21st-century context.

Adrian Frasier of NUI Galway (who organised the event) followed Harrington's humorous delivery with his own wryly critical treatment of Siobhan McKenna's 1961 *Playboy* film. Ophelia Byrne, a board member of Tinderbox Theatre Company, then gave an impres-



HYNES' 2004 PLAYBOY

sively researched paper on the play's reception in Northern Ireland — a topic seldom given such thoughtful treatment. She noted that while theatre in the Republic received financial and social support, companies in the North, such as Ulster Literary Theatre, had little endorsement of any kind. Under such conditions, theatre ceased to be an effective political tool, and so the disruptive figure of Christy Mahon lost much of his power, making Northern responses to the play decidedly more muted than those in the South.

In a more casual mode, Joe O'Donoghue of St. Jarlath's College then ruminated on the relationship of *Playboy* to amateur drama. The final speaker, Nicholas Grene of Trinity College Dublin,

brought the play into a more immediate contemporary context with a paper titled "Two London *Playboys*: Before and After Druid." Using as a touchstone the "landmark" 1982 Druid Theatre production directed by Garry Hynes, Grene compared what he referred to as a "benign" 1975 production at London's National Theatre (starring Stephen Rea), with the grittier 2001 NT production, directed by Fiona Buffini, identifying Druid's influence in the subsequent production.

Grene's paper served as a fitting segue to the concluding roundtable discussion, a "living review" of Druid's latest *Playboy*, directed, as in 1982, by Hynes. Novelist Jennifer Johnston and Hynes herself joined the day's speakers in a panel chaired by the animated and assertive Lelia Doolan (a former artistic director of the Abbey Theatre). While responses from those who had already seen the production seemed sincerely favorable, comments from Hynes proved most interesting. Her responses revealed Druid's commitment to affirming Synge's place in not simply the Irish, but the international theatre canon. Hynes emphasised the importance of staging the entire Synge cycle and treating it as an ongoing process, so that when Druid revives *Playboy* after going through all the other work, the play will have enjoyed a journey of its own. Given the day's enthusiastic treatment of Synge's masterpiece, it will be a journey that audiences, scholarly and otherwise, can anticipate with pleasure.

---

Beth Newhall is studying for a M.Phil in Irish theatre and film at Trinity College and is *itm*'s editorial intern.

# The Vasty Deep

The first of three Abbey debates in this, its centenary year, confronted the fathomless question of the relationship between "National Theatre and Nation." **PETER CRAWLEY** dives in.

**B**EFORE THE ABBEY DEBATE OF 31ST JANUARY PLUNGED INTO its potentially infinite topic, our convener, Fintan O'Toole, held out more hope for clarifying the tensions and contradictions of "National Theatre and The Nation" than getting to the bottom of it. He offered a subtitle: "Life, the universe and everything." If only it were that simple. Even the Abbey's foundation, O'Toole suggested, depended on an uncomplicated notion of the nation that could rally "a simple sort of allegiance." Such simple allegiance has allowed dramatists since Synge and O'Casey to cause concatenation just by questioning it, prompting a resurfacing issue in the debate: the right of a national theatre to challenge, agitate, or annoy the nation it represents.

When the discussion flirted with our contemporary reality — pondering but never fully engaging with the representa-

tional challenges of a multicultural nation or, again, whether or not the currency of nationhood has been debased by European consolidation or cultural globalisation — it became clear that the debate (like the nation) lacked definition. If simple ideas of nation were a necessary fallacy to galvanise a theatre in 1904, a simpler motion is necessary to motivate a debate. Instead, arguments clustered within it like unruly provinces while the borders of the debate grew more elastic.

To imagine the nation as theatre, or the theatre as nation, began Patrick Mason, may have fired the minds of the Abbey's founders, but could also lead them to overblown rhetoric. Indeed, even the salience of Mason's points — distinguishing between a national theatre and a "theatre of the nation" as supplied by independent companies — gave way to railing against the global market's "gross commodification of all human life and experience." He praised the continuity of art, repertoire and experience supplied by the institution; the factors that allow the individual to respond artistically and politically to the collective.

Faced with the nation, Rough Magic's Lynne Parker focused more on its inhabitants, speaking animatedly on "dynamic individuals" who provide the personalities of national theatre institutions. "These buildings will reflect the skills, imaginations, the pace of the people running them," she said, hoping also that an institution in receipt of state funding would take the responsibility seriously, "but not too seriously." It became something of a leitmotif; a recurrent theme of juxtaposing social responsibility and mischief-making.

Just as Rough Magic was founded by theatre-makers who felt "slightly excluded" by the national theatre, so Peter Sheridan outlined a love/hate relationship with the institution.

Whether or not we could find an answer, Thomas Kilroy certainly had the question right. The fall of empires led to

The fall of empires led to the urgency of nation-building, which in turn drew politics to the stage. But the unifying ambition of national theatre "is not particularly relevant in our country today," said Tom Kilroy.

the urgency of nation-building, he summarised, which in turn drew politics to the stage. But the unifying ambition of national theatre "is not particularly relevant to our country today," claimed Kilroy. "What does the national theatre mean right here and now?"

Different things to different people, it seems. Fond anecdotes emanated from the audience along with familiar criticisms. The demand for national touring insisted that the National Theatre must also be "a part of the nation." A shortfall of women writers and a charge of paternalism brought vehement defences from Ben Barnes, pointing to 12 current commissions for women playwrights while abhorring the notion of "positive discrimination."

A trenchant observation that no actors occupied the panel opened old wounds of the dissolution of the theatre's permanent company. Sheridan even ventured that "management is the new company" of the theatre. Demands for Irish language plays were slightly more concrete than demands for "excellence and ecstasy" — the latter may have artistic benefits, but the former might be easier to programme.

Multicultural concerns all, but the debate provided no melting pot. What can anyone learn from a subject without borders?

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*Peter Crawley writes about theatre and music for publications including The Irish Times and is news editor of this magazine.*

# Directionless?

On 27th February, THE IRISH STUDENT DRAMA ASSOCIATION convened a panel of established directors to address the question of directors' training in Ireland. DAVID HORAN was taken aback by some of the views presented.

**H**OW TO TRAIN A DIRECTOR? SHOULD WE BOTHER? THESE questions were the focus of the ISDA "Seeking Direction" forum, attended largely by student theatre practitioners. ■ Brief introductions revealed that none of the panellists had formally studied the art/craft of directing. Gavin Quinn of Pan Pan revealed his directing career started with "choreographing my sisters, aged five." Lynne

Parker set up Rough Magic on leaving university because there were no other opportunities for directors. Rough Magic presented seven plays in their first year. "But," Parker observed, "this happened at a time that does not exist any more."

She's right. There are now so many independent theatre companies funded by the Arts Council that it leads to funding decisions like this year's round of revenue grants, in which no new companies received funding. Funded companies can still only generate enough activity to pro-

vide directing work for their own artistic director. Thus, the current environment actually boasts fewer opportunities for new directing talent than in the past. Rough Magic received a grant in their second year of operation.

So with no formal training, how did the panel train themselves? The apprentice/mentor relationship was put forward as a healthy mode of practice. Many on the panel referred to times spent observing another director at work as formative experiences. The major piece of advice the

panel offered to young directors was to get out there and do it for themselves.

But is this really the best way forward? Of course, there will always be a time when a director will have to produce a play independently in order to assert him/herself onto the professional scene, but are there not fundamental skills a director should have spent time honing first? Are certain environments not better for this than others?

The panel was surprisingly reticent about the idea of establishing a training course for directors in Ireland, and this prompted major debate as many in the audience were of a different opinion. The panel asked: What type of directing would you teach? Would training only promote one particular aesthetic? Is a training course practical in an Irish context? Where would these new directors work? And considering four years studying fine art does not an artist make, is it really possible to teach directing? Jason Byrne, describing himself as someone who once "fetishised" training, now thinks all learning should come from a deeply-felt need to achieve some personal artistic ambition. Best done, therefore, by a director alone with his actors.

I was shocked and disappointed by the panel on this point. When the Hungarian director Lazslo Marton directed *The Wild Duck* in the Peacock last summer, he was in his rehearsal room at 9 am the morning after opening night to give a workshop to young Irish directors on text analysis. He believes in training and is committed to raising standards all over the world. When Brook brought *Le Costume* to the Dublin Theatre Festival two years ago, he



THE WILD DUCK

asked to meet in private with young directors in Ireland to discuss the director's role in making theatre and the state of Irish theatre. There are training courses for directors across Europe and America. Why should the situation be different in Ireland?

Irish theatre is generally considered to be at a low

ebb. The hit-and-miss nature of theatrical endeavour (with the misses so outweighing the hits) is causing disillusionment within the industry and its audience. I believe it is the responsibility of an Irish director to monitor and care for the welfare of Irish theatre as a whole. The more established a director, the greater that responsibility becomes. That's why what Rough Magic is doing with its second Seeds project — funding selected young directors to create their own work and to be mentored by established directors — is so important.

Too often, there is a detectable complacency about the standards and future of Irish theatre. This occasion proved little different. If directing continues to be the preserve of just those with the self-confidence (and the cash) to do it — no matter how misguided — we will continue to hear critics complaining about how the acting community is being let down by production teams in Ireland. ISDA should be congratulated for organising this event, but the students present may have been disappointed by some of the limited thinking offered to them.



*David Horan is a freelance theatre director. He spent last year as staff director in the Abbey Theatre and is director-in-residence with Inis Theatre.*

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## sounding board

PATRICK LEECH calls for a *real* Abbey debate.

I'M THE ACTOR WHO QUESTIONED the management of the Abbey Theatre from the audience of the abbeyone-hundred *Late Late Show* special, in particular the choice of John McColgan as director of an upcoming mainstage production of *The Shaughraun*. I also pointed out the unfortunate messages sent by the seating arrangements of the final panel that night — why was the Abbey's artistic director sitting furthest away from the programme's host?

Most of the audience, many of whom were actors, filed past me quietly and politely at the end of the show. However, under cover of darkness, their reticence was replaced with handshakes and congratulations.

Why is the acting community afraid to speak out?

I spoke that night because I feel that certain issues need to be challenged. One of the functions of theatre in society should be to challenge the status quo, and raise difficult questions and concerns.

These are the difficult issues I would like to raise. It is my view that the Abbey Theatre is suffering a crisis of artistic vision; that attempts to give the Peacock Theatre a new artistic identity have not been successful; that new plays are poor-

ly developed and supported; that new productions are frequently under-rehearsed and opened before they are ready; that the institution is top-heavy with management and administrative personnel; and that at present it is closed and monolithic.

Being led to believe that their voices don't count for anything, actors don't often rock the boat or bite the hand that feeds them. Rarely invited to sit on panels of discussion or boards of management, actors seldom have a say in the running of their business, and yet without our creativity and energy night after night after night, the theatre is simply and absolutely nothing.

In 2003, actors stood together and brought about changes in Actors' Equity, and helped reverse the government's stance on the Section 481 tax incentives for film production. Before the new Abbey building is designed, I would like to call for an

open and honest debate — a *real* Abbey debate — on how we can change our national theatre for the better, and I would like to demand that the acting community of Ireland has a voice in that debate.

*"It's the silence that's the enemy"*  
—Gar Private, Philadelphia, Here I Come!



Why is the acting community afraid to speak out? One of the functions of theatre is to challenge the status quo.

# States of Access

**I**RELAND'S PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION comes at a crucial juncture in the Union's development: on May 1, ten new states, mostly from the former Eastern Europe, will be granted access to the exclusive benefits of trade, infrastructural investment, and untrammeled border

Cultural diplomacy is arguably at its highest pitch in our country's history: an extensive cultural programme is a key component of Ireland's current EU Presidency, and next year Cork will be European Capital of Culture. But what lies behind such cultural performances of national identity and pride, and how sustainable are they?

**BRIAN SINGLETON**  
considers the issues.

crossings that the EU provides. To mark the occasion, the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism, together with major Irish arts institutions, has developed a cultural programme of import and export for the six months of presidential tenure. This programme will see Irish artists travelling east as well as the cultures of the accession states being welcomed and showcased in Ireland. The cultural endorsement of the political and economic realignment of Europe, let alone its expansion, is a lynchpin in the strategy of Government to celebrate the new diversity of nations and cultures in the EU, and also aims to establish Ireland as a cultural powerhouse on a European scale.

Such endorsement of political and economic treaties through culture is nothing new. Throughout Europe's history, pageants, tableaux, and festivals have been used by monarchs and emperors, oligarchs and democrats alike to emboss political decisions and military triumphs, and to celebrate the expansions of empires. In the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain and France, which controlled the Mediterranean between them and a good deal of the rest of the world, gathered together the peoples of the world in the pavilions of the Great Exhibitions. In these pavilions the "native" peoples performed saccharine versions of their home cultures for the European tourists who came in their millions to traverse the globe culturally in a day and a few thousand metres. These were not celebrations of diversity and inclusiveness, but rather highly controlled performances of the cultural dominion of imperialist nations. These were celebrations of empire, providing a zoological framework for the consumption of culture.

## CULTURAL PERFORMANCES

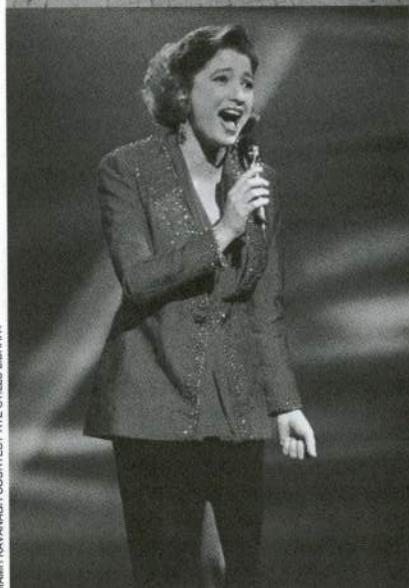
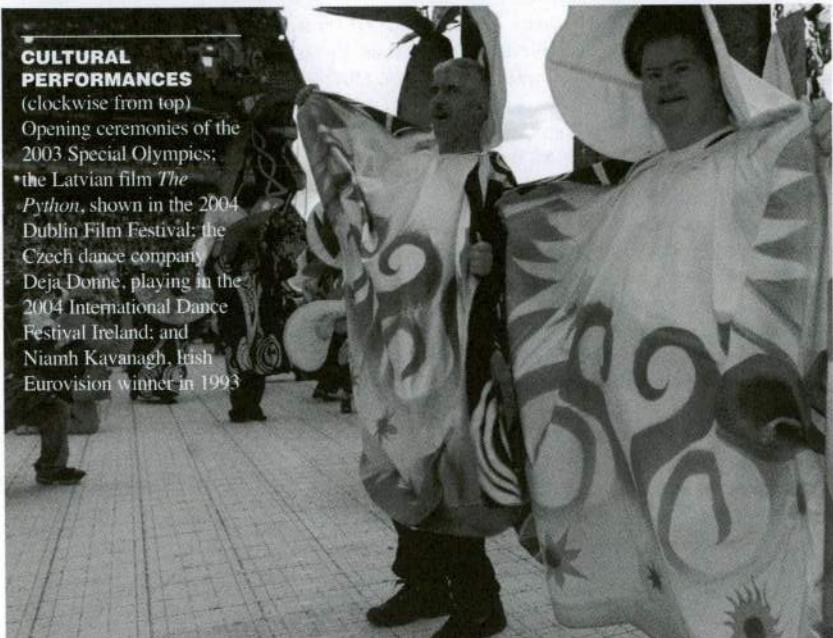
(clockwise from top)

Opening ceremonies of the 2003 Special Olympics;

\*the Latvian film *The Python*, shown in the 2004 Dublin Film Festival; the

Czech dance company Deja Donne, playing in the 2004 International Dance Festival Ireland; and

Niamh Kavanagh, Irish Eurovision winner in 1993.



NIAMH KAVANAGH COURTESY RTE STILLS LIBRARY

Performing a cultural party to remind us of our Europeanness is a means of taking control and owning the expansion of Europe. Ireland will reap no rewards from this moment of celebration unless it is seen to grab the privilege of presidency.

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How does the cultural celebration of the expansion of the EU differ? First, it is obvious the accession states have not been coerced militarily to join. However, they have had to meet strict economic and legislative conditions that ensure that the new EU "partners" have achieved an acceptable level of "civilisation." Many of the new countries are small nations which have re-emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The size of these countries (with a few notable exceptions, of course) is important in our understanding of the need to celebrate their accession beyond national borders. Their geographical land-mass and populations are as small as their economic and political influence, and they now are aiming to be treated constitutionally on a par with the giant founders of the EU, France and Germany. Exploding fireworks in Prague, Tallinn, and Warsaw on the day of accession makes no impact on the consciousness of the rest of Europe, although each national celebration no doubt will be enormously significant within its own borders. But since the whole idea of the Union is of neo-federal inclusiveness, a celebration beyond national borders is imperative.

We must not forget that the celebration is as much for the states already in the Union as for the accession states. The political realignment necessary to ensure equity in a new constitution will mean some states losing out in terms of power and influence. Ireland's initial rejection of the Nice Treaty might well have been replicated across the member states had their constitutions demanded a popular vote. There is much public relations work to be done to smooth the passage of expansion. Performing a cultural party to remind us of our Europeanness is also a means of taking control and owning the expansion. Ireland, which has benefited dramatically from EU inclusion, will reap no rewards from this moment of celebration unless it is seen to grasp the privilege of presidency. Music, dance, film and theatre, either imported or exported, will be used as a means to "perform" the accession. Cultural exchange across borders will be the performative means of celebrating the new diversity, and its Irish orchestration will place Ireland at the centre of this cultural trade.

After the last Dáil elections, the rejigging of government departments saw Arts, Sport, and Tourism being lumped together under one Ministry for the first time. The link between Arts and Tourism, which has had a long tradition in our national performing institutions such as the Abbey and Síamsa Tíre, essentially was endorsed and encouraged. If the arts now are seen as the lynchpin in a Bord Fáilte enterprise, one has to ask the question: just who are the arts for? If culture is a processing of our existence, then we are now being asked to perform that process for the rest of the world rather than just for ourselves. Arts now, according to cur-

rent Arts Council policy, are encouraged to have an international dimension in recognition of our new globalised existence. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, as international co-operation can only be for the benefit of our own culture. The demographics have altered considerably over the past ten years, and Ireland is no longer a homogenous white nation. Recently Ireland has had first-rate success in performing itself for the rest of the world. In sport, the 2003 Special Olympics was a triumph for both local and national sense of community and its cultural endorsement in the form of the opening ceremony was also a triumph of the power of



influence Ireland wields in the international arts and political communities. Five wins of the Eurovision song contest may have done little to enhance Ireland's musical reputation, but the performance of the competition in Ireland set the standard for future television spectacles by other nations for the 400 million spectators annually. The spin-off for tourism through art is thus enormous. Seen in this context, the cultural programme of Ireland's EU Presidency is an endorsement of the nation's status on the European stage by means of art.

Theatre was the first art form to benefit from the EU Presidency programme, with TR Warsawa's *Festen* appearing on the Abbey stage in January, dovetailing neatly into the Abbey's own centenary celebrations. The Hungarian company Vigszinhaz's production of *Dance in Time*, directed by Lazlo Marton, will grace the Abbey stage over the St. Patrick's week-end — an act of generosity surely for Irish theatre to surrender its national stage at the peak of the tourist trade to a company from an accession state. Finally,

**CULTURAL  
PARTNERSHIP:**  
Minister John  
O'Donoghue  
(second from left)  
and representatives  
of Slovenia and its  
Irish host city,  
Limerick

in May, the Slovenian Mladinsko Theatre will present their highly physicalised version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the same stage. What is to be applauded in these choices is the fact that all three companies are virtually opposite to mainstream Irish theatre practice in their advocacy of physical styles and forms. However, these are showcase events which may bring lasting memories to those privileged enough to witness them, but which are likely to have little if any tangible effect on Irish theatre practice. It is fortunate, therefore, that the abbeyonehundred programme includes a training strand, scheduled for July, in which imported practition-




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**HITTING THE  
ROAD**  
Crash Ensemble

---

ers will give master classes; this shows more long-term thinking than the overall jamboree culture of the EU presidency. The primary mission of the latter, it seems to me, is to create a marketplace in which to trade samples of exotic East European culture against the corporate image of Irish national identity.

Beyond the national theatre, annual festivals across the art forms are also being used as vehicles for EU cultural inclusion. The Jameson Dublin International Film Festival in February was targeted specifically by the EU Presidency cultural programme to endorse its mission, with a "Welcome to Europe" schedule of films from eight of the accession states. The Second International Dance Festival Ireland has also scheduled a Czech company in its May programme, though that is hardly a major contribution to the whole presidency. The re-funded Opera Ireland's April season at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre sees co-productions with Eastern European opera companies in new versions of *Tosca* and *Jenůfa*. And there is no doubt that this year's St Patrick's Festival will

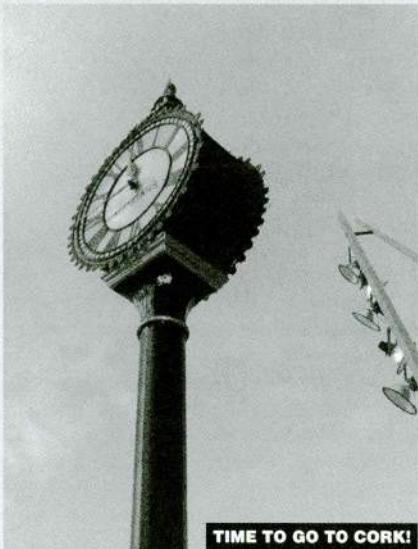
# Southern Focus

What are the precedents and possibilities for Cork as European Capital of Culture 2005?

THE EUROPEAN UNION HAS LONG USED CULTURE AS A DEVICE to cohere disparate national cultures, and its Cities of Culture Programme, begun in 1985, has aimed to promote cooperation and understanding across Europe. This shifts the European cultural focus to a new city or cities each year, while celebrating the work of the civic hosts as well. In 2005 Cork will be bestowed with the amended title of European Capital of Culture – a chance for Cork to promote and enhance its place within Ireland, and to further assert Ireland's cultural place within Europe.

It will also provide, perhaps more importantly, an opportunity for real, sustainable cultural development within Cork. The model for such success is Glasgow 1990, which fed into and augmented a tide of civic renewal that saw the city transformed in the 1970s and '80s from a run-down post-industrial second city to a vibrant, visitor-friendly urban hub. Culture, and particularly performance, played a major role in that transformation. Post-industrial spaces were turned into performance arenas such as the Tramway, which played host to the great and the good from the rest of the world. Peter Brook took his *Mahabharata* there in 1988, and not to London. A world theatre season during the City of Culture year rivalled and surpassed the Edinburgh Festival. Visitors flocked to the city, and continue to do so for its world-class Citizens Theatre, its National Review of Live Art, and the Scottish Opera, Ballet and National Orchestra.

Thus culture carved out a new significance for the city that was akin to cultural devolution. The city, a former jewel in the crown of the British Empire fallen into neglect and disrepair, used culture to pull itself up materially and imaginatively onto the world stage. The collective benefits for the city in terms of self-confi-



TIME TO GO TO CORK!



dence, an explosion of new arts practice, and tourist revenue, were immeasurable. This is in stark contrast to the nearly imperceptible benefits that Dublin's year as City of Culture, 1991, had on Ireland's capital, the result of a tiny budget and an apology that culture was "already there."

It is too early to tell what sustainable impact the Cork initiative will have on Ireland's second city, and clearly organisers are struggling with a budget that is exponentially smaller than most other Capitals of Culture — the total budget for Liverpool Capital of Culture 2008, for example, is €75 million, while Cork has revealed that the total monies available to them from federal, local and EU sources for the 2005 programme is only €13.5 mil-

lion (while private fundraising is ongoing). Outside of those funds, however, the City Council is spearheading numerous civic renewal projects including the €12 million renovation of Patrick's Street and the Huguenot Quarter and the €15 million renewal of the Shandon area, many of which will see completion in 2005.

The recently announced initial Cork Capital of Culture programme modishly defines culture in its broadest terms (and ones that dovetail with the profile of the new Ministry), in that sporting events and sports publications are included in a programme that also includes a residency by John Berger and the importation of a Daniel Liebeskind pavilion to the city. It is troubling, however, that theatre as yet features so incidentally. There is no announcement of any high-profile visiting international work, and the only theatre projects announced are site-specific productions in the city's civic spaces from Corcadorka and Gare St. Lazare Players. It takes some digging in the programme to unearth hints of other promising-sounding theatre events: a commission by the Everyman Palace Studio and new works from Johnny Hanrahan and Conall Morrison. Making the city's civic spaces come alive theatrically, and commissioning new Irish works are admirable projects in themselves, but surely not at the expense of world-class visiting performances, a gap one hopes will be addressed in October's final programme. *-BS*

PAUL GREEN

have a European dimension — although that will only be a rehearsal for the company which produces it, An Féilte Dhuibh Linne Teoranta, which has been commissioned to produce the "Day of Welcomes" — the accession day celebrations in Dublin and ten cities and towns throughout Ireland.

Meanwhile, some of Ireland's best known arts companies, such as the exciting Crash Ensemble, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, and the National Chamber Choir are travelling from Ireland to the accession countries. What is noticeably absent from the touring programme is theatre. This is doubtless partly because of the cal-



endar of funding decisions, which effectively means companies cannot begin to plan their annual programmes until January, and thus too late for the celebration. Further, Irish theatre companies bar the Abbey and Gate have relatively little experience in touring, since they do not have the international reputation that would allow them to secure private sponsorship in order to export their work. Much of Irish theatre, as well, is heavily text-based and this makes it difficult to tour to non-English-speaking countries. And even the physically based companies that emerged in the early-to-mid '90s have not invested in the advancement of their reputation on an international scale. It is the rare independent company that has carved out an international name for itself; perhaps the best-known name in the accession states already is Pan Pan, whose work is suitable for export, being highly physical, often non-linear, and with no primacy of dialogue. But Pan Pan shows are often

**OVER HERE**  
Czech dance  
company Deja  
Donne

anarchic and unpredictable, and therefore hardly fodder for "official" Irish culture on tour.

So Irish theatre gets short shrift in the official programme, and is not scheduled in any part of the celebrations at home. Surely a director from one of the accession states taking on an Irish classic with Irish actors in a physical style would have been an exciting prospect, in much the same manner as Lazslo Marton worked with Irish actors on Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in the Peacock production last year. The result was electrifying, as we saw Irish actors transported onto a new plane of competence and skill. Such a collaboration, however, has no purchase in such a cultural programme as the EU Presidency has commanded. The simple reason is that official celebrations cannot easily accommodate intercultural cooperation. Eastern European directors reworking our classics on home turf is a dangerous and unsettling enterprise. East must remain East and West must remain West in European terms. National cultural identities must not be blurred, but delineated and reinforced. We must know whose culture is whose.

Irish theatre gets short shrift in the official EU Presidency programme, and is not scheduled in any part of the celebrations at home. Surely a director from one of the accession states taking on an Irish classic with Irish actors would have been an exciting prospect.

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Thus, the culmination of the Irish EU Presidency Cultural Programme will be the already-mentioned "Day of Welcomes." Dublin, we are promised, will be transformed on May 1st into a colourful bazaar, with marquees, stands and stages making up "The European Fair" in St. Stephen's Green. The organisers are expecting over 100,000 visitors to the fair on that day alone to sample the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Europe through food, craft, tourism, technology, and culture. We are all invited to a market to consume — but not necessarily to understand. Will we know, for instance, the social, material, and historical conditions of the produce (material or performative) on display?

So with the absence of intercultural co-operation in the dangerous live arts such as theatre, and the strong presence of the recorded and fixed (and therefore already licensed) arts such as cinema and music, means that the Cultural Programme of Ireland's EU Presidency will be a consumerist spectacle. Irish people will imbibe unmediated samples of largely East European culture (with Cypriot and Maltese thrown in.) That act of consumption will be televised on May 1st throughout Europe to show the good, inclusive Europeans that we are. Ireland as a cultural force in its ability to command such a spectacle inevitably will have spin-off political clout through televised imagery. As has been the case throughout history, the use of culture as a weapon of empire is utterly transparent: art (and particularly theatre) are sacrificial pawns of endorsement in the performance of Europe. 

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Brian Singleton is associate professor and head of the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin.





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# A New Beginning

In this historic year, which marks the centenary of the Abbey Theatre and therefore that of the modern Irish theatre movement itself, *itm* is asking a series of theatre artists and arts workers to envision an appropriate celebration: If real-life space, time, and budget concerns were suspended, how would they commemorate 100 years of Irish theatre, and look forward to 100 more?

**ENDA WALSH** kicks off the series by getting out his ouiji board.

HAVING BEEN SUCCESSFULLY LURED BACK FROM the dead (and from France) Samuel Beckett joins forces with Donal O'Kelly to run the National Theatre. Tom MacIntyre and Thomas Kilroy become chief dramaturgs. Peter Stein and Robert Wilson are given funds to travel the world and choose the most exciting theatre directors who will be invited to sit on the theatre's artistic panel. Their discussions will concentrate on the very large back catalogue of Irish playtexts, only ten of which will be put into production for the year. Each play will rehearse on Valentia Island for a period of two months (no more, no less). On a specific night of the year (let's say the 7th of February, only because it's my birthday) each of the plays will open in a major city or town, and then tour the country. There is no admission charge for these plays. It will be deemed necessary and appropriate to perform Beckett's *Endgame* in Dundalk. The government, which has outlawed the watching of television for

two months, also pledges the entire Irish naval budget to the development of theatre. Aer Lingus offer free travel to see these productions from anywhere in the world to anyone who completes the sentence, "Ben Barnes was the wrong man for the job because..." A new National Theatre designed by Daniel Libeskind will be built in Phoenix Park and the existing theatre space on Abbey Street will be kept intact so we can look at it and wonder how on earth they ever got anyone through the door.

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The New Electric Ballroom by Enda Walsh, directed by Stephan Kammage, premieres at the Munich Kammerspiele in September.

## Fresh Blood

Quare Hawks  
Theatre  
Company  
predicts a  
flatline, unless  
energies are  
refocused on  
young talent.

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**W**E CANNOT IMAGINE THE FUTURE OF IRISH THEATRE if we do not ensure its continued growth through the training and encouragement of young directors. Irish theatre is in a critical condition. We urgently need a transfusion of fresh blood. It is not that there is a shortage of new talent in the theatre sector but that there is no will nor means to tap it.

During the Abbey's recent debate on "National Theatre and the Nation," there were many calls for "excellence." If we want to excel, we must take a risk on new directors. The writers and actors of this country are internationally celebrated, but we badly need practical training opportunities for young directors. Our top priority has to be to give such directors the breaks they urgently need. At the "Seeking Direction" forum at Project in February, the young Irish director Rachel West stated — depressingly but accurately — that there is little point in a young director starting up a new company in Ireland at present, with 35 companies already extant and funded. Is this really the kind of atmosphere the theatre sector wants to foster? Are the lucky 35 going to evolve into everlasting institutions? Can anyone remember the last time that an institution lead to innovation?

The Arts Council's annual Project Awards should provide breaks for new talent, but instead early-career directors are forced to compete for funding with institutions like the Abbey and the Gate. If we want to take action immediately, then let's require companies with an Arts Council revenue grant of over €150,000 to employ an assistant director for each production. Larger institutions could invite internationally renowned directors to give two-week master classes. Bigger, better-funded companies should be obliged to hire gifted young directors and give them the opportunity they deserve. If we don't take some measures now then the

blood in our theatres' veins will stagnate, clot, and kill us off.

*Quare Hawks' co-production, with the Civic Theatre Tallaght, of Speaking in Tongues by Andrew Bovell plays at the Civic from 30 Aug-18 Sep followed by a five-week tour. Liam Halligan directs.*

# The Wingèd Monkeys

*"Gee Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more."*

*—Christy Mahon in The Wingèd Monkeys, Act 1, Scene 2.*

**A**S THE AUDIENCE TAKE THEIR SEATS IN THE MAIN auditorium a mild wind seems to be blowing throughout the theatre. The wind gets stronger as the venue fills, with the curtains swaying and tumbleweeds blowing up and down the aisles. Once everyone is settled, the gale gathers strength, yanking apart the curtains to reveal a set depicting expansive midwestern cornfields. There is a sudden cry of "Tornado!" Abbey front of house staff stream into the auditorium, battening down the escape doors, running onto the stage, and disappearing into trap doors. Christy and Old Mahon are blown on stage. Christy carries a loy, and Old Mahon wears a pair of ruby slippers. Both desperately try to hold their ground as the set smashes apart around them but get carried away into the flies.

There is a silence.

Slowly, one of the traps opens, revealing a member of the front of house staff, now dressed as a Munchkin. More Munchkins creep onto the stage where they find a dazed Christy Mahon now wearing the red slippers. They burst into song, proclaiming "Ding dong, his da is dead!" (Tom Waits is the musical director), and launch Christy on a marvellous adventure in the course of which he will encounter a wicked witch known as Widow Quin and her spies, the village girls (who appear as wingèd monkeys). In the end everyone learns a lesson: Pegeen finds and loses her heart, brainless Shawneen strikes a clever bargain and the lion... doesn't appear in this story.

Christy himself learns that "there's no place like home" and with his faithful loy at his side, makes for the familiar plains of Kansas (or is it Kerry?)



Inis Theatre  
present a  
new play by  
J.M. Synge  
(and a friend),  
to be presented  
on the Abbey  
Theatre  
mainstage

*Inis Theatre will present a highly offensive comedy about Siamese twins by Laura Lundgren Smith in the Dublin Fringe Festival 2004, featuring Isult Golden and Carmel Stephens and directed by David Horan.*

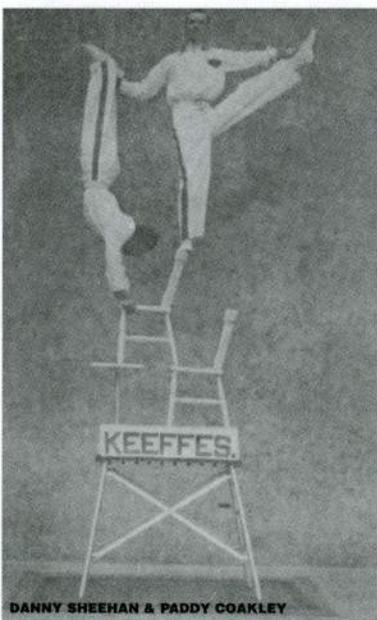
# Without a Net

Tony Sheehan remembers his Uncle Danny, a talent for whom there was no place in mid-century Ireland.

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**G**ROWING UP IN YOUGHAL IN THE 1960S, MY YOUNGER brother and I had one claim to notoriety: our grand-uncle was in the circus. Danny "Waddle" Sheehan had been part of a troupe of three acrobats called the Amigos who in the 1930s made up one of two acrobat troops in the area. Because they couldn't afford props, they specialised in balancing on chairs; in fact the surviving photographs all show chairs of varying design, commandeered from the sitting rooms of the town. According to the old people, Danny was very serious about his work, but was continually diminished by Ireland's inability to accommodate the professional performer. The Economic War came and went, the Emergency came and went, and the Amigos did not last. Danny joined the circus and eventually left for London. He was to re-appear again in Youghal in 1965, but on the telly, live from the London Palladium, doing a high-wire act.

I add this subterranean footnote to the history of the performing arts in Ireland in an attempt to suggest that, just as it is foolish to dismiss the collective effort of the last 100 years, it would be arrogant of me to imagine the next 100 years of theatre when there are young writers, directors, actors, set designers, and acrobats whose job will be that imagining. If I am allowed to imagine, it is that, unlike Danny, those artists will be nurtured, they will be taken seriously, they will belong to a society that does not behave dysfunctionally towards them — so that the



DANNY SHEEHAN &amp; PADDY COAKLEY

PHOTO COURTESY TONY SHEEHAN

next years will be better than anything I can imagine.

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Tony Sheehan is director of community-based projects for Cork 2005: European Capital of Culture.

# Notes from the Underground

**O**NE HUNDRED YEARS. THEY WERE TURBULENT YEARS; they tested our resolve. It was a century that pitted us against the authorities, that elevated our art to a higher plane. Truly, 2004 is a year to celebrate. It was the year they banned the theatre.

Nobody seemed to notice at first. The only two permitted texts — *Playboy* and *Juno* — ran in repertory for 11 years. But not all of us were prepared to take this affront lying down. A small group of activists workshopped in secret. Soon we gathered the courage to stage a full production in the ruined basement of Café en Seine. All I can remember of that first show is the fear, the ever-present threat of raids from the dramatic license squad. ASMs exchanged scripts soiled with cold sweat on street corners.

Opening night was an odd affair. We had invited no one. Yet when the curtain rose on our secret playhouse the place was packed. They had bartered, begged, and stolen to get their hands on high-priced black market tickets. After the show we thirstily quaffed glasses of cheap merlot the grateful audience had brought along for our refreshment. All had changed utterly.

Soon dozens of underground groups sprang up around the city. There was an insatiable desire for their work. In the pubs and the cafes there was talk of little else — although always in a fearful whisper. Only the fashionable intellectuals dared drop hints that they'd "done a show." Middle-class mothers jammed the switchboards of talk radio, voicing fears that their children had "got mixed up in theatre." The government tried to ensnare potential traitors with promises of generous state funding. None came forward.

It was a glorious century. 100 years of oppression and secrecy. 100 years of censorship and subterfuge. But now it has passed. It's 2104. Last year they lifted the ban. How much longer can we survive under these conditions? 

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Tom Swift,  
writer with the  
Performance  
Corporation,  
remembers  
the dark days  
of the ban.

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*The Performance Corporation's production of The Butterfly Ranch by Tom Swift plays at SS Michael and John from 22 Apr-1 May.*

# Long May She Wave

**NIAMH LAWLOR** of Púca Puppets offers an excerpt from their production **SONGS IN HER SUITCASE, PERFORMED LIVE BY THE LATE AGNES BERNELLE**, which plays at Project Arts Centre in Dublin from 26 May-5 Jun.



**NIAMH LAWLOR WRITES:** The premise of the play is that the irrepressible ghost of Agnes Bernelle insists on one last show. The result is an autobiographical cabaret, where original recordings of her songs tell her extraordinary life story, giving voice to the puppets, masks, and shadows she has enlisted. Liberated from the limits of reality this is no ordinary cabaret, as "the past is all present" and crucial moments are re-lived, or appear as film, interacting with or overtaking the action. In addition to songs by her compatriots Brecht, Weill, Ringelnatz, Dress, and her own father, and more modern additions including Waits and Keane, the sound track will feature new bridging music by her former collaborators: Philip Chevron of the Pogues, and her latter-day accompanist Bairbre O'Sullivan. The show is written and performed by myself, and is directed by Leticia Agudo, with filmmaking by Agudo and the Irish Film Archives. This excerpt is the opening of the production.

#### PRE-SET:

Developed and designed by Marcus Costello, from a device that Agnes used in one of her own performances, the set is an enclosed revolving space presenting seven sides to the audience in turn. Each is a screen when closed, but can

open to reveal different settings and times of Agnes' life. It will be closed on the audience's entry, but a quote or image will be projected onto it.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 1. Ghost-summoning music

plays. The set begins slowly to move. A hand appears pressing through its fabric... disappears. A child's face presses out, is gone. The screen is disturbed again, an ageless voice: "Is this the Project?" Repeats, fainter, as if from somewhere else: "Is this the Project?" The set spins. "I've not had enough, yet" (pause) "of pausing, mid-line, feeling the audience hold their breath for what I'll say next." Pause. "Laugh!" Spin madly, stop.

**SCENE 2.** A light appears within the set; the voice continues: "It's very frustrating, being at your own funeral. There they all are, everyone you love, everyone who loves you, even people you hardly know, with tears in their eyes, although you know now, they're not just crying for you, it's lovely, you can feel it, like a warm wall, all these people thinking and feeling and wishing and wanting. Strange.

"And it is a wall. And you're on the other side, smiling and dancing and waving and wailing, and it's no use, they can't see you.

"But I shouted, 'Look! It's a lovely day...' but in fact, I couldn't say if it was or not, somehow I couldn't see or feel the weather, only their weather, the changes rushing through them, if you can know what I mean. Anyway, I said, It's a lovely day. Let's leave this old church, and go on a picnic, look at you, all together at once, let's celebrate! We'll go to Howth, and sit up on the head, where the grass is waving, we'll have ice-cream and lavish wines, and later we'll sing, bring all the children, and I'll be sun-burnt one last time.

"But they were stuck. Stuck in their sadness and bodies and nowness and

whatever the weather it was. Only I was free. And it was no good, they couldn't see me."

**SCENE 3.** To Philip Chevron's "Kitty Rickets," sung by Bernelle, the shadow of a feather boa becomes discernible, gradually recognisable, and begins to dance, sometimes as if a human were wearing it, sometimes as if it were alone and dancing the ways that only feather boas can. "... She's a ghost and she's not there..."

**SCENE 4.** As the music ends, the set turns revealing an opening where Agnes Bernelle (the puppeteer in half-mask), age 76, is tucked up to her chin in a bed (upright). She looks about her as if checking that it is safe to do something illegal, and begins to wriggle under the bedclothes. Gradually we realise she is surreptitiously dressing. She looks out again; her hand appears with a compact, she opens it and examines herself in the mirror. "I'm like death warmed up." She laughs, takes out a lipstick and carefully does up the puppeteer's lips to look like her own. "I have too much to do, there's no time to be dead! Even in the hospice I used to sneak out to do auditions, or a short film." She is ready — she throws off the covers and is wearing her sequined performance dress, she is spot-lit, suddenly performing:

**SCENE 5.** "This song is not really like any of the other songs that I do, but it was sent to me by no less a person than Tom Waits, and he suggested I should sing it, and so, I have been singing it ever since: 'Broken Bicycles.'"

While she sings the song a film pro-

## play excerpt

jection of black and white floor tiles whizzing past plays over the sheets and floor, and we hear a child's excited, near-laughing breath, glimpse small shoes on pedals, hands on handle-bars, as if point-of-view of the young cyclist. Agnes takes the sheets off the bed, preparing to fold them, and catches the image against her body, finishing the folding at the last line, as if the memory is safe in the sheet. She puts it away.

"In our apartment in Berlin, I used to bicycle up and down the corridor, up and down, faster and faster.

SCENE 6. "Next thing I know I am 75 years old, stuck in bed in a hospice."

She closes away the bed.

"I have no intention of dying, but the doctors don't listen, you'd think I don't own myself any more my body is theirs, not mine.

"My children still need me, I know they are grown, but I wish I could ensure they were secure. And how can I not see my grandchildren grow up? And my next project! Brecht's *Mother Courage*, perhaps I could die once I've done that. She had two sons and a daughter, like me, and war sent her wandering the world too: "Wherever life has not died out it staggers to its feet again!"

It's a German classic, just what I need... but it's so hard to organise. I had two backers, but I made the mistake of meeting them both at the same time, in two different places. They were both at least in The Shelbourne, one in the grill, the other in the restaurant. In between courses, I'd rush from one to the other. In the end I said, 'hell,' and we all had dessert together. But even with two of them, the funding fell

through... And then I was told I had a shadow on my lung. Just little cancer bubbles, I willed them away, not now, darling I'm busy... but three years later it snuck back again, I let myself get down. Don't let things get you down, it's just a little bad luck phase, if you hang on your luck will change.

SCENE 7. "I remember." She closes the doors, hiding herself, letting the image of a sea wash over them. We see a pair of child's feet from her point of view. "More clearly than I stand here, the feel of my toes wriggling in sand, Abyssinia, 1932, we'd a summer house there, when I was a child. It's ten past three, a hot afternoon, but my tongue is cool from ice cream..." The film fades, the set turns. "My memory has become extraordinary. My past is present, my present all past."

SCENE 8. She goes into the set. A door opens with a window in it, as if a mirror the audience can see through. Agnes (a puppet, life-size, operated bunraku-style) has become a child, nine years approximately. She is wearing the same adult evening dress and high shoes as the opening scene, as if dressing up. "I was born in Berlin in 1923. My mother was German, my father a Hungarian Jew. In Weimar Germany this lead to a complicated childhood." As she whistles the intro to "It was in Schoeneberg," she poses for the mirror, perhaps mimes to the song as Agnes' older voice sings :

"It was in Schoeneberg and it was May  
We were two little kids that happy day  
I was the little girl, and you the boy,  
I think of Schoeneberg with tears and joy."  
(the play continues...) 

# entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and goings in Irish theatre.

**FERGUS LINEHAN**, director of the Dublin Theatre Festival since 2000, has been named director of the Sydney Festival. He will see through this year's Dublin Festival before decamping to Australia. His position will be advertised soon... **CHRISTINE MADDEN** has been appointed literary manager of Rough Magic Theatre Company. Among her responsibilities will be the coordination of the company's second SEEDS programme...

**AMY O'HANLON**, until last year administrator with *Barabbas*.... *the company* and most recently administrator of this magazine, has been appointed development and membership officer of Theatre Forum. This is a new position... **DAVID QUINLAN** has been appointed production manager for the Project

Arts Centre. This new position has been created following the departure of **STEPHEN BOURKE** from the role of director of technical services. Quinlan was previously production manager for Arthouse, Temple Bar... **MAUREEN LOUGHREN**, previously manager of Field Day and the English Shakespeare Company, has been appointed part-time administrator of Bewley's Café Theatre... **CHRISTINA KEOGH** has departed as administrator of the Gate Theatre to take up the same position with the

Galway Film Fleadh. **RACHEL LYSAGHT** is her temporary replacement while the position is advertised... **FIONNULA DOWNES** has left the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire, to become the new administrator of the Mermaid Arts Centre, while **JIM DOYLE**, previously with Heat Design, replaces her as administrator of the Pavilion... **RAY YEATS**, former artistic director of



LINEHAN



O'HANLON

Chelsea Playhouse in New York, has been appointed the new artistic director of Axis Arts Centre. The Centre will soon announce its new programme development officer together with a local arts development officer to complete a new arts executive...

## SITUATIONS VACANT:

Tinderbox Theatre Company has advertised the new position of full-time literary manager, the first such appointment in Northern Ireland.



# book reviews

## THE GIRLS IN THE BIG PICTURE: GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY ULSTER THEATRE

by Imelda Foley

Blackstaff Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY CLARE WALLACE

GENDER, IT SEEMS, IS BACK TO TROUBLE the "big" picture of Irish theatre. Imelda Foley's *Girls in the Big Picture* presents alternate perspectives on the apparently familiar territory of Irish drama, considering the work of Marie Jones and Charabanc, Christina Reid, Anne Devlin, and Frank McGuinness from proximate but dissimilar perspectives. These include feminism and Northern Irish theatre; the representation of women in the arts, politics and society of Northern Ireland; women's perspectives on, and experience of, the Troubles; female characters in plays about Northern Ireland; and the issue of gendered writing and form. This proliferation of perspectives at times threatens to scupper the unity of the project.

Notoriously difficult to define, the feminine as a term in literary criticism is generally agreed to refer to writing that represents a mixture of possibility, fluidity, hesitancy, and uncertainty — which, Foley states, runs counter to patriarchal Ulster ways of seeing and writing the world in absolute terms. However, since the book largely avoids academic theorising, little additional clarification of this contentious terminology is provided. *Girls in the Big Picture* might benefit from more rigour here, especially as the concept of "the feminine" is unevenly

applied to the selected playwrights.

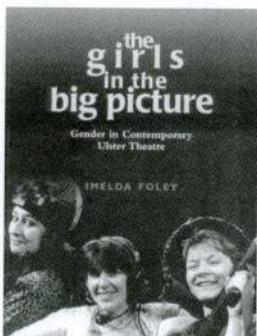
Foley is on much safer ground when she traces the specific contours of the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT) and contemporary Ulster culture. Her first two chapters chart the history of the ULT, and discuss Yeats and Alice Milligan, and the place of women in Ulster society and politics. These sections are well written and engaging. Foley vividly describes the transformation of the ULT's remit from national to provincial, and offers a valuable discussion of little-known plays by Gerald Mac-Namara, St. John Ervine, and Alice Milligan. Concluding this tour, Foley points to the

continuing sexism inherent in Ulster social and political life, challenging any assumption that Northern Ireland might be a post-feminist society.

The subsequent chapters focus on individual playwrights, each beginning with an interview with the writer under consideration.

This is a welcome change to the usual academic format, giving the writers a chance to respond to the terms through which Foley reads their work, and conveying their attitudes to gender and its role in their writing.

In her analysis of the history of Charabanc, Foley connects that company's objectives with those of the ULT. Like the ULT, Charabanc sought to represent Northern Irish society in a form that might attract a very particular local audience. Similarly, Charabanc made use of farce, melodrama and communi-



ty-specific humour, and its work was marked by non-literary qualities — so much so that the Charabanc plays discussed by Foley have yet to be published. Where Charabanc diverges from its predecessor is, of course, in the way they “highlighted gender roles” with “women at the centre” of all their work. However, Foley argues that, although feminist in practice, the company eschewed the label “feminist” for fear of alienating its audiences.

Foley then attempts to apply the framework of the feminine to Marie Jones’ work post-Charabanc. How Jones’ aesthetically conservative, popular work might be reconciled with the disruptive modes of the feminine is not resolved, a problem Foley also faces in her reading of Christina Reid, whose work similarly does not conform to ideas of the feminine. Anne Devlin comes closest among the female playwrights treated here to a recognisable feminist awareness and, because her play *After Easter* formally overturns naturalism, a reading in terms of the feminine is more tenable.

Ironically, it is the male playwright of the group who is most articulate with regard to the feminine. Frank McGuinness explicitly claims the force of what he calls “the feminine principle” and acknowledges the formal implications of that term. Foley cites *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* as an example of McGuinness’ attempts to communicate the fluidity of memory and experience. In this final chapter Foley introduces a theoretical base absent from the preceding material, productively discussing McGuinness’ work in relation to Freud and Lacan, Irigaray and Kristeva. The question arises as to why

such methodology could not be applied to the women playwrights.

Nevertheless, *Girls in the Big Picture* is a readable and informative book. Foley’s depictions of Ulster theatre are faithful to her broader objective of propagating a gender-conscious discourse about some of Northern Ireland’s most interesting playwrights.

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Clare Wallace teaches at the Department of English and American Studies at Charles University in Prague.

**RE-IMAGINING BELFAST:  
A MANIFESTO FOR THE ARTS**

**Edited by Mark Carruthers, Stephen**

**Douds, and Tim Loane**

*Cultural Resolution, 2003*

**REVIEWED BY DECLAN McGONAGLE**

THE 12 ESSAYS IN THIS BOOK ARE haunted by Belfast’s failure to be 2008 European Capital of Culture. Its contributors attempt to provide the means for cultural activists to move on from that failure — the need for which is expressed most directly by David Johnston, who writes that the “beaten docket” of the bid process needs to be torn up and thrown away. This is a powerful image, raising the fundamental question of what Belfast was really gambling on when it bid for 2008.

The constant references to the bid in these essays — by practitioners, commentators and policy makers (some very close to the bid process) — make clear that Belfast was not really betting on its culture. In fact, Johnston and John Gray both argue that Belfast was and is “profoundly anti-cultural.”

Could it be that the city, consciously or unconsciously, was betting on a culture of

## book reviews

high art ideals, conforming to assumptions about what culture is and where its value lies, rather than foregrounding its actual culture? Belfast is a contested site to say the least, and is actually and imaginatively divided. In a culture based on high art, division is a serious disadvantage. But if culture is a negotiable rather than a given process, as it is in Belfast, contestation can be a strength.

The failure of Belfast's bid, predicated by the unprecedented public protests by the arts sector to cutbacks — sorry, "reallocations"— of arts funding by Belfast City Council (the very body responsible for the bid), represent a wake-up call. The book's editors understand that these events present an opportunity to collectivise, and to look to the future strategically — but with feet on the ground rather than head in the clouds this time.

Some contributors set out specific hopes and ideas about the future of the arts in Northern Ireland, while others simply restate the problems they face. But the value of the book is not that it's a manifesto for the arts, but that it provides the necessary stepping stone to the development of a manifesto, by articulating the need to strategise around basic common goals. The very existence of *Re-Imagining Belfast* begins the transformation of the collective response of momentary protest into a longer term process of discourse and action.

Jo Egan calls for the definition of the arts to be stretched to include "other sto-



ries," arguing that Belfast has the potential to offer such inclusion. This is a crucially important point, which is missed in many other essays: before Belfast, or any other civic space, can be re-imagined, the arts sector has to reimagine itself, repositioning itself as part of — not apart from — society. Belfast is not alone in having to face up to that task without a consensus. This involves a process of mapping the zone that comes before consensus, before a manifesto. This publication gives momentum to that process.

The one consensual point in the book is that the failed bid highlights the need for action, for movement away from discussing what "we" are against, to articulating what "we" are for. In response to the question of who the "we" are anyway, *Re-Imagining Belfast* provides a usefully inclusive answer. The question of "what are we for?" is answered in a series of personal perspectives, from Malachi O'Doherty's downbeat assessment, to Gerald Dawe and David Johnston's consideration of other places where the arts have been transformative, which points out the need for new thinking.

Any change must be grounded in realism, linking arts/cultural processes to wider socio-economic development. Division and dispute cannot be avoided, but must be acknowledged as central to the culture of place in Northern Ireland. The energy invested in the contested space of Belfast in particular, and

Northern Ireland in general, has to be harnessed, and the arts/cultural apparatus capable of doing that will have to be invented *in situ*.

What emerges in *Re-Imagining Belfast*, from quite different perspectives, is that the only option available for the arts is to engage with the larger process, already underway in the North, of creating a new civil society — a new civil culture — which is shared, yet diverse, and belonging to all citizens. *Re-Imagining Belfast* is a welcome rehearsal of these issues, and an essential precur-

sor to an actual manifesto for the arts. And, while it clearly addresses the specifics of Belfast, the publication draws together a range of perspectives in a way that provides a useful model for the kind of discourse that's needed throughout the island.

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*Declan McGonagle is finalising City Arts Centre's Civil Arts Inquiry and has been appointed Professor of Fine Art at the University of Ulster in Belfast, and director of a new research centre there which will examine issues of art and context.*

# Through the Leaves

**PATRICK LONERGAN** reports on new developments in Irish theatre publishing.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR THE Abbey Theatre as it marks its centenary is to ensure that our desire to celebrate the theatre's past is harnessed in a way that will renew and reactivate the Irish repertoire. The risk is that our appetite for nostalgia will instead cause us to treat the Abbey's past as if it's an exhibit in a museum — as something pretty and mildly diverting, but of no relevance to our present. How the Theatre manages to deal with this challenge remains to be seen, but publishers of Irish theatre books are doing a fine job of using the centenary as an opportunity to publish books to deepen our understanding of the Abbey's role in the life of the nation.

In some cases, this involves a new

look at neglected Abbey playwrights. Albert DiGiacomo's *TC Murray, Dramatist* (Syracuse) makes a compelling case for the contemporary relevance of a playwright whose works were largely responsible for keeping the theatre in business in the period between Synge and O'Casey. Ciara Hogan's book on Louis D'Alton, due from Four Courts, looks set to provide a new perspective on another interesting Abbey writer. Christopher FitzSimon's *Abbey Theatre* (Thames and Hudson) attempts to provide an accessible overview of the theatre's history — a task that it achieves very well. But what makes it particularly valuable is its inclusion of photographs from the theatre's archives, with almost every page full of fascinating illustra-

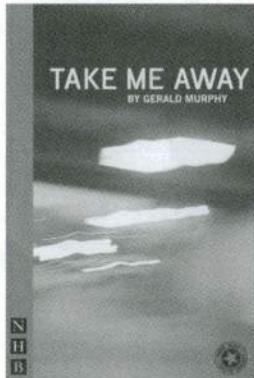
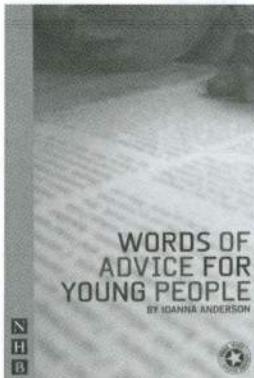
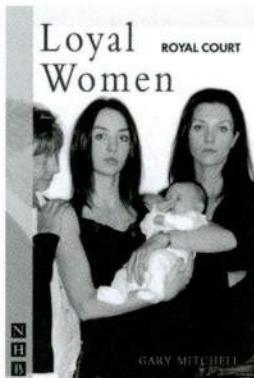
## book reviews

tions. The decision to focus on the Abbey's history from a visual, as well as a textual, perspective is a very positive approach to Irish theatre history, which one hopes will be widely emulated.

Another book that deserves praise for its emphasis on the visual qualities of Irish theatre is James Knowlson and John Haynes' *Images of Beckett* (Cambridge), which combines three essays on Beckett with almost 150 images from various productions of

Press). Lojek deals with McGuinness' plays through *Gates of Gold*, reading them against each other in illuminating ways. The book is particularly well written, and also refreshing is Lojek's frank treatment of the issue of sexuality in McGuinness' plays.

Meanwhile, new Irish plays continue to be published with impressive frequency. Gallery Press have brought Thomas Kilroy's *Shape of Metal* and Friel's *Performances* into print, and



Beckett's plays — including many from the Gate's Beckett Festival. An interesting counterpoint to that volume is Daniel Albright's *Beckett and Aesthetics*, also from Cambridge, which considers Beckett's plays in terms of surrealism, music, and other artforms and movements. Such publications are doing a great deal to complicate the notion that Irish theatre is excessively dependent on text.

This focus on Irish theatre's past means that there has been less work on contemporary writing recently. A major exception is Helen Lojek's new study of Frank McGuinness (Catholic University

Lilliput have issued Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*, which was recently named the best play of 2003 at the Irish Times/ESB awards and will return in this year's Dublin Theatre Festival. Nick Hern Books continues as a stalwart publisher of new Irish work, having recently published works by Stella Feehily (*Duck*), Gary Mitchell (*Loyal Women*), Ioanna Anderson (*Words of Advice for Young People*), and Gerald Murphy (*Take Me Away*). 

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Patrick Lonergan is completing a PhD on Irish theatre at NUI Galway, and is *itm's* books editor.

**ARISTOCRATS by Brian Friel**

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

12 Nov 2003–24 Jan 2004

Reviewed 24 Jan BY PETER CRAWLEY

TWIRLING AROUND THE STUDY OF HIS beautiful, collapsing family home, Casimir O'Donnell, eccentric heir to a beautiful, collapsing legacy, surveys its furnishings and nourishes his illusions. Reciting a litany of breathtaking names in the single-breath rhythm of rote learning, he finds the spirit of G K Chesterton residing in a footstool, George Moore in a candlestick. "What's Yeats?" enquires Professor Hoffnung. "This cushion," Casimir replies. Trapping artists into lifeless commodities, the scene is comically absurd and subtly poignant, expressing the sentimental value of everything and the artistic worth of nothing.

In this numbingly efficient staging of Brian Friel's 1979 play, the playwright himself is a tasteful trinket, becoming, as the first instalment in the nostalgic study of the Abbey's centenary, just another part of the furniture.

There are few dramatists as enticing and forbidding as Friel. If the density of his characters and the attentive balance of his stagecraft cast him as a generous talent, then his reams of non-negotiable stage directions make him the most intractable custodian of his work. When the terrain for exploration is so hemmed in, there is one option to the revivalist – you have to dig deep. The essence of his play, Friel thought, was "the burden of the incommunicable." Sticking to observable details, however, it's a burden that Ben Barnes' production never bears.

Returning to the ruin of their upbringing, a Catholic family of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy is reunited for a marriage

between manic-depressive Claire (Justine Mitchell) and a greengrocer twice her age. It is one further plummet in fortune, a decline marked out by the failing of Casimir (Peter Hanly) in the legal profession — he works in a German sausage factory — eldest daughter Judith's (Ingrid Craigie) illegitimate child, Alice (Elisabeth Dermot Walsh)'s alcoholism and her troubled marriage to Eamon (Paul Hickey), grandson to a former maid of the house. It is an exhausted family, dominated still by a patriarch who now lies powerless and out of sight, his voice merging eerily with the walls of the oppressive house, issuing disoriented reproaches through a newly installed "baby alarm."

Naturally, everyone and everything gradually comes to pieces, shattering the halcyon illusion of a big house betrothal into no weddings and a funeral. The inevitable decline of aristocracy sharply recalls Chekhov, with another pretty family vastly overtaken by modernity, retreating to social structures and imaginary games that have long since ended. In the acrid proletarian wit, charismatically delivered by Paul Hickey's Eamon, the stately melancholy that descends on Justine Mitchell's Claire, or the frequent decanting of liquor to lubricate the revelations, it could almost pass for — were the idea not so preposterous — a Tom Murphy adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*.

The ensemble appears unguided, however, and the family dynamic thus loses conviction; psychologically they never break the surface. Hanly does offer some precious moments. The fragile rendering of the gulf between his German son and himself, "We can smile and make signs and stagger on," is so disarmingly touching, you realise that, though Friel is no

## reviews

sentimentalist, he cannot condemn these pretty, useless people and their will to cling to the past — a will so strong that not only does one outsider join an imaginary game of croquet, the professor (Bosco Hogan) even photographs it.

A production should not entertain such delusions, however. It needs to explore this Big House carefully, to demonstrate a fluent understanding of its characters, to gradually unlock its secrets and lure an audience in by stealth. Instead, the play seems to have been consulted like a checklist. "When I think of Ballybeg Hall it's always like this," approves Hanly's Casimir on a stage that misses the irony and practically ticks the boxes. Joe Vanek's imposing edifice rises up from rolling lawns (check!); the dutiful glow of Rupert Murray's temperate summer lighting falls warm upon it (check!), strains of Chopin envelope it like a

summer haze (check!). These are fine production values in search of a fine production.

This is not to say that this *Aristocrats* is a bad production. In fact it's quite all right. Oh, no, let's be generous — it's *very* all right. As an act of theatrical restoration rather than excavation, however, its superficial fidelity to the text feels like a betrayal of the drama. Friel, like Chekhov, knew what lay at the core of imaginary games of croquet or billiards and kept his distance from such empty revivals.

This Abbey production of a former success is overcome by an aesthetic sheen, succumbing to theatrical lip service rather than exhibiting directorial rigour. For all their attractive, dreamy self-deception, such unthinking embraces of former triumphs have left a family exhausted, directionless and irrelevant to the society around it. Where does it leave a theatre?

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**ECCENTRIC** Hanly and Craigie in *Aristocrats*



## CÚIGEAR CHONAMARA

by Micheál Ó Conghaile

Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe

8-18 Oct 2003; reviewed 9 Oct

BY IRENE NÍ NUALLÁIN

IS MINC FIR AG COMHLÍONADH RÓL ban i stair na drámaíochta, ach ní minic an trasghléasachas a bheith mar ábhar ann féin sa drámaíocht. Is amhlaidh a bhí, áfach, i ndráma ceiliúrtha 75 bliain na Taibhdheirce.

Ach cé go raibh an trasghléasachas mar théama lárnach sa dráma, níor úsáideadh ar mhaithle le conspóid amháin é. Rinneadh an t-ábhar a láimhseáil go habtí ann.

Baineann scéal an dráma le rúin, saolta ceilte agus daoine atá coinnithe mar phrósúnaigh ina saolta féin. Tá athar an tí, Coilmín (Peadar Ó Treasaigh) ina chónaí lena bheirt mhac fásta, Darach (Peadar Cox) agus Danny (Seán Ó Tarpaigh). Fuair bean chéile Choilmín bás 25 bliain ó shin agus is léir go bhfuil a intinn chráite fós ag an gcailliúint. Carachtar binbeach é Darach agus cruthaonn sé teannas sa teach lena thuairimí nimhneacha. Go deimhin, is deacaí a shamhlú gur deartháir le Danny é agus pearsantacht chomh séimh, goilliu-nach sin aige.

Tugann comharsa bhéal dorais Meaigí cuairt rialta ar theach na bhfeair agus is léir go bhfuil cion faoi leith aici do Choilmín, rud nach dtaitnaíonn le Darach agus tá sé in éad leis an gcaidreamh atá ag Danny leis an gcaillín áitiúil Cynthia (Saybna Seoige). Ta gach carachtar sa dráma gafa i saol atá ag plúchadh an spioraid iontu. Nuair a nochtar rún Danny tagann mothúincháin ceilte na gcarachtar chun solais agus léiríonn sé go bhfuil a rúin fhéin ag na carachtair uilig.

Tá scríbhneoireacht an dráma fhéin an nádúrtha ach sílim go n-oibróidh cuid de na radhairc níos fearr dá mbeadh siad níos giorra — an radharc le Cynthia agus Meaigí ag an nGrotto ach go háirithe. Bhí an radharc seo beagánín dochreidte sa lá atá inniu ann — go mbeadh caillín óg ag guí chun na Maighdine Muire ag Grotto de bharr deacrachtáid caidrimh atá aici lena buachail.

Bhí mé an-tógha lé páirt Danny sa dráma. Fágadh faoi dhráfocht aige mé. Cuirtear é inár láthair mar charachtar lách séimh ceanúil ag tú an dráma agus glacann an lucht féachana go héasca leis an nós atá aige gléasadh mar bhean. Is léir gur bhráith Danny uaidh tionchar na mban agus é ag fás aníos agus gur nós é an trasghléasachas atá aige an bearna seo a líonadh. Tugann sé le fios go mbraitheann sé níos giorra dá mháthair, atá básaithe, nuair a bhíonn sé gléasta mar bhean.

Ní raibh carachtar Cynthia chomh hinchreidte céanna le carachtar Danny sa dráma. É sin ráite, d'éisigh le Sabyna Seoige fearg a carachtair nuair a fhraigheann sí rún a leannáin amach a léiriú thar barr: "An dtuigeannt tú go bhfuil trí bliana de mo shaol millte agat orm?" a bhéiceann Seoighe.

Tá cáil Uí Chonghail mar dhuine de phríomhscríbhneoirí na Gaeilge ag meádú is ag meádú. Seo an chéad dráma uaidh (cé gur léiríodh aistriúcháin a rinne sé ar shaothair ó Martin McDonagh roimhe seo.) Cé go bhfuil clú bainte amach ag fear Inis Treabhair lena ghearrscéalta agus úrscéalta, gan trácht ar a chuid filíochta, is léir go bhfuil luí ar leith aige leis an drámaíocht agus is nádúrtha fós a chuid scríbhneoreachta don stáitse ná a chuid scríbhneoreachta don phár.

An méid sin ráite, shíl mé nár luí na monalogaí fada le stíl nádúrtha an dráma.

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Cé go bhfuil an chaint a dhéanann Coilmín Ridge (seanfhear) inchreidte, níor oibrigh na comhráite fada a bhí ag Danny leis féin faoina mháthair, faoi thus a thrasghléasachais. Ní raibh siad inchreidte ná nádúrtha ar aon bhealach. An iomarca 'insint' don lucht féachana. Níor chabhraigh na monaloga aird an lucht féachana a choinneáil ar an dráma agus bhrith mé nach raibh gá le gach ceann acu i bhforbairt forbairt an scéil.

Ach bhí comhrá agus teagmháil na gcarachtar lena chéile an-éifeachtach agus nádúrtha, go háirithe nuair a cheappann Coilmín gur a bhean chéile atá i Danny nuair a chasann sé leis i láir na hoíche agus é gléasta mar bhean. Níl sé soiléar an é seo an bealach ag Coilmín a chur in iúl ar Danny go nglacann sé leis an nós atá aige, nó an bhfuil mearbhalla air agus é leath ina choladh nuair a tharlaonn an eachtra. D'oilbigh an éiginnteacht seo go maith.

Léiriú mothálach a bhí ann ar an iomlán, faoi stiúir Dharach Mhic Con Iomaire. Thaitin an chaoi go ndeachaidh léiriú an dráma i ngleic leis an trasgléasachas agus sílim go ndeara Mac Con Iomaire láimh-seáil cumasach ar an téama leochailleach seo. Chabhraigh seit Pháraic Breathnach go mó leis an teannas a cruthaíodh sa dráma — go háirithe agus seomra codalta Danny crochta in airde ar an gcistin, an seomra ina raibh formhór an dráma suite.

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Irene Ní Nualláin, *Eagarthóir Ealaón le Foinse, Príomhnuachtán Náisiúnta na Gaeilge*

ALTHOUGH CROSS-DRESSING HAS BEEN a central part of drama since Elizabethan times, there are few plays that deal explicitly with transvestism as we understand it. *Cúigear Chonamara* (*Five Connemara People*) goes some way

in exploring this theme but it is not used as a tool to provoke controversy. Such a sensitive theme could have been easily mishandled, but this did not prove the case, in one of the five home productions of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe in 2003, marking the 75th anniversary of the national Irish language theatre.

*Cúigear Chonamara* focuses on the secrets and hidden lives of five people living in Connemara who are prisoners of their pasts. The play is set in the house of Coilmín Ridge (Peadar Ó Treasaigh) who lives with his two adult sons Darach (Peadar Cox) and Danny (Seán Ó Tarpaigh). Coilmín is still struggling to come to terms with the death of his wife 25 years previously, and his sons have their own personal struggles to deal with. Darach, the older son, is spiteful, and intentionally creates tension in the house with critical and often harsh comments. Danny, a transvestite, is quite the opposite to his older brother, having a gentle and sensitive personality.

The three men are visited regularly by a nosy neighbour, Meaigí, who displays affectionate shows of attention to Coilmín. Darach seems uncomfortable with their relationship, and is also threatened and envious of his younger brother's relationship with a local girl, Cynthia (Sabyna Seoige). Each character seems imprisoned by the mundane events of their everyday lives, by feelings of quiet desperation. This isolation becomes more apparent when Danny's secret is revealed; their reactions tell us more about their secrets and inadequacies. Eventually Danny's transvestism serves as a liberating force in the development of the men's relationships with



each other and with Meaigí and Cynthia.

Even though the play is very well written, there were some scenes which might have worked better if shortened. There did not seem to be much point in the inclusion of, for example, a scene with Cynthia and Meaigí at the Grotto. We were asked to believe that in this day and age, a young girl would go to pray to the Virgin Mary because of difficulties with her boyfriend. If only all of us with relationship problems could be so easily consoled!

Danny's character was particularly endearing. He is presented as a sensitive but likeable person at the beginning of the play. Dressing up in women's clothes also seems to counter the imbalance that Danny feels at the loss of his mother at a young age and the lack of a female role model in his life. His girlfriend Cynthia was not as

**DIFFERENT  
FACES** Cúigear  
Chonamara

convincing a character. She only comes into her own when Danny's secret is revealed to her; Seoige managed to portray her anger with Danny with great conviction. "Do you understand that I have wasted three years of my life on you?" she screams at him.

Ó Conghaile is one of the foremost and most prolific of Irish language writers, but this is his first original drama (he has already translated some of Martin McDonagh's work into Irish). Although the man from Iris Treabhair has established his reputation for short stories and novels, not to mention poetry, it is evident that he has a special gift as a dramatist; his writing has a natural rhythmic flow and is quite suited to the spoken word. The play has moments of great tenderness, as when Coilimín wakes in the middle of the night and mistakes his transvestite son for his

## reviews

dead wife. It is unclear whether this was Coilmín's way of accepting this aspect of Danny's personality, or whether he was actually sleepwalking, but this was a productive ambiguity that made for a very effective scene.

The dialogue in the play was quite effective, but long monologues took away from the natural flow of the drama. Even though Coilmín's were credible, Danny's monologues about his mother and cross-dressing were stiff and unnatural. There was too much exposition, and the play dragged in these parts.

Páraic Breathnach's set was well designed and the placement of Danny's bedroom over the kitchen, the room where most of the play is set, was very effective. The sensitive production, under the direction of Darach Mac Con Iomaire, managed to examine both the light and the dark sides of the characters, and produced an entertaining night of theatre.

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Irene Ní Nuallán is arts editor of Foinse, the national Irish language newspaper.

### DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA, AN APACHE DANCE by John Patrick Shanley

Argy Bargy Theatre Company

International Bar, Dublin

20 Oct–1 Nov 2003;

reviewed 30 Oct BY COLIN MURPHY

SOME FUCKIN' BAR, HE SAYS. DANNY and Roberta sit across from each other at dimly lit tables. *Nobody here.*

*That's why I like it,* she snaps back.

*What's the matter? You don't like people?*  
*No. Not really.*

*Me neither.* There is a pause.

*What happened to your hands?* His

hands are bandaged.

*Fight.*

*Who'd you fight?*

*I don't know. Some guys last night.*

Roberta doesn't like people; Danny fights them. Their taut, clipped exchanges across the floor of the International Bar are gripping, and the vista they open up of an American urban underclass is compelling.

They are violent misanthropes, mired in an almost absurdly dysfunctional society: his father had a temper so severe that, finally, he "got so mad 'cause somebody did something, that he just fuckin died"; her mother works in a bakery where "the smell of the sweetness is too much, and it makes her puke." Separately, they seek refuge from their environment in a local shebeen, and over a night's drinking and in three taut scenes, they stumble and grope their way into each other's arms.

Scene One has the two trading violence-laden language across the empty bar, until Roberta coaxes Danny into letting her join him at his table. In scene two, she seduces him in her closet bedroom in her parents' home, and they talk, hesitantly, of love. In scene three, they wake the morning after, and confront the reality of their futures.

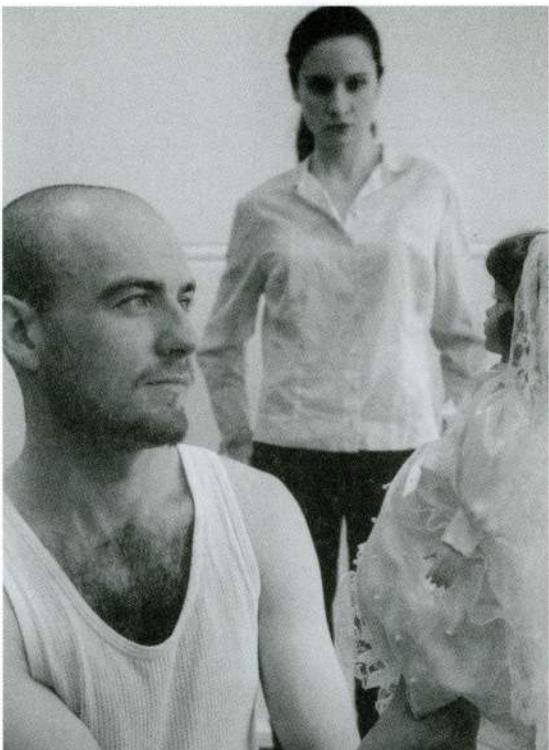
There are traces of absurdity in the apparently inchoate nature of John Patrick Shanley's dialogue. Despite its evident late 20th-century modernity, however, this is drama of a classical bent. Roberta and Danny may be studies in human dereliction, but they are no mere ciphers for "urban decay," aimlessly hurling abuse in a bar and looking for a cheap fuck. Rather, they are tragic characters, railing against an unjust fate; fate brings them together for the night, and

Danny's insistence at the end that they together plan a wedding, is a heroic act that offers the prospect of redemption to Roberta.

The principal virtue of this evening's theatre is the script: Shanley's writing is electric, and this text is demanding as well as engaging. But that is not to dismiss this production. Shanley's gritty, bare dialogue is a gift to the two actors, Catherine Farrell and Sean Mac, and they spar with his words well. The tight space and simple lighting of the International Bar suit the raw honesty of the piece, and its dilapidation suits the barren bar and cramped closet-space of her bedroom where the play is set. It is a shame, though, that playmakers in the International invariably seem content to fit their play to the space, rather than fit the space to the play. While the peeling black paint and dusty light does have an appealing, studio-theatre feel to it, such a small space should also be the most easily convertible. In this case, Roberta's bedroom, where two of the three scenes are set, could certainly have been more eloquently evoked than by the bare furnishings placed on stage.

If the physical setting works more easily in the first scene, when the two are

JOHN DELANEY



**HEY DOLLY!** Farrell  
and Mac in *Danny and  
the Deep Blue Sea*

simply sitting at separate tables in a bar, this scene, too, flows more comfortably. Mac and Farrell seem more at home exchanging dialogue at high volume across the bar floor than murmuring it to each other in between the covers. For such a ballsy play, it was also disappointing that more was not made of the second scene, which Stanley describes as taking place on the mattress of Roberta's room, when "they've just finished." The aggressive lyricality of his script and the intensity of the dialogue given to Roberta and Danny are not

## reviews

reflected in the physicality of Farrell and Mac's performances. The scene and the performance need, simply put, sexing up. Their shared intimacy here is integral to an understanding of the violence and harshness of the piece; in a morality tale of the American ghetto, it offers the possibility of redemption to its alienated and damaged characters. Farrell and Mac dance well with Shanley's words, but do not match this with body language.

Yet the production is a success. This is a cracking play, and Farrell and Mac, under John Delaney's direction, give it a solid outing. Their characterisation is authentic and their relationship is believable. Argy Bargy Theatre Company are to be congratulated for bringing John Patrick Shanley's work to Dublin, and for giving it a faithful and committed production.

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*Colin Murphy is a freelance journalist and Ireland correspondent for The Tablet newspaper (London).*

### FEATURING LORETTA

by George F. Walker

AboutFACE Theatre Company

THEatre Space @ Henry Place, Dublin

17-29 Nov. 2003; reviewed 26 Nov.

BY BETH NEWHALL

THE IRONY OF IRONY, IF YOU'LL ALLOW, is that although practically omni-present, it often proves elusive. In the case of John Delaney's production of *Featuring Loretta*, failure to recognise the irony at the core of the script seriously diluted the comedy. Even worse, because Delaney takes the plot, which revolves around the objectification of the beautiful Loretta (Anna Olson), at face value, the show ends up promoting regressive gender bias.

As the play opens, we find "Lorie," the

Loretta of the title, in the shabby motel room where she has taken up residence following the demise of her adulterous, thrill-seeking husband. Not that Lorie's husband was alone in his infidelity: shortly before his death (eaten by a bear while on a wilderness excursion), Lorie enjoyed an extramarital fling of her own. Unfortunately, Lorie's affair led to an accidental pregnancy, and, unable to confront either her lover or her in-laws, she abandons her old life and attempts to start anew.

Since moving to the motel, Lorie has acquired both a job waiting tables and a suitor — Alan Walsh's monumentally irritating Dave. In a recurring joke that didn't work the first time, Dave refuses to leave the motel premises despite Loretta's chant of "Go away, Dave!" Believe me, I felt like shouting it with her. Had Walsh focused on Dave's clumsy pursuit of Loretta, and the character's obliviousness to her annoyance, his performance could have earned some real laughs. Instead, Walsh chose to act annoyingly, and definitely succeeded.

Luckily, Dave is not the only one to fall under Loretta's leggy spell. Michael, played with wonderful panache by Charlie Kranz, ostensibly pursues Lorie not to date her, but to make her an exotic film star. Like a New Age guru peddling porn, complete with greasy ponytail, Michael assures Loretta of the easy money to be made in the adult film industry. Admitting that he's never made a successful film, Michael smiles and asserts, "Just because I don't know what I'm talking about doesn't mean it won't happen." He considers his immediate arousal at the mere sight of Loretta — endlessly hysterical, by the way — proof enough that the lady's got what it takes.

The dysfunctional mix also includes



Sophie (Tara McKeever), a Russian housekeeper whose story is so poorly integrated that, problematically, she seems to be onstage only to provide us with an amusing "foreigner" stereotype. Sophie does offer a counterpoint to Lorie's ambivalence about the pregnancy, arguing that "It's not a choice, it's a baby." Without deeper probing, however, such absolutist statements feel like a product of the conservative foreign provincialism that the production finds so funny.

However distressing the depiction of Sophie, it is in realising Loretta that the play truly falters. Lorie maintains that, in the past, she always had men telling her what to do. Now, proclaiming, "I can do whatever I want," Lorie decides that what she wants to do is make money, "the only thing that expands your options." And how to make money? Star

**IRONIC?** *McKeever  
and Olson in  
Featuring Loretta*

in a pornographic film, directed by Michael, with some assistance from Dave. Lorie, determined to assert her independence, does so by agreeing to become a sex object in a plan concocted by two men who become drooling adolescents at the sight of her.

Although this central paradox offers great comedic potential, Olson portrays Lorie with misplaced earnestness that often reads as weakness. Even when she sends the two men packing — at which point Dave and Michael get into an hilarious wrestling match that almost proves worth the price of admission — Lorie seems more lost than liberated.

Ultimately, the fault lies not with the actors, but in the lack of an overall directorial vision. Beyond putting on a funny show, Delaney does not seem to have a clear idea of what he wants the production to say, and so says nothing — a dan-

# reviews

gerous task in a play explicitly dealing with the objectification of women. Loretta should be the one exploiting the men for their weakness (their incapacitating desire for her), not the reverse. In overlooking this crucial irony, Delaney misses a theme that would give the show coherence, momentum, and a source of sustained humor. Sadly, the deftly sleazy Kranz is the only one to take advantage. Thus, as the actors took their bows, I found myself applauding most enthusiastically for Michael, the play's readiest exploiter of women. Now isn't that ironic?

## FINDERS KEEPERS by Peter Sheridan

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

28 Jan–6 Mar 2004; reviewed 18 Feb

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

THREE YEARS AGO, THE ABBEY INFAMOUSLY proposed a move out of Bertie Ahern's constituency, over the river to Misery Hill – a proposition that backfired so badly that the last thing anyone would have expected was the inclusion of a play set in Dublin's Docklands in the Abbey's centenary programme. Of course, *Finders Keepers* was originally commissioned by Draíocht, but had to be cancelled shortly before it was due to premiere last year — so this wasn't originally conceived as an Abbey play. Nevertheless, this production of a new work set within a short distance of one of the sites offered to the Abbey raises questions about where our national theatre sees itself in relation to its locality.

The action takes place in the late 1960s on the banks of the Royal Canal, and concerns the relationships of four teenagers (Feidlim Cannon, Lisa Lambe, Aaron Monaghan, and Domhnall O'Donoghue) with two elderly women, the so-called "witches of the North Wall" (Anne Kent

and Máire Ní Ghráinne). As signposted by the music (acoustic guitar, of course), this is a coming of age story, with transformation at its heart: boys become men, frogs become princesses, first kisses are exchanged, and all's well that ends well. There is a plot nudging all of this along, which concerns the group's efforts to raise money to retrieve a button guaranteeing a permanent job in the docks, sold for drink by an alcoholic father — but this story is for the most part incidental to the play's main objective of indulging in light-hearted nostalgia.

Not that there's much wrong with indulging in nostalgia — which has been much in fashion in Irish culture lately anyway, with countless middle-aged writers delivering memoirs of the rare aul' times, full of orchard robbing, batterings from Christian Brothers, kissing under Cleary's clock, absent and/or alcoholic fathers, and so on. Peter Sheridan's *44* and *Forty-Seven Roses* are among the best examples of this genre, so the announcement that the Abbey was rescuing *Finders Keepers* seemed like good news. Besides, Irish drama's representation of the past has been so focussed on bogbound tragedy lately that a bit of uncomplicated, easygoing nostalgia seems long overdue.

And that's exactly what the play as directed by Martin Drury gives us, asking for little in return. The use of warm primary colours in the lighting and design (by Sinead McKenna and Carol Betera respectively), together with highly artificial blocking, make clear that we're not witnessing reality here, but a sentimentalised re-creation of the author's memories. While the actors seem occasionally unsure of just how seriously they're supposed to take their

characters, the performances are generally solid. And the plot is parcelled out in easily digestible portions, wrapped up neatly to send the audience home happy. The play quite simply is a fairytale for adults, dressed up in the gaudy colours of a child's birthday party, and the production seems happy to leave it at that.

Yet for anyone familiar with Dublin, it is impossible to watch *Finders Keepers* without an awareness that Sheridan knows his happy ending is a sham. The action concludes with the retrieval of the button that promises permanent employment, implying that a secure future lies in store for the characters — yet most members of the audience will know how redundancy and crime later devastated the community being portrayed on stage. And the freedom to roam enjoyed by the characters contrasts

depressingly with the heavily monitored, privatised space that the Docklands has since become.

It seems fair to assume that Sheridan wants his audience to contemplate the contrast between Dublin's past and present — yet, curiously, they are given absolutely no encouragement to do so by the production. Instead, we are treated as if the northside is a foreign country. We are, for example, told where to find the Rotunda hospital (it's near the Carlton Cinema, isn't it?), and — as was the case with *Duck*, the Abbey's last slice of working class Dublin life — at least half the cast have trouble with their Dublin accents.

While it would be wrong to demand that every new play at the Abbey must have political content, it is unsettling to observe this production's reluctance to establish a relationship between the



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Dublin onstage and the Dublin of today. By staging this play at this time, the Abbey had an opportunity to publicly re-articulate its relationship with its immediate environment and local community, and to ask audiences to consider more critically the recent transformation of Dublin. These issues matter, not just because they affect everyone in our society, but also because the Abbey is itself a key player in the future of Dublin's north inner city. After all, if *Finders Keepers* is about the future direction of Dublin, so is the debate about where the Abbey should be situated. This common ground might have been fruitfully explored, yet I left the theatre with no evidence that it had even been noticed. This felt like a missed opportunity.

What remains is a well-written, funny play, which is nicely performed and effi-

**REMEMBERING AUL'**  
**DUBLIN** Monaghan  
in *Finders Keepers*

ciently produced. Aaron Monaghan in the lead role is particularly impressive, and it all amounts to a pleasant evening's theatre.

But a glance to the right as one leaves the Peacock will strongly suggest that it might have been much more.

**FOOL FOR LOVE by Sam Shepard**

The New Theatre and

Big Papa Theatre Company

The New Theatre, Dublin

13 Nov-13 Dec 2003; reviewed 12 Dec

**BY CATRIONA MITCHELL**

FOOL FOR LOVE IS SET IN A CRAMPED, run-down motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert. The walls are the colour of mushroom soup. On a single bed lies May (Laoisa Sexton), in her early 30s, fully dressed; her lover Eddie (Sean Power) is trying to placate her as if after a fight. May oscillates between supplica-

TOM LAWLER

tion and violence, pulling him to her and pushing him away, unable to decide if she wants him near or far. "You smell," she says at last. Indeed Eddie looks unwashed — his hair is greasy, his jeans grimy — but that isn't what she means. "Your fingers smell," she says. "Pussy. They smell like metal... Rich pussy."

Eddie has just driven 2,480 miles to find May. He can't live without her, but he can't remain faithful to her either. "Fifteen years I've been a yo-yo for you," she laments. "It'll be the same thing over and over again. We'll be together a little while and then you'll be gone." But the lovers' problems extend beyond infidelity: they are brother and sister. Their history is revealed through a series of startling and sometimes lyrical monologues, when a third party, Martin (Patrick Joseph Byrnes) arrives at the motel. Appropriately dull in contrast to the feisty May and Eddie, Martin acts as a

neutral, impartial audience to the lovers' tales of tragedy and passion.

Throughout the play, an old man in a white cowboy hat sits drinking just in front of the stage, so close to the audience he's almost a part of it. He is Eddie and May's father (played by the director, Ronan Wilmot). His constant watchful presence emphasizes the enormous psychological impact he has had on his children's lives. When he comes to life sporadically, it is to uphold his patriarchal worldview. "Stand up!" he shouts at Eddie, "Get on your feet now God damn it! I want to hear the male side of this thing." Unfortunately, Wilmot is inclined to overplay the role, becoming blustering, and thus diminishing the authority the old man could have.

Eddie struggles with his father's legacy, and Power embodies the conflict well, moving from bravado and aggression to displays of tenderness with

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**DESERT DWELLERS**  
*The company of Fool  
for Love*



## reviews

ease. Equally scarred, and determined not to be abandoned like her mother, May can be violent in both word and deed. Sexton is a sex bomb on stage, likely to explode at any moment, although on occasion she allows emotional frenzy to veer too close to hysteria.

It is a shame that the cast uses a southern drawl which, though consistent, lacks authenticity and creates unwelcome distraction. Perhaps for this reason, the protagonists' physicality becomes the star of the show. Bodies clash energetically in the small space: May knees Eddie in the groin, he back-flips across the room, he pins her down, they tussle on the floor, there is the flailing of elbows, his fists get tangled in her hair. The scuffles invariably have a sexual edge: passion and violence, it seems, spring from the same source.

The use of props and costume fuels the antagonism between the sexes. Near the beginning, May goes to a small bathroom built onto the back wall of the stage (a clever piece of stage design), where she discards her dowdy ankle-length skirt for a skimpy red dress. She then sits on the bed and rubs moisturizer into her legs, spraying herself with perfume. As if in retaliation, Eddie goes to his truck and fetches his male accoutrements: a shotgun, a bottle of tequila, and a pair of spurs. Now the sparks really start to fly.

Equally, the lighting and sound design add to the tension. At the beginning, the stage is dark but for the red glow of sunset through a back window. Silhouettes of telegraph poles recede into the distance, creating the haunting atmosphere of this transient, desolate place — an apt site for impossible, unhappy relationship. During the show we hear doors slamming, May's screams, explosions, shattering glass, car horns blaring, the whinnying of horses and

the sound of hooves. The play both begins and ends with a song by Chris Hoctor, implying that despite the odd glimmer of hope, nothing essential changes.

Shepard's stage directions ask that *Fool for Love* be performed "relentlessly, without a break" — but surely this relentlessness need not come at the expense of subtlety. Some heavy-handedness in the acting hampers what is otherwise an edgy and compelling production.

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

### HAMLET by William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company

SFX City Theatre

21 Jan-13 Feb 2004; reviewed 10 Feb

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO BE OPEN-MINDED about theatre for school audiences. Productions of texts on school syllabi have a poor reputation, and many theatre-goers complain — often with justification — that student groups can disrupt and even ruin a performance. Yet some productions for schools can be great — a Shared Experience *Jane Eyre* delighted many audiences in 1999, and Second Age and Theatreworks co-produced a well-regarded *Macbeth* in 2003. But whatever one's opinion of school productions, it's important to judge them on their own terms. It seems fair to expect them to entertain and educate students, to indicate an understanding of the text, and to make those students feel welcome in our country's theatres. And it also seems reasonable to believe that the show should reach a minimum standard of professionalism — that the production should equal the sum of its parts, that the company



should conform to or exceed audience expectations. These criteria might seem basic, or even simplistic. But I mention them because this Second Age *Hamlet* doesn't meet any of them.

The play is directed by Alan Stanford — and looks in many ways like one of his Gate Theatre productions has been ambushed and dragged down the road to the SFX. The action is set in a 1920s drawing room, with the characters dressed in a dizzying combination of Jazz Age glitz with military kitsch, which unintentionally resembles Conor McPherson's brilliant send-up of *Richard III* in *The Actors*. There is no compelling explanation for this choice, which ultimately comes across as veneer masquerading as directorial vision. The absence of such vision is often shock-

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**UNHAPPY COUPLE**  
*Rory Keenan and  
Emily Nagle in Hamlet*

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ing. *Hamlet* isn't easy to direct, but it does provide some basic pointers in Hamlet's advice to the players: keep your movement subtle, try to ensure that your words and actions cohere.

This production has an experienced cast, who should be well able to meet these simple requirements, but they seem constrained by a style of directing that lacks unity or any overarching intelligence. This is particularly true of Rory Keenan, who as Hamlet shows that he's a skilled actor — but he is let down by superficial, disjointed directing. Hamlet is angry, therefore he shouts. Hamlet is frustrated, therefore he drops to his knees and shakes his fist at the sky. Hamlet is mad, therefore one tail on his shirt will not be properly tucked in, his hair will be



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unkempt, and he will gesticulate wildly. And on it goes, as cliché after cliché lurches inelegantly across the stage. Ophelia is insane, so she will open her eyes *really* wide and sing tunelessly. When the ghost is onstage, we will have sound effects of wind blowing. It doesn't matter that the ghost appears indoors as well as outdoors (Elsinore gets drafty, I suppose); if there is a ghost, there must be eerie wind.

There are other elementary problems. Although there are two exits, scene changes are disrupted by actors entering and exiting at the same place. Lines are delivered to the wings and the backdrop despite the theatre's poor acoustics. And the actors' movement is often so lacking in logic that it generates laughter.

This is not to suggest that the production entirely lacks vision, since there is a clearly discernible vein of misogyny and elitism throughout. Consider for example the moment when Hamlet stares at Ophelia's crotch and lingers emphatically over the first syllable in the word "contrary" to make it sound like "cunt." It is likely that Shakespeare's original audiences laughed along to this pun, but if you're going to recreate elements of the original performance for a modern audience, surely there are more interesting ways of doing so than using Shakespeare's bawdy as an excuse for an extremely cheap laugh that panders to someone's idea of what teenagers find funny. Indeed, the representation of Ophelia is often worryingly sexist, with Polonius (Barry McGovern) belittling and harassing her throughout the action. This could have been handled interestingly and creatively, but it's played as if it's all just a bit of harmless fun. Some members of the audience do laugh at this; most just look embarrassed.

Then there are the accents. It's not nec-

essarily objectionable that the soldiers and gravediggers speak in Dublin accents, while the aristocratic protagonists deliver their lines in British diction. It is a problem, however, that these accents are delivered as if the audience will assume that a working class Dublin accent is inherently funny, and that anyone speaking with one must automatically be either socially or intellectually inferior. If you're a student going to the theatre for the first time, and the only accents on stage that resemble your own are presented as a source of classist amusement, would you feel welcome in places like the Abbey or the Gate?

Everything was in place for this *Hamlet* to be successful. A good cast, a well-resourced company, and an audience who were attentive, enthusiastic, and well marshalled by their teachers and the company's impressively efficient staff. How unfortunate, then, that this production did so little to merit their attention.

#### **HOMEBODY by Tony Kushner**

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin  
19-29 Nov 2003; reviewed 27 Nov

BY LOUIS LENTIN

OUR WORLD HAS LONG MISLAID ITS OLD magics; unsparingly shorn, they hover as shrouded myths only in theatre where all of life's mysteries may be freely imagined, reflected. There, for its brief passage, we may offer ourselves, become vicariously involved in the larger experience, leaving hopefully happier, sadder, exhilarated, enlightened, emotionally churned... pity and terror effecting a purification. Regrettably, for the majority of audiences, arousal is invariably momentary. For the most part we return home, maybe discuss, ponder, then move on.

## reviews

Tony Kushner's masterful stage polemic *Homebody* facilitates a conversation with such a person, one of us, really; she in a "pleasant room in her home in London." Conversation usually permits public exchange; theatre's rites allow us only to listen, consider, agree, reject — discuss and ponder later.

Kushner's representative *Homebody*, a compulsive, magpie reader, flits "moth-like" from momentary interest to interest, perversely sniffing her detritic book trail not for the latest volume but for the foxed pages of superannuated remaining remainders. Her story, her passion of the moment "...begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000 BC..."; she tells us, "I am reading from an outdated guidebook about the city of Kabul. In Afghanistan. In the valley of the Hindu Kush mountains. A guidebook to a city we all know has... undergone change."

Thus via Kushner's brilliant grappling with societal/individual lack of responsibility in politically repressive times (...when were they not?), collectively we dip into the history of this much-conquered, much-coveted land and its fabled capital Kabul, founded by mankind's first murderer, "Biblical Cain." Not the best omen. Against the guidebook's recurrent theme of millennia of occupation, savagery, and barbarism, our



### MESMERISING

Jane Brennan in  
*Homebody*

*Homebody* attempts to lay before us her exposition, her tale... Kabul! Elliptically, "her borders only ever broached by books," she strives to reconcile, to harmonise her conscience and ours.

"The Present is always an awful place to be." Nevertheless, reconcile it we must with the magic we can only imagine, but must believe, was the reality of the past. But what past? Also an awful place? The Untouched Past; the true animus of place and time despite, or indeed because of, the corrupting fingerprints of voracious occupations, cross-fertilisations, colonisa-

TOM LAWLER

tion. Its animus doomed to linger only as titillating "doodahs of a culture... you know, Third World junk...", beached exotic offerings of First World city scuttle shops.

To assuage our culpability, mankind breeds its global keening shops. There amid guarded, pre-stressed concrete and glass, multi-lingual, cross-global professional shamans talk and fudge in dis-united nationalistic babble, vainly striving at the pretence of some degree of non-attainable integrity, above all hide us from the overwhelming miasma of depression that would otherwise afflict us all. Global anti-depressants hoping in vain to pacify us all. The Homebody too needs anti-depressants — now hers, now her husband's. Contemporary magics granting trillions like her the freedom to float, to luxuriate in individual imaginative awareness, to "romp about, grieving, wondering, but with rare exceptions... remain suspended... between Might and Do." Mankind tranqued out, doomed to exist in a "quaggy sort of bubble where the solid core ought to be... uselessly watching others perishing in the sea... Never joining the drowning. But how dreadful, how really unpardonable to remain dry."

Come, Kushner exhorts, try to understand, jump in! But what/how can we understand, we who have not been there, who have not experienced the horrors? Oh yes, we read and hear first-hand accounts... ears, noses, legs, arms, fingers hacked off, randomly or precisely — by whom, to whom, for what reason, for being on this side or that, for simply trying to survive, does it matter? It happens — we allow it to happen, that's what matters! We can try to touch, but "...touch which does not understand that which it touches

is the touch which corrupts... which corrupts itself..." And so what remains, except to keen as the Homebody does for us all, to float down... "into the terrible silent gardens of the private..." Into our world of politically Prozaced isolation.

But, no he/she insists, there must be hope. There must be a way back. Wisdom's hand will eventually turn on the light inherent in us all, allow time to erase imposed intrusions. As Jane Brennan, who has so superbly grappled for the pitifully few attendant acolytes, now finally speaks a 17th-century poem to the beauty of Kabul, per Kushner's sparse directions, she dons and buttons her coat. A way in/out for a Homebody? Make what significance of that you will!

Alone throughout the play, Brennan mesmerised. As in the best orchestral performances, the conductor had done his work in rehearsal. Bar by bar, phrase by phrase, director Martin Drury and his solo artist combined in a seamless simplicity to hide their art and craft, allowing Kushner to speak and be spoken superbly.

My copy is headed Act One. The full title of this concerto for performer and audience is *Homebody/Kabul*. The Peacock must perform the resolution, and soon.

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*Louis Lentini works as a theatre director and an independent television producer-director.*

#### **INNOCENCE: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CARAVAGGIO by Frank McGuinness**

Granary Productions  
The Granary Theatre, Cork  
13-24 Oct 2003; reviewed 15 Oct

**BY ANN BARRY**

*INNOCENCE: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF Caravaggio* dramatises the life of an artist who thrived on abuse and manipulation,

not just of those who dominated him — representatives of the Catholic Church — but also of those who lay below him in economic and social status. Both prostitute and pimp, Caravaggio lived life to excess — a style reflected in nearly all of his paintings. However, as portrayed in Frank McGuinness' play, he was also deeply unhappy, uncertain of who he was and engaged in ongoing evasion of his real feelings and fears, which by the play's end become crippling and overwhelming.

Tony McCleane-Fay's production failed to make Caravaggio's story engaging and real for the audience. This, in spite of the fact that some of the elements of this production were of a very high quality — in particular a very solid and grounded performance by Julie Sharkey, excellent lighting design by McCleane-Fay himself, and a good sense of timing between the performers which brought out the play's comic elements.

The primary problem with this production was the performance of the leading actor. John Crosbie played Caravaggio with exaggerated, highly ornate gestures and movements which distanced him from the poetry of the text. I did not experience a character, but rather an actor struggling to get to grips with a very challenging role. In stark contrast to this was Sharkey's very solid and grounded performance as Lena, who offers refuge and solace not only to Caravaggio but to some of the play's more vulnerable characters. Her performance demonstrated a strong connection with the text and an ability to speak the highly poetic language with conviction and understanding. Her physicalisation was much more subtle than that of Crosbie, and seemed not only to compli-



**ARTIST** Crosbie  
as Caravaggio

ment, but to have grown out of, her strong connection with and ownership of the text. One wonders at the director's role in all this. Had he encouraged Crosbie towards an excessive physicalisation, or had he simply failed to direct his leading actor to sufficiently engage with the text?

By contrast, McCleane-Fay's lighting evidenced a profound engagement with the play and with the visual aesthetic of Caravaggio's paintings. Characters appeared — materialised almost — out of the shadows of the Granary; the scene-dock and sides of the stage were in darkness or deep shadow. As with the lighting,

TONY MCCLEANE-FAY

the set too (also designed by McCleane-Fay) seemed to have been created to emulate Caravaggio's paintings — long, wine-coloured curtains hung across the space and framed various parts of the stage. Characters enveloped themselves in these lush drapes at various points, creating painterly images. The inclusion of actual paintings (by Fiona Byrne) into the performance — mounted on the gantry above the stage — was jarring, however. Caravaggio's paintings had already been emulated on the stage, so including real artworks as props seemed unnecessary. Similarly, while the choice of baroque music was particularly appropriate, the volume at which it was played and the length of each musical introduction was excessive.

This focus on the visual and on exaggerated and ornate movements and sounds suggested that the director was preoccupied with the work of the artist rather than the characters described in the text, a preoccupation that distanced the audience from the character of Caravaggio and his story. McGuinness has said about Caravaggio that, "I tried to make him a poet, and in his poetry would be his painting." Those actors who connected with the poetry of the text — Sharkey, Domhnall O'Donoghue, and Frank Prendergast — succeeded in concretising their own characters and the moments of the performance in which they appeared. These were the moments in which we began to get a sense of those who were connected with the leading character. But Caravaggio himself remained largely elusive.

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*Ann Barry recently graduated from the MA in Drama and Theatre Studies at UCC.*

**JANE EYRE** by Charlotte Brontë,  
adapted by Alan Stanford

Gate Theatre, Dublin

2 Dec 2003-31 Jan 2004; reviewed 2 Dec

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THE COMBINATION OF GOTHIC suspense, Victorian romance, and psychological character study in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is still potent after 150 years. Amidst a story of physical danger and economic hardship, "plain" Jane's is an intellect which is tested throughout the story in her quest to remain resolutely and steadfastly herself in the face of social and emotional pressures to conform. She finds herself at the heart of a mystery when all signs point to a frustrated romance, and by virtue of several nightmarish scenes in which the proverbial madwoman in the attic makes her appearance like the return of the repressed, the action evolves into a sophisticated symbolic and metaphorical exploration of the paradoxes of patrimonial imperialism. Rich is hardly an adequate word to describe it.

Yet in spite of the many interpretations and approaches brought to bear on this story over the years, Clare Boylan argues in the programme accompanying the Gate Theatre's production that "above all, it is an exercise in theatre, vividly realised." She cites a line from the novel in which Brontë herself gives the reader the cue to think of theatre: "When I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the George Inn at Millcote." Certainly there is a reference to theatre here, but is there a difference between a literary and a theatrical reading which affects how this story is told?

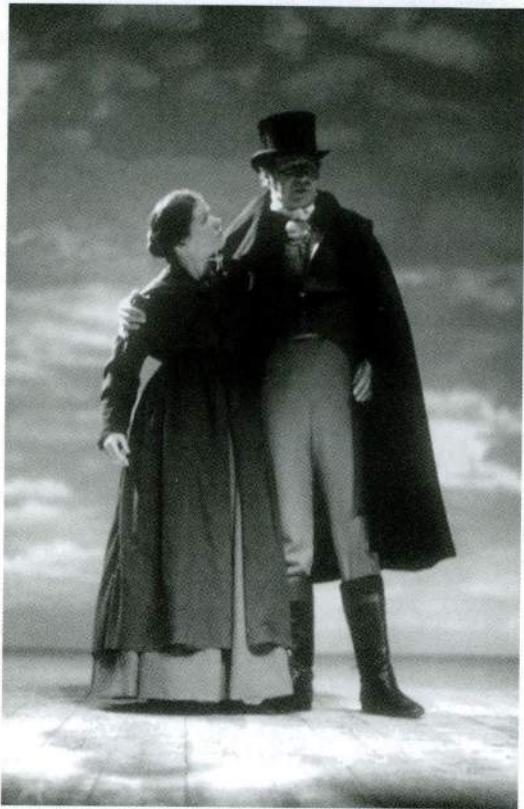
Alan Stanford frames his adaptation with Susan Fitzgerald in the role of an

## reviews

older Jane reflecting back upon her life. This is consistent with the novel, written from the point of view of Jane Rochester ten years after the events in question. As a form of theatrical narration, this has its limitations, the first of which is to shift attention back towards the pace and content of a more leisurely form of linguistic expression. Lurking at the side of the stage most of the time, patiently and clearly reciting lines from the novel to clarify the action and move the story along, the omniscient narrator is an additional spectral presence that this story really doesn't need.

Respectful as it is of its source and as neatly done as seems inevitable at the Gate, there is a clinical, "play-for-schools" feel to the production in which all of the intricacy, richness, and interpretational depth potentially offered by the process of adaptation has vanished. Scenes from the novel are enacted with due reverence for the delicacies of dialogue, and yet the audience is left with the impression not so much of a story well told to an attentive reader free to discover its surprises, as of a series of sketches performed for the entertainment and edification of the Yuletide punter.

The Gate, as ever, presents a handsome, crisp, clean, professionally mount-



**HAPPY COUPLE**  
*Bradfield and Brennan*  
in *Jane Eyre*

ed production. It is nicely performed, with Dawn Bradfield perhaps a shade too pretty to pass for plain but otherwise giving a good rendering of Jane's determination. This grows nicely from Siobhán Cullen's turn as young Jane suffering the indignities of her childhood with discernible character. The connection between Bradfield and FitzGerald is incidental though, and the latter's presence continually reminds the audience that they are not seeing the

years in between. The character evolution is absent which takes the storytelling from the live action of the remembered past to the internal monologue represented by the literary narrative. This means that FitzGerald, as the older, reflective Jane Rochester, remains nothing more than a cipher of the omniscient narrator of literary fiction, and thus is not a character at all. FitzGerald is left with the thankless task of filling spatial and narrative gaps rather than performing a role.

The set by Bruno Schwengel is another in a series of steely, stark minimalist designs which has the effect of offsetting the action from a naturalist space into the realm of self-conscious signification. It doesn't look like 19th-century England, and it isn't. The characters seem unaware of this. This sense of distance between story and storytelling is symptomatic of the problems with the production. The actors stand out from the scenery like cardboard cutouts. They are not part of the world, but come from someplace other and unrepresented: the absent presence of the novel. The production overall feels artificial and pedantic, separated from its source and its audience by the conventions of commercial theatre. The stage is just a setting, and the novel just a jump-off point for a series of re-creations, none of which coalesce into a provocative or stimulating work. How disappointing when we recall that Stanford himself played Rochester in the thrilling and stimulating adaptation by Fay Weldon mounted at this same theatre 13 years ago.

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

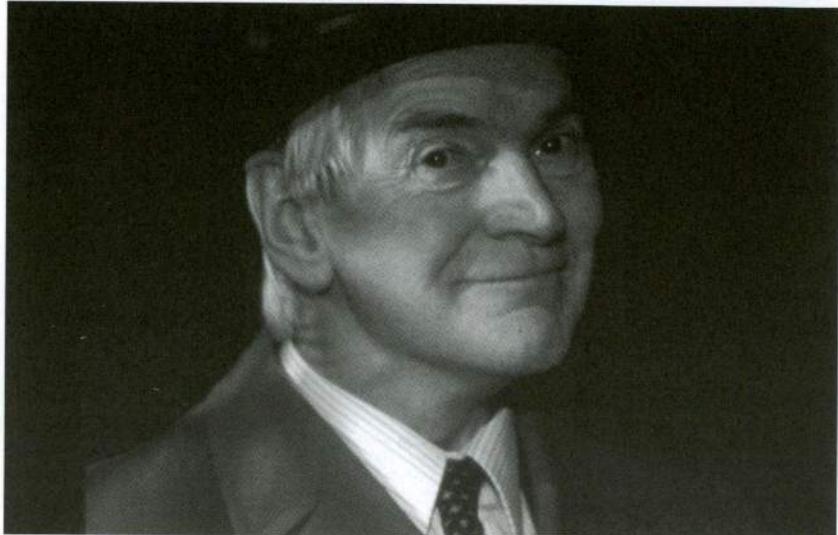
#### **THE LOVE-HUNGRY FARMER by**

**John B. Keane, adapted by Des Keogh**

On tour; reviewed 5 Dec 2003 at the Pavilion Theatre , Dun Laoghaire **BY BELINDA McKEON**

POOR, VIRGINAL JOHN BOSCO MCLEAN. Bad enough to have reached his 56th year without once progressing past a woman's hemline, but to have the fact make headline news in *The New York Times*? That's gotta hurt. Stateside exposure may not be part of the plot of Des Keogh's adaptation for the stage of John B. Keane's book *Letters of a Love-Hungry Farmer*, but it has certainly been a part of the story of the play's success here. Lauded by New York critics, it sold out its run in the Irish Repertory Theater there, and came home triumphant, drawing full houses into the Pavilion — who came along partly to see what the off-Broadway brouhaha was all about, but also, of course, eager for more of the powerful cocktail of wry comedy and wrenching realism which characterises Keane's world, and which saw several productions of his work sell out in Irish theatres last year.

On the surface, it's not difficult to see what New Yorkers might have found appealing in the mood-swinging monologue of this crusty bachelor, whom we encounter in his cottage on a winter evening, forlornly penning the history of his romantic and sexual life which amounts to a litany of failure. Apart from the strangeness of the world inhabited by McLean, with its geographical and interpersonal isolation — a strangeness that lends to it a certain, crooked charm — there's much of the seanachaí to Keogh's character, as he weaves his way through humorous anecdotes of John Bosco's hapless attempts to get a woman. And the



standard cast of any comedy set in rural Ireland are all present and correct: the jaded priest, the mischievous matchmaker, the double-crossing friend who drags John Bosco into scrape after amusing scrape on their woman-seeking pilgrimage to the Mecca of Irish farmers, the Spring Show. Keogh's delivery of these amorous adversities is immaculately deadpan, eliciting shrieks of audience hilarity as he trails his protagonist around in search of the "jiggy-jig caper," from the seaside to a hotel bedroom to the back seat of a car.

But this is the world of John B, not *BallyK*, and the comical is laced throughout with a sorry, sour tang. Though they make us laugh, McLean and his cronies are embittered, inwardly destitute, existing on the sort of bleak emotional outcrop to which Keane was so skilled at giving dramatic life. The problem with

**CRUSTY BACHELOR**  
*Des Keogh in The Love-Hungry Farmer*

Keogh's production lies perhaps in its division into two parts; the first being almost uniformly side-splitting, the second much darker, and eventually downright desolate, as John Bosco, resigning himself to a life alone, seems to contemplate suicide. As a portrait of despair, the production surprises its audience, and ultimately itself. Though Keogh is utterly at ease with his character, and gifted at bringing out both sides of John Bosco's nature, the mordant and the morbid, the balance is in favour of the amusing side of the story. Hence, when the darker shades come at the play's end, with a resigned John Bosco nursing a bottle of whisky in his kitchen and apparently accepting it as his only companion, it seems incongruous, almost inappropriate. The interval has only served to create two separate portrayals of John Bosco; a more complex

mix of light and shade throughout, or in one shorter piece, might not have been such a crowd-pleaser, but might have made for a stronger play.

Though he is defeated by the play's length, evidence of Keogh's skill manifests itself throughout, wisely directed by Charlotte Moore. Where others might have settled for easy laughs, he imbues the character of John Bosco with a depth of humanity, opening up vistas of loneliness and suffering, shining a light onto the long years of grim circumstances which have shaped this man's plight. Other aspects of the production, including the lighting design and the use of song, are equally successful, and hint that, with some shifting of the weight, this is a play that could really work.

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*Belinda McKeon writes about the arts for The Irish Times, among other publications.*

#### **THE MAKING OF ANTIGONE RYAN**

**by Martin Murphy**

TEAM Educational Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 18 Oct at

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

**BY COLIN MURPHY**

JO RYAN (ORLA NÍ DHUINN) IS A teenager in a working class suburb. She runs with a local athletics club, where her uncle is the coach, and where her brother was a leading member before he fell in with the wrong crowd. When Jo's brother gets into trouble with some local drug lords, she steals the development fund from the clubhouse for him, but is caught and despite confessing, is thrown out of the club by her uncle. In the meantime, Jo has been cast as Antigone in a school play. She finds resonance in the lines, "Brother and sisters, look at me, / Last of

a noble line./ See what I suffer and the cause,/ because I honour what is right." Meanwhile, Neil (Tony Leddy), a fellow club member and general dosser, has got his hands on a video camera from a filmmaker interested in mentoring a social documentary by and about the local kids, and sets about filming their antics at the club and in school.

Thus we have *The Making of Antigone Ryan*, complete with modish parallel narratives and diverse perspectives. Martin Murphy's script follows the literal making of a classical tragic heroine out of Jo, and the dramatic action is interspersed with Neil's raw footage, shown on a television mounted on the stage: the play documents the making of his film, and his film documents the evolving story that is the play's principal subject.

The climax of this is tragic in the functional sense: Jo is hit by a car and killed while running away from the police. This moment is a weakness in the play as tragedy — the car accident is not a common or effective tool of fate, and running across a road is not a heroic action in the face of impending death. But Jo's escape — effected while literally on stage as Antigone in the school play — incites everyone in the school hall to follow her (imagine *Dead Poets' Society*, but hurdling the desks instead of standing on them), and her subsequent death in hospital provokes a riot. Thus, she is a hero in the sense of being a catalyst for wider socio-political action.

The challenge this play sets itself, as educational theatre, is to establish both character and circumstances such that issues of socio-political import are set out and set against each other. The catharsis educational theatre aims for is the awakening of ideas and the fermenting of debate.



But as opposed to the precision of tragedy, here we get a mish-mash of issues. The play feels like a teenage discussion — it is full of energy and ideas, but lacking in structure or delineation. Murphy's direction is crisply paced, but his script struggles to articulate the ideas it is wrestling with while remaining true to the idiom of the young characters and their environment.

The use of video attempting a documentary style, too, is problematic. It does not segue with on-stage scenes and disrupts the suspension of disbelief. Acting and writing for film — particularly in the "reality" style of docu-drama — are different beasts to their stage equivalents, and attempting to follow actors from stage to screen and back again is jarring.

Nonetheless, on this Saturday matinee performance for an exclusively school-going audience of 15-17 year olds (except

**RUN JO RUN** *Ní Dhuinn in The Making of Antigone Ryan*

for the fellow in the trench-coat lurking at the back, taking notes), the whole clearly works. The story held them, they responded well to both

the staged and filmed scenes, and in the workshop which followed, it was clear that TEAM had made a genuine connection with many in the audience. The five actors, all of whom give engaging performances, afterwards energetically attempt to cull opinions and questions from the kids, and then play improvised scenes in response to their suggestions. It is a variation on Augusto Boal's "forum theatre," designed to provoke the audience not only into engagement with the play's issues and into moral reflection and debate, but also into active engagement with theatre as a tool of discourse.

The kids sitting around me came from a school in one of Dublin's more impoverished suburbs. They tell me they find

KEVIN McFEELY

the characters credible and the story immediate. They understand the frustration that lurks close beneath the surface of Jo's furious will to race and win, and beneath Neil's ostensibly lackadaisical, jokey persona. They recognise the suburb without facilities and the kids' dismissiveness of their environment. They will leave, it seems to me, having been entertained and, to varying degrees, provoked.

#### **OILEÁN BY Siamsa Tíre**

On tour, reviewed 11 Nov 2003 at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght **BY MEGAN KENNEDY**

THE LATEST PRODUCTION FROM SIAMSA Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, provides light entertainment for the family; it comes across as a prolonged night of amateur pantomime, peppered with singing, traditional dancing, and a few touches of contemporary theatre. *Oileán* celebrates the history and culture of Blasket Islands, which is, as is well known, a lost culture: in 1954, the Irish government displaced the Blasket Islanders from their homes and moved them onto the mainland. The Blaskets were already renowned at the time for their history and folklore, and since then have become the subject of a great deal of nostalgia. Siamsa Tíre is located close to the islands, in Tralee, and there is clearly a sense of connection between the company and the island's folk traditions. *Oileán* celebrates the Blaskets by showcasing slices of historical islander life — seemingly hoping for life on the island to become alive and kicking for Irish audiences today.

Directed by the company's artistic director Oliver Hurley, *Oileán*'s cast of 24, three of whom are professional members of the company, attempt to convey their

enthusiasm for the place through disconnected scenes of fishing life, of courting between young lovers, and of schoolchildren at their simple wooden desks. In the course of the production, the islanders bid farewell to a hopeful island girl emigrating, and welcome incoming visitors; live traditional musicians providing some fluidity between the scenes. The last scene shows a newcomer arriving on the island and establishing herself as a contemporary inhabitant — perhaps Siamsa Tíre's optimistic suggestion of the future of the Blaskets.

Choreographer Cindy Cummings, in collaboration with the company, has created flurrying, frenzied dances: the choreography stems from traditional dance-steps but with a distinctly modern approach. The performers are mostly untrained dancers, yet produce movement pleasing to watch, especially when the fishermen whoop and dance together, and in the opening "organised chaos" sequence, which is then repeated at the end of the production.

The shards of blue and green lighting, designed by Jimmy McDonnell to illuminate the shoddy set, convey tranquility and resoluteness among the islanders' festivities. Leonore McDonagh's costumes are one of *Oileán*'s strong points, meticulously and aptly designed to illustrate the production's celebratory mood. The men and boys are clad in earthy tunics that resemble fishing net material, and there is abundant colour in the other intricately weaved and beautifully dyed traditional costumes.

Yet the production does not contain a narrative of any sort, only short isolated snippets of island life with attempts at comedy attached. This does not allow the audience any chance for identifica-



tion. No affinity is created between the spectator and the characters; this is partly due to the production's dependence on movement rather than dialogue, but is also because the cast is mostly amateur. The younger members, in particular, seem to stray from their characters on stage, lacking presence and theatrical awareness. The performers seem to genuinely enjoy their time on stage, yet they do not exhibit an understanding of the fundamental purpose of the production, which detracts from their performances.

This isn't to say that *Oileán* does not entertain its audience: on the night I attended, spectators tittered and tapped their feet at the right moments, and the auditorium was mostly full. As with a pantomime, the audience seemed to overlook production weaknesses: they came along for a good night of singing

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**LOST ISLAND** *The Siamsa Tíre company in Oileán*

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and dancing, and found the enjoyable experience they had sought. Yet due to several significant

weaknesses — a lack of strong direction and a feeling of under-rehearsal — the production failed to achieve a consistent sense of professionalism.

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*Megan Kennedy is a Dublin-based freelance writer and contemporary dancer.*

**OLGA** by Laura Ruohonen,  
in a version by Linda McLean

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

30 Oct-29 Nov 2003; reviewed 17 Nov  
BY HEATHER JOHNSON

SHARP ANGLES OF PAINTED WHITE wood make up the minimalist setting for the Rough Magic production of *Olga* by Finnish playwright Laura Ruohonen.

Bláithín Sheerin's set evokes a sense of Nordic simplicity and lends the production a distinctive, moody quality. This is further achieved by the excellent use of sound and music to enhance transitional moments, while the slow and sustained notes suggest the play's contemplative concerns. The central conflict is between Olga, an old woman who muses on her own past and that of her country, and a young male intruder, Rundis, whose embittered impressions of the older generation challenge any rose-tinted versions of the past. The play attempts a reconciliation of these views in the love which develops between the two characters. However, beyond the production's impressive technical achievements, this play presents a puzzling combination of Finnish sensibility, Scots dialect, and a narrative which feels like *Harold and Maude* meets the *Cherry Orchard*.

There can be little doubt that Rosaleen Linehan successfully conveys the unique personality drawn in Ruohonen's ageing title character. Linehan's performance is impressive; her sense of presence and lightness of delivery sustain a character as totemic as Olga. Fergal McElherron as Rundis presented a character of inconsistencies: the angry young man who is violent, but immediately placid while fishing; ruthless in burglary but very quickly sensitive to his older victim. The pair debate issues of generation and gender ("the design ae the male is a total balls up," declares Rundis). Ultimately there is a lack of chemistry between the two actors, so that when the declaration of love concludes the play one is unconvinced of its purported intensity. Perhaps each character needs the other through a shared lack, but the intended romantic notion that they would marry each other

were there no generation gap seems stretched. In this version of the play by Linda McLean, Olga sings about unrequited love, while the same song in the original Finnish script begins, "who is that ghost?" The latter strikes a note of dissonance between a woman's external ageing and her sense of self grounded in her youth, a potentially affective theme though one not fully amplified here.

Overlapping the personal romance are romanticised memories of the past, and here echoes of Chekhov are unmistakable. In particular, Olga's loss of her childhood home as a symbol for her loss of status and identity as an older woman ("My past is gone, like last year's snow") is reminiscent of the nostalgia in *The Cherry Orchard*. Olga's view that "only beauty makes you truly happy" characterises the past as a beautiful ideal. Yet in contrast to the Chekhovian sensibility embedded in Brian Friel's *Afterplay*, with its exploration of dreams, memory, and life experiences, McLean's version of the Finnish play fails to be involving, moving, or universal in its reach. The dialogue between two principal characters is often slack, and the pace feels sluggish rather than languorous, turning what are potential insights or poetic moments into banalities. The production is lifted nevertheless by a number of whimsical touches, such as Olga chopping her shoes with an axe, and the shower of green parrot feathers in a birdwatching scene. Notably, director Lynne Parker has chosen to omit other fanciful elements of McLean's script that serve to underscore the play's own fictionality. Excluded, for instance, is the "Jam Cantata" by the "Finnish Antique Dealers' Association's Male Quartet in Uniform," a comic interlude which briefly takes the audience out



of the play, and invites audience members to consider the idea of common nationality.

McLean's version of *Olga* translates much of the play into Scots dialect, giving it a local flavour for its previous production at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre. Yet, not wholly in or about Finland, not wholly in or about Scotland (the modern white stage jars with allusions to the Scottish tenement and close), and not potent enough to be universal in scope, the play seems to leave the audience in no-man's-land, and distracted by attempts to locate the play geographically, generically, and even philosophically.

A curious experience concluded this particular night of theatre. Following the performance, Linehan paid tribute to fellow actor Fedelma Cullen, who had died in the preceding days. The brief words she spoke were so full of emotion and evinced such a strong reaction in the audi-

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**ODD COUPLE** Linehan  
and McElherron in *Olga*

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ence that one was unable to ignore the contrast in effect between the eloquent and heartfelt language of her speech and that of the play which had gone before, a play that remains strangely cold and remote.

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*Heather Johnson is a literary critic and tutor in literature at DCU.*

**ONCE UPON A BARSTOOL** by Felix Nobis

Grendel Productions (in association with the Cork Fringe Festival)  
Granary Theatre, Cork  
12-24 Jan 2004; reviewed 21 Jan

BY ANN BARRY

ONCE UPON A BARSTOOL WAS THE highlight of this year's Cork Fringe Festival. Neither director Thomas Conway nor writer/performer Felix Nobis is a stranger to the stage in Cork, or elsewhere for that matter. The success of their

PAT REDMOND

previous collaboration on *Beowulf* paved the way for high audience expectations — and attendance: the theatre was packed to the seams the night I attended, with a waiting list of over 20 people. Those of us who managed to acquire a ticket were not disappointed.

Characterised by simplicity, the play was, as its title implies, a story told in a pub. The space, dimly and softly lit, simulated a pub environment, as did the jazz music playing as the audience entered. The lighting, designed by Kath Geraghty, highlighted another key element of the performance, the audience. The first few rows of spectators were visible throughout much of the performance: from the very beginning we were made aware of our presence within the story, of our roles as listeners, not just onlookers. The action began with one spotlight highlighting a barstool and another a sheet of blue paper, folded on the floor. This was later revealed to be a letter and would provide much of the story's impetus and subject matter.

The story itself was about a young man who had travelled from Australia to spend time and perhaps make a new life for himself in Ireland — Cork city, to be precise. But as the play unfolds it turns out to be as much about the young man's ancestors back in Australia, both living and dead, as about the central character himself. He narrates the story, becoming different characters just as the letter comes to represent many letters in those characters' interweaving lives. The story is at once circular and linear. The connections and interconnections made by the narrator between characters and events, and the movements backwards and forwards between them, are balanced by a very definite sense of

propulsion. The audience had to work hard to keep pace with the story, but this was clearly by design: "keeping up" kept us engaged.

And what an engaging story it was! Filled with humour and adventure, it entertained us from beginning to end. We took childish satisfaction in the numerous references to pubs and landmarks in Cork. By drawing attention to aspects of our daily experiences, we were made to feel our own presence in the story. Thus our engagement became more than empathy: we were encouraged to relate our own experiences to the characters described.

The success of this story lay not only in the skill with which it was written, but in the way in which it was performed. Though seemingly nervous at first, Nobis soon eased into his role of storyteller, moving fluidly from one character to another. Unaided by any sound or music, with no props (save the letter), and helped only by subtle lighting changes, he created each character individually through mime, physical embodiment, and language, and did so without undermining or confusing his role as controlling narrator.

The direction of this piece was equally superb. The precision which characterised Conway's previous productions was in evidence here. Highlighting details like the barstool and the letter, he let the narrator do almost all the work, never allowing the audience forget their roles as engaged listeners.

*Once Upon a Barstool* succeeded in fulfilling exactly what it set out to do — to tell a story, nothing more, nothing less. It was entertaining, touching and more engaging than anything that I have seen in a long while.

## reviews

### PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!

by Brian Friel

The Association of Regional Theatres (N.I)  
On tour; reviewed 16 Feb 2004 at the  
Gaiety Theatre Dublin BY LOUIS LENTIN

SAD TO REPORT, I FOUND THIS PRODUCTION of Brian Friel's wonderful, innovative play boring. Why? I have to lay the blame at the approach adopted by first-time director Adrian Dunbar, who throughout refused to allow the play to breathe, to speak for itself, to permit his cast time and pause.

Friel set this, his first stage play, in the fictitious small town of Ballybeg, a setting he has revisited more than once. All is there in Friel's portrayal of a time when many made the choice to leave or go under. Gar has to choose between the daily grind of working for his father for a pittance, or Philadelphia with his bundle on his shoulder. Like many Gar is a scared dreamer... knowing not why he opts to leave, begging to be asked to stay.

Recognition of the inability of those we meet to articulate, communicate, or say anything meaningful is absolutely vital. Replete with inherent silences, cast and audience must be allowed time to receive, to roam with thought and emotion. It is not what is said that holds the key, but what cannot be said. Above all we must appreciate the repressive, stultifying nature of the relationship between Gar and his father — S.B. O'Donnell to you, County Councillor, stalwart of the small community, general shopkeeper... everything from salted fish to fencing posts — "Screwballs" to Gar.

Friel's innovation that provides the play with its drive is to present Gar as two characters — both a Public, circumspect Gar and the daringly Private Gar,

"the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the alter ego, the secret thoughts" providing "a compelling expression of Public Gar's potential." Two sides of the same coin. Occasionally they speak to each other, but Public Gar, as the author carefully states in his stage directions, "never sees him, never looks at him. One cannot look at one's alter ego." A vital essential this production fails to observe.

Constructed around Gar's last evening in Ballybeg, the play moves between his memories and his present. His hoped-for marriage to lovely Kate Doogan, the local Senator's daughter — a dream that would have allowed him to stay, if only he had the nerve to confront her smug father, and be encouraged by Kate's desire, her urging — "Remember, it's up to you, up to you entirely." Isn't everything?

The visit of his dead mother's sister, Irish-American Aunt Lizzy and her husband Uncle Con, all the way from Philadelphia. Childless, sozzled Aunt Lizzie, come to offer him a home, their home, "Maire's boy, we'll offer him everything we have." The die is cast, and so Gar's final night arrives, cardboard suitcase packed, his final chance to get old Screwballs to talk, to remember... a day, one day, Screwballs must have been happy. But no, Screwballs can't or won't remember. Any capacity to recall has been cheated by life, blunted perhaps by his young wife's death within weeks of Gar's birth. An anguish father and son share, both conceal.

Friel's masterpiece transforms the confusion and complicated experiences of his chosen lives into a tapestry of shape, meaning, and relevance not only



for the Ireland of 1964, but for all time. When allowed to, it tugs at the heart. When allowed, we

laugh at its absurdities and cry at the hopeless anguish of it all, as it bears us along in and out of its crests and troughs. But for it to work (as indeed for any play) the director must be able to penetrate its essence, respect the dominant key and changes in tempo, and recognise what underlies relationships.

Dunbar's production opened at an incredible pace, with superfluous images and an energy which never varied. Scene followed scene at the same relentless pace, with inherent differences ignored. Not for nothing is the only piece of music that Gar listens to on his record player in E minor. Above all there was little performed differentiation and lack of tension between the two Gars, so much so that one could easily have been

**DREAM GIRL** *Conroy and Hutton in Philadelphia...*

mistaken for the other. The blend was too great.

Performances had the potential to be effective: Eileen Pollock's as the indomitable housekeeper Madge, was. Ruaidhrí Conroy's Public Gar came close and could have come closer; the same applies to Marty Rea as his private persona. Pauline Hutton was touchingly believable as Kate. I wish I could say the same of Stella McCusker's Lizzy, whose scene never took off. The rest of the large cast just missed the boat, or were pushed into the wrong one — particularly, and sadly, Walter McMonagle's portrayal of S.B. O'Donnell conveyed little of the man trapped by the isolation of the emotionally taciturn. Monica Frawley's set dominated unnecessarily, and for once Paul Keegan's lighting appeared unsympathetically harsh and unfocused. What a pity!

# reviews

## THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

by J.M. Synge

Druid Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 26 Feb 2004 at the Gaiety  
Theatre, Dublin BY PETER CRAWLEY

WHAT A RIOT! AS FAMOUS FOR THE vitriol unleashed on its opening night as for the arc of its drama, John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* may have long since lost its power to shock. The first production of Druid's long-mooted Synge cycle, however, wonders whether or not we can even take the play seriously. Questioning the Irish character, its morals and — most especially — its church could cause nationalist tempers to boil over in the Abbey in 1907, but the cocky cynicism of today finds such national satire practically quaint.

Even the Synge Song — defended by its author as scrupulously authentic speech — now seems like a put-on, a tongue-in-cheek tangle of peasant syntax since lampooned by the clumpy pastiche of Martin McDonagh. Garry Hynes's production has decided that if it cannot provoke a riot, its ferocious and often exhilarating comic energy will instead turn it into one.

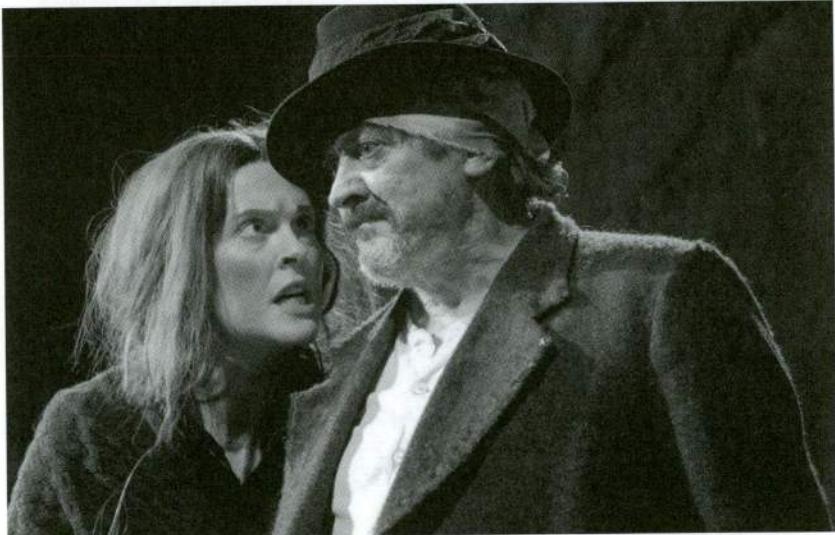
*The Playboy* was always conceived of as a comedy, but perhaps never quite in this way. Although Ann-Marie Duff as Pegeen Mike dissipates the murk of Francis O'Connor's unsettling, submerged design with an incandescent temper, the first truly illuminating appearance of the production comes via the shebeen's grotesque regulars. The subnormal couple of Chris O'Dowd's staggeringly tall, fright-wigged Jimmy Farrell and David Pearse's diminutive Philly Cullen serve as shriekingly weird

sight gags, which, like Eamon Morrissey's grisly caricature of Michael James, might have appeared offensive in the late 19th century. But as Cillian Murphy's Christy Mahon enters this world, so timid that the door seems to overpower him, it is clear that given suitable distance, we will tolerate parody as comfortably as they do patricide.

This high comedy seems at once to be the production's triumph and also its undoing. With Christy's father-slaying confessions and Pegeen's admiration out of the way, we are treated to the production's most astonishing performance. When Aisling O'Sullivan's Widow Quin, coarse-mannered and sharp-tongued, observes the exotic murderer "sitting so simple with your cup and cake," she screeches the line with such guttural affection, it resembles a banshee attempting sarcasm. O'Sullivan retains every drop of Quin's self-sufficient wiliness, but such condescension seems to inhabit every nook and cranny of the stage.

The impossibly high ceiling of O'Connor's skyscraping shebeen may seem appropriate to an impossibly tall tale, yet it too seems faintly dismissive, belittling its inhabitants and their swelling self-importance. As Christy's stature grows, and his father's fatal wound deepens from "the knob of his gullet," to "his breeches belt," Murphy's increasingly spry performance suggests he is actually reaching for the roof; jumping onto a chair, leaping from it to the bar's enormous table and practically pirouetting onto a shelf below the window.

Even more dextrous though is the contemporary twist that Hynes finds in Christy's growing celebrity, neatly exploiting the opportunity presented in her leading man, a gifted stage actor who



conveniently happens to be a bona fide film star. When Christy's awakening narcissus gazes into a hand mirror, Murphy twists and contorts for it, as though he is posing for a particularly demanding *Vogue* photographer. When the wide-eyed, giggling village girls ask if he is the man who killed his father, they squat and screech like hysterical teenagers meeting a boyband member in the flesh. Bestowing a round of applause upon him for his performance, these girls anticipate the celebrity culture to come: Hynes and Murphy have gamely conspired to make a *Playboy* for the Westlife world.

Well before the last act, however, parody seems to have been pushed beyond its limits. When O'Sullivan leaves the stage, howling misdirections after the resurrected Old Mahon for what seems like an eternity as her voice grows faint

**DEAD AGAIN?**  
*O'Sullivan and  
O'Sullivan in Playboy*

with distance, it may indeed be the most tearfully funny moment of this or any production. But such high spirits allow that famous gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed to widen like a ravine.

When reality finally encroaches, turning Christy's once captive audience into his lynch mob, even Murphy's desperate confrontation is entertainingly acrobatic. Waving chairs against his captors and engaging in a tug of war, David Bolger's choreography lends him the affected motions of a circus routine. Against it, the atmospherics of Davy Cunningham's lighting, bathing the climax with a dance of flames, seem as alien and unfathomable as the hollers of disapproval that echo from all those years ago. Pegeen's last, wild lament is sounded, raising nothing from the audience but a titter. That much, at least, is fairly shocking.

## SKYLIGHT by David Hare

Landmark Productions

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

20 Jan - 7 Feb 2004; reviewed on 20 Jan

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

FOR THEIR INAUGURAL PRODUCTION in Ireland, Landmark Productions have brought together a team of consummate professionals to present an intelligent, well-crafted play. David Hare's *Skylight* focuses on an evening encounter between Kyra, an inner-city school teacher, and her former lover, Tom, a restauranteur whose wealth has been accumulated during the Thatcher years. The humdrum pace of Kyra's life is neatly established as we see her unpacking tinned tomatoes and running her bath after work. An unexpected visit by Tom's son Edward (nicely played by Michael Fitzgerald, complete with the nervous fidgeting of a teenager), reveals Kyra's potential vulnerability relative to the man from her past, as the son seeks her help for his recently widowed father. When, shortly afterwards, Tom comes crashing into her modest London flat and back into her life, we are fully attuned to the seismic effect of his appearance.

Cathy Belton (Kyra) and Owen Roe (Tom) immediately establish the promised intensity of their meeting. Sustaining this pitch places substantial demands on the two principal actors, and it was commendable that on a

preview night their delivery faltered so infrequently. The lack of physical contact between Kyra and Tom for the first hour of the evening increases the dramatic tension and emphasises the erotic undercurrents of their verbal contests and reminiscences. They proceed to dissect each other: their motives, value systems, views of Britain, and also the other's perceptions of their six-year affair. This dissection proves a source of both exposure and pleasure; compelling as it is to learn about oneself even when uncomfortable truths are told.

Deftly directed by Michael Caven, the production's attention to detail is impressive in many areas. Wardrobe and hair choices add to the characterisation while placing the play in

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**PAST LOVE** *Owen Roe and Cathy Belton in Skylight*



TOM LAWLER

the mid-90s: sporting big shoulder pads and a flowing mane of hair, Tom appears doubly large in Kyra's intimate flat. Joe Vanek's meticulous set design pushes into the far reaches of the stage; Kyra disappears into the bathroom or outside on the stairs. Whenever the stage is empty of actors we are left with the flat's interior, not impatient for further action, but contemplating the scene of everyday life as a setting for drama. The stage seems to have an active rather than passive role in the production. In quiet moments, it is alive with the muted humming of the fridge, while the boiling kettle and the onions frying on the stove contribute to the energy of the dialogue between the couple as Kyra prepares a meal. Also subtle is Rupert Murray's lighting, in particular the off-stage illumination and the accents during the characters' late-night conversation, such as the fridge's interior light that brightens Kyra's face when she opens its door. Caven's direction of the actors' movements is so telling that the simplest gesture, such as the lifting of a cheese-grater, can form a wordless part of Tom and Kyra's exchange.

*Skylight* is a consummate work of playwriting, seamlessly weaving its ideas into the personal material of the characters so that one suddenly finds oneself listening to an erudite clash of value systems. Never heavy-handed, the script ranges across themes of free will and determinism, class, loyalty, altruism, love, pretence, integrity, and the benefits of fine dining.

Tom's dismissal of "spirituality" as a meaningless '90s buzz word is comparable to the view of Will Self, another of Britain's acid social commentators, who is similarly suspicious of the unthinking evocation of the word "energy" by New-Agers. Hare's impatience with such wool-

ly liberalism is matched by his condemnation of Thatcherite greed and materialism. Yet neither liberal nor conservative stance is fully endorsed or dismissed by the playwright, and each advocate is sympathetically drawn as an individual. Hare, it seems, is urging us to be mindful — of our choices, of our motivations, of language, of those around us, of the state of our country (Britain or not).

The central image of a skylight is ultimately associated with beauty (of snow, of greenery glimpsed by a dying woman) and with hope. High above the realistic flat interior, an oversized framing skylight aptly hangs the title's metaphor over the unfolding drama. It is a pity that the programme notes indicate an unexpected turn at the end, setting up expectations of a huge plot shift rather than the simple delight and hope of the ending which balances the play's form. Hare's *Skylight* is a passionate, intelligent, and thought-provoking play. Irish theatre will be the richer if other companies here make plans in the near future to stage the work of this important and challenging English playwright.

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*This review originally appeared in itm's online newsletter.*

**SWEPT by David Bolger**

CoisCéim Dance Theatre  
and the Peacock Theatre, Dublin  
11-29 Nov 2003; reviewed 13 Nov

BY CHRISTINE MADDEN

BEFORE THIS PIECE, THE LAST MAJOR composition by David Bolger produced in this country was "A Dash of Colour," the opening ceremonies of the Special Olympics last year, which involved athletes, dancers, and some 30,000 spectators.

tors in Croke Park. Unless he had decided to create a piece for himself and a coat hanger in a closet, *Swept* couldn't be more different.

Bolger stages the production in the modest but awkward setting of the Peacock Theatre bar and foyer. His intention — to choreograph a romantic adventure — is both inhibited and inspired by this difficult, boxy, and fairly bland area. In this, it follows the current Irish vogue for site-specific work — the audience follows Bolger and his performance partner Diane O'Keeffe about the space as they go through their (e)motions. They could be one of us, except we might permanently damage our spine, muscular or nervous systems getting into or out of any of the slow dynamic contortions or hectic movement of the piece.

In six distinct sections, *Swept* charts one of Bolger's frequent themes: the courtship ritual. Beginning behind the bar, O'Keeffe displays her disgust with her humdrum working life in percussive movement to the beat of the bar music as Bolger enters and is bowled over at the sight of her. O'Keeffe's cat-and-mouse repulsion of his hesitant advances take place on, over and around the bar — used in a choreographic pun also as a ballet barre, as they stretch, balance and propel themselves across it.

Bolger's use of everyday objects in this piece is tremendously enjoyable; he pro-



**UP THE WALLS**  
*Bolger and  
O'Keeffe in Swept*

jects the sense that he is encountering these objects for the first time. A section with brooms — the genesis of the title — takes a party trick to

complex conclusions as you wonder which element — a limb or a broomstick — is going to break first. His playful manoeuvring with a bowler hat — perhaps trite, but it also brings to mind the romantic, dancing film hero Fred Astaire — nevertheless contains the wonder of holding an object in one's hand for the first time.

While Bolger and O'Keeffe do a bit of Fred and Ginger themselves, the sexual tension and physicality are a bit more upfront than that of the classic film couple. They wind around each other, more flex-

HUGO GLENDENNING

ible but more complex than broomsticks, O'Keeffe even using Bolger as a chair. A subsequent section, with the dancers being thrown out of the doors to the theatre space — where music was blaring, indicating a visit to a club — was amusing but choreographically unexciting.

An acrobatic high point — literally — changed the mood. Bolger and O'Keeffe wedged themselves up and down the walls of a narrow corridor to an otherworldly soundscape and slowly flickering lighting. Their bodily strength made them look weightless and as if they were moonwalking, as they edged their bodies upside down and back up again, with Bolger once even descending upside-down. Light became a more tangible element of the choreography, as O'Keeffe, near the ceiling, handed down individual lights and Bolger collected them on the ground. The dreamlike atmosphere and "landscape" of this element turned it into an imaginary and ethereal rather than corporeal experience; the relationship of Bolger and O'Keeffe deepening as they pulled down the stars from the sky.

This continued into the conclusion, as Bolger arranged the lights on a length of red carpet, and O'Keeffe played a mournful melody on the cello. Bolger rolled up the carpet and pulled O'Keeffe with the lights as she continued to play; then the cello was laid aside like a sleeping woman as they engaged in their most intimate duet yet. After having pushed, prodded and moulded themselves against the indifferent physical reality of broomsticks, chairs and walls, they discover the right fit — the yielding bodies of each other. Their arms entwined as interlocked rings, they wound them up and down and around each other's body in a sensual and sensitive expression of

foreplay — both physical and emotional. Bolger can't leave it at this, though, and ended the piece with a teasing play on words.

Bolger's best work takes place within the spell of sexual tension, an area well-suited to his cheeky sense of humour, sensitivity, and spirit of fun. He also took a sterile space and realised some of the countless possibilities with which an artistic imagination could fill it — it would certainly be exciting to see more performance art within this space.

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*Christine Madden writes about dance for The Irish Times, among other publications.*

#### **TRACES**

**by Pushing Tin Theatre Company**

Project Cube, Dublin

3-15 Nov 2003; reviewed 14 Nov

**BY MEGAN KENNEDY**

TRACES IS A DEVISED PIECE PERFORMED by Serena Brabazon, Kate Perry, and Rachel Rath, and directed by Perry, which considers the possibility of individuality within our strictly controlled society. Strong physicality and visions from the characters' vivid dreams illustrate the struggle of coming to terms with one's identity. Are we all prone to identity crises during our lifetimes? Why do we incessantly question our role in society? There is much to be praised in this young, bold, and inspiring piece.

Set in the intimate black box of Project Cube, the performance space is bordered by three chairs, from which each woman narrates a confused array of thoughts, as she is torn between what she prefers and what others recommend. It is the jumbled jargon of a familiar identity crisis. The women talk of travelling through a busy



city, walking amongst a human herd whose members are seemingly unaware of their status as obedient cogs in society's machinery. What do we do, the production asks, with the desire to be more than just part of this matrix?

These are age-old queries posed theatrically, in a highly stylised manner, by somewhat inexperienced yet talented performers. Much of the time, the performers' bodies appeared to react violently to their words, thus creating a clipped, jerky internal movement vocabulary, disconnected from the play's narrative force. Perry's presence is particularly striking; her robotic physicality is quietly hypnotic.

There is a feeling of entrapment: the characters ceaselessly seem to be attempting to extricate themselves from their situation. Each sits on her chair, in its own marked space, labouriously pondering her identity, her eyes often flash-

**CAPTURED** *The company in Traces*

ing with panic. The chairs are of different heights: Rath's is a massive throne, Perry's chair is a tiny garden stool, and Brabazon sits on an ordinary table chair. Each character is contained in her individual space; in her own separate world of status, belief, anxiety, and frustration.

Dried leaves are scattered on stage, perhaps representing the straying outsider who opposes societal norms. Similarly, the characters' inability to find happiness despite feeling that they *should* be happy becomes increasingly confused by the end of the piece; their minds become scattered, like the leaves. They begin to question whether their previous dreams of happiness ever existed. The lighting, delicately designed by Joseph Collins, falls with precision on the performers, distinctly marking each solo section within the one-hour production.

*Traces* does not follow a scripted storytelling path; to a certain extent this is refreshing, yet the piece is constricted by the lack of plotline. The three characters are evidently very separate from each other, but it is never explained why they remain this way, and what relationship they have to each other. Their disconnection creates an alienating effect, and it is not clear whether this is intentional. As a result, *Traces* floats by as a series of moments rather than a lucid theatrical narrative.

Devising theatre is never easy, and Pushing Tin should be commended for undertaking the challenge. The dialogue feels natural and organic to the characters, and yet there is no obvious through-line to the piece; the overall impression is of fragmentation, alienation, and ambiguity. *Traces* offers fluttering insights into the possibilities for individualism, but we are left none the wiser, contemplating whether loss of identity is inevitable in all cases and not solely in this production.

#### **THE WEIR by Conor McPherson**

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

31 Jan-20 Feb 2004;

reviewed 3 Feb 2004 BY MARK PHELAN

WITH CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE WEIR* AT the Lyric Theatre, it is apposite to recall Belfast playwright Stewart Parker's assertion that "plays and ghosts have a lot in common." Set in a remote, rural pub in Leitrim where a wintry evening's storytelling of old folk and fairy tales gives way to more personal, confessional narratives of grief and loss, *The Weir* is wreathed with ghostly presences, whether they be of the "little people," the dead, or the haunting memories of the living.

McPherson's work has gained extraor-

dinary commercial success and critical acclaim; however, some critics qualify their praise with rueful *bon mots* that his reliance on monologic forms and storytelling signals a return to a conservative theatrical practice that privileges language over action, plot over performance, narrative over form. Such critics are keen to emphasise the liveness rather than the literariness of theatre, and dismiss the monologue as an inherently anti-theatrical device, devoid of action or conflict through its exclusive focus on language and storytelling. Others have even darkly adduced that McPherson attempts to reduce the physical, kinetic, scenographic, and corporeal processes of theatre so that it can be transformed into a purely literary medium. Such criticisms ignore the single most important element of the live theatre event: the audience. The current production of *The Weir* at the Lyric reaffirms that storytelling, in a place which blurs public and private space, creates an intense aesthetic contract between actors and audience and a form of testimonial theatre that is cathartic, effective, and highly theatrical.

*The Weir's* Beckettian sense of stasis means that, as Jack later affirms, "you have to relish the details." One memorable detail from the opening scene of the original Royal Court production occurred as the barman, Brendan, came onstage with an armful of turf to stack the small brazier burning upstage, opening it to unfurl a plume of peat smoke that rolled over the stalls, transporting the audience from the darkened auditorium into the intimacy of the pub — a pure, magical, theatrical moment. Such transportation, however, is unnecessary given the intimate space of the Lyric stage, which easily engenders a sense of cosi-

ness, on which Fiona Watt's snug set design capitalises.

Director Fiona Buffini orchestrates things with a secure, subtle touch, fully aware of the play as a wonderful vehicle for actors to demonstrate their craft; she allows them room to do so. The play's conversational rhythms require a complex oral choreography that demands the cast be at ease with each other. Initially, the banter between Jack (Lalor Roddy), Brendan (James Doran), and Jim (Miche Doherty) doesn't quite have the casual, colloquial ease of locals long comfortable in one another's company. This improved as the trio developed a sarcastic solidarity against self-aggrandising Finbar (David Heap), who enters and flaunts his wealth while flirting with Valerie (Paula McFetridge), a new arrival in the area whom he has brought to the pub.

Heap's performance was perfectly pitched: gauche but not grotesque, his confident peacocking around Valerie proved to be rather poignantly impotent when he left without her. Roddy conveyed Jack's cantankerous, cussed nature, but didn't quite convince in the final monologue which expresses the etiolated loneliness of his existence: living in a dilapidated garage, under a tin roof, on a bypassed road, "spinning little jobs out all day." Perhaps this was because he was playing a role for which he was 20 years too young; certainly his physical sprightliness further belied the fictional age of his character. Doherty's nicely understated performance of the shy Jim also suffered from the same casting problem; even a bedraggled beard couldn't disguise his boyish features.

As the only character who doesn't tell a ghost story or make a private confession, the barman Brendan functions not

as a fabler but as a listener. His patient, diffident nature and non-judgemental, sympathetic sincerity mean he almost acts as a psychotherapist for the others' tales; but, as McPherson has alluded to in interviews, it is to Brendan's plight — his "poetics of inarticulacy" — that audiences are invariably drawn. This makes Brendan a difficult role to play; serving drinks, supporting the others, and listening to their stories. Doran does not quite rise to the challenge; his functional performance of these subsidiary roles alone gives us little sense of his character's inner life. Valerie, who is seeking sanctuary in the sticks following the death of her daughter and the consequent failure of her marriage, is another difficult role, for she must move from being a passive listener of the men's stories to delivering the final, cathartic confession that releases the purgative power of the play. While McFetridge tapped into some of the emotional energy of Valerie's traumatic narrative, the fact that the ensemble acting hadn't cumulatively charged the play on its opening night meant that her story, and the play itself, didn't fully detonate amongst the audience. Despite this overall lack of cohesion, however, this is a promising production that bodes well for the Lyric's new season.

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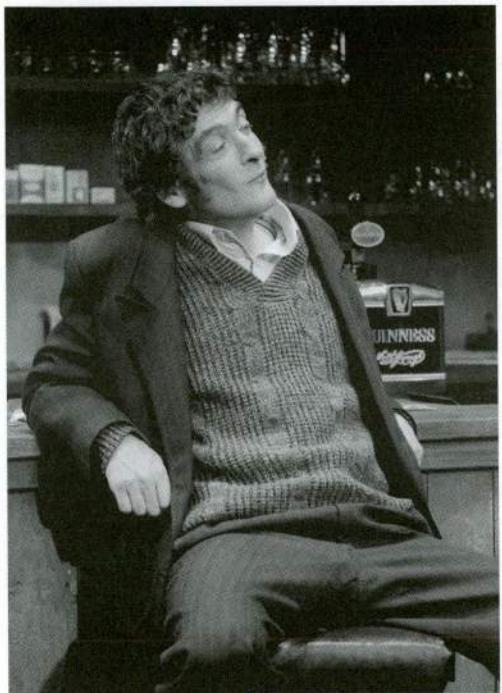
**THE WOLF OF WINTER by Paula Meehan**

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

10 Dec 2003 – 17 Jan 2004; reviewed 20 Dec

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

PAULA MEEHAN'S PLAY OFFERS A RETURN to the dark and disturbing world of the traditional fairytale, yet in an inventive and



original manner. *The Wolf of Winter* creates a welcome break from many contemporary fairytale narratives aimed at children, which have a tendency to exclude the subversive strands of the plot and leave the child with a sense that "they all live happily ever after." Meehan's writing is not superficial, and allows the play to be enjoyed on several levels, as both child and adult spectators are drawn into the story world.

Indeed, issues of storytelling are at the core of this production. Before the play even begins, the audience are immediately placed within the realm of the story-

**ACTIVE LISTENING**  
*Lalor Roddy as Jack in The Weir*

book through Carol Betera's wonderful set design. Her work echoes the style of many children's picture books in its construction of perspective from a child's viewpoint (where everything seems huge), most notably in an oversized chest of drawers and the way that shadows are cast against the walls. The play opens with five actors onstage, each trying to remember the story of a girl called Jodie's adventures with a wolf who arrived one winter. They eventually begin narrating and dramatising events, each actor sometimes playing narrator, sometimes a character from the story. They act out the tale of Jodie's family, who are on the brink of starvation until a stranger arrives in the village. He saves the inhabitants, takes Jodie back to his home in the forest, and then transforms into his real guise — as the wolf of the title.

The play explores several major themes relevant to the life of the child, particularly the transitional nature of the period of adolescence. As Jodie journeys into the magical world of the forest (which possibly represents sexual awakening), she begins to forget about her family and her past. In continuing her travels, she ventures into the adult world of sexual activity (represented by the pricking of her finger with a needle) and desires to return home. However, the village is no longer as she remembered it, and Jodie realises that her true place is with the wolf, whom

## reviews

she must save and protect. At first we see Jodie as a commodity; the stranger bargains her for riches with her father. However, Meehan breaks this conservative representation of the female-as-property that features in many fairytales by making the character of Jodie strong and resilient as she protects the wolf from predatory hunters.

Director Andrea Ainsworth creates many beautiful stage moments with an innovative approach to representing the world of the fairytale, particularly Jodie's journey through the forest and the transformation of the stranger into the wolf. Billowing white sheets and the synchronised movements of the actors also help create the impression of snowdrifts. This is aided by Betera's set design and Tony Wakefield's excellent lighting, which immerse the audience in the realm of the fantastic. Such collaboration culminates in the lament of Jodie's brother Ger at the end of the play, which is visually stunning. As the actors stand onstage singing, snow falls behind the trees in the light of the moon.

However, despite these moments of pleasure, the production fails to come together as a coherent whole, with many elements of the text not realised to their full potential. Central to this failure is Ainsworth's direction of the actors and their subsequent inability to fully convey Meehan's text. Some of the performers have difficulty changing between narrating to playing characters, with no clear method of signalling the transformation. Andrew Bennett as the father stands apart in this regard with his ability to communicate with the audience in a confident manner that lacks condescension.

Meehan's text offers an opportunity



**GUNA NÚÁ** Emma Colahan in *The Wolf of Winter*

for young people to escape into alternative worlds and get lost in the realm of fantasy.

The Peacock production, however, fails to adequately express much of the rich script and lyrical dialogue. The text itself creates a new hope in raising the standard of theatre that caters for both children and adults in Ireland, but further developments are necessary. Surely it is time for the National Theatre to take note of the potential and possibilities of producing quality theatre for young people, both in terms of scripts and production values. Or perhaps that too is the stuff of fairytales.



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

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