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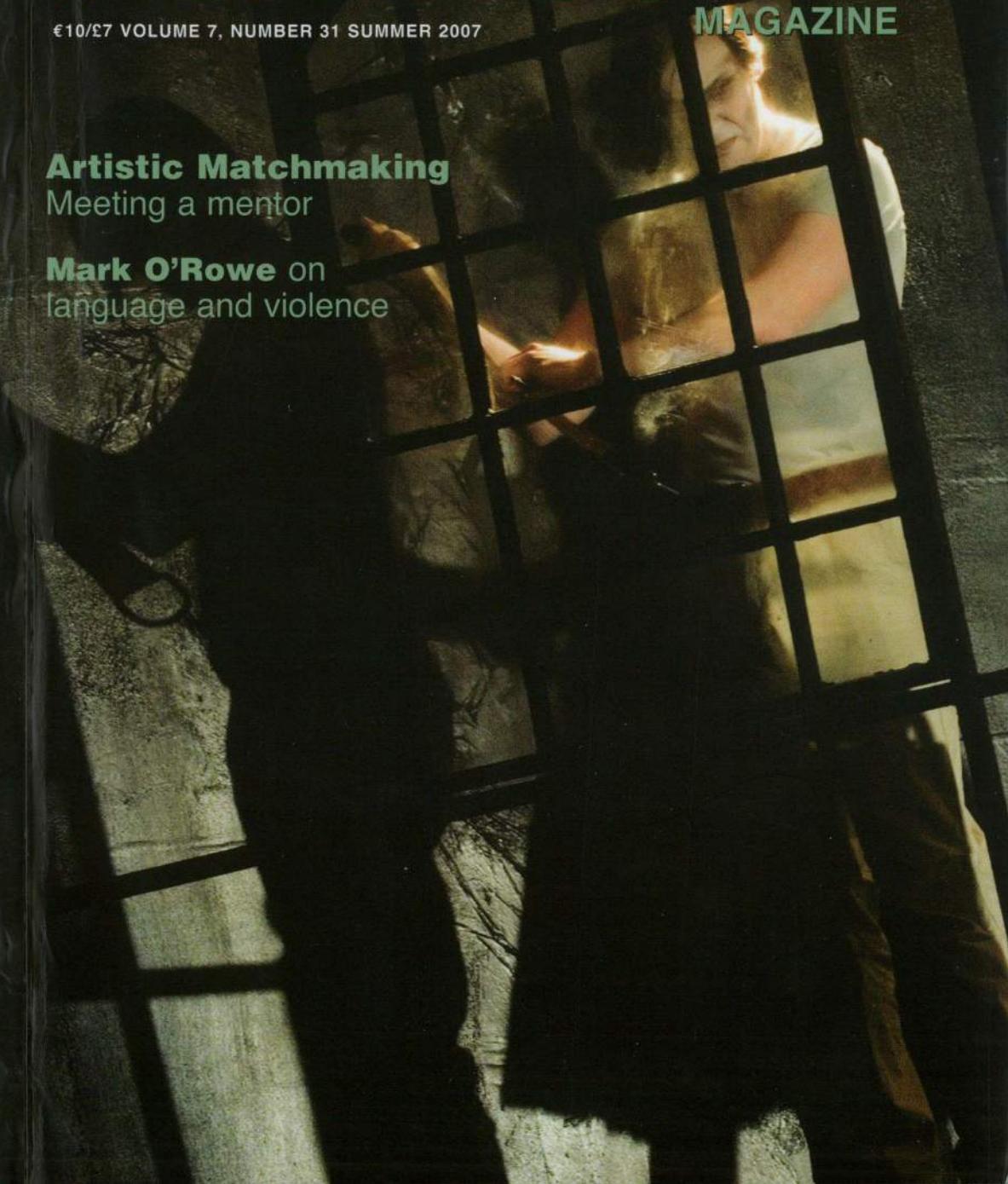
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MAGAZINE

Artistic Matchmaking

Meeting a mentor

Mark O'Rowe on
language and violence





The
Performance
Corporation

P R E S E N T S

Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclock

B Y T O M S W I F T

On the Mullet peninsula, in a time that's neither here nor there,
lived two townlands at war with each other for no good reason
except it was something to do when the days got longer.

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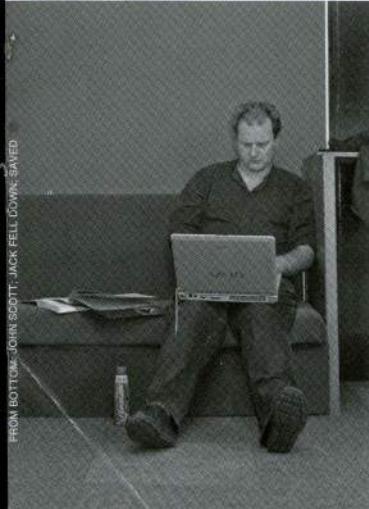
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ON THE COVER: David Shannon in *Sweeney Todd*.
Photo: Ros Kavanagh.



reviews

irishtheatre MAGAZINE

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IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE

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Recollections in tranquillity

AS A NEW GOVERNMENT PREPARES its policy objectives, it's a good time to recall what all the main parties' arts spokespersons stated were the priorities for the arts – before the election. Apart from the desire for an overall increase in funding to the arts, the most specific issue on the top of the politicians' list at the public meeting convened by Theatre Forum was the (re) introduction of multi-annual funding for arts organisations. Outgoing Minister John O'Donoghue suggested that had it been in place, the financial crisis at the Abbey might have been avoided. Also unanimously agreed was the need to abolish VAT on visiting international artists' fees, although the reason this has been so difficult to actually implement was less clear. Over to the new Finance Minister.

Also worth introducing would be a

We need a system for monitoring the composition of – and appointments to – boards of arts organisations.

system for monitoring the composition of – and appointments to – boards of arts organisations, to ensure that their members have the knowledge and competence they require.

We've got our eye on theatre-makers of the future in this issue, with a focus in the Features section on youth and student drama. Apprenticeships of another kind are examined in a report on a pilot scheme pairing mid-career artists (in different disciplines)

with mentors who can help them to develop their work – or change direction altogether. This pioneering scheme, developed by Michelle Read and Valerie Bistany, deserves the financial support it needs to become a fully-fledged annual mentoring programme. Another item for the list of funding requests ... Comments on anything in this issue may be sent to admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie.

Our Man in Culture

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR THE POSITION OF CHIEF executive officer of Culture Ireland involved, by all accounts, a rigorous and international search. So the appointment of Eugene Downes proves that sometimes the very thing you were looking for was there in front of you all along. Or, in Downes's case, what Culture Ireland was looking for was the very person who drafted the blueprint

for what the organisation would become. Founded to promote Irish arts internationally, Culture Ireland is soon to become a statutory body.

Downes, who worked in foreign affairs in the mid-1990s – he was cultural attaché in Russia – subsequently became a broadcaster with RTE Lyric FM and founded a small consultancy company. In his position

with the latter he was contracted by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism in 2003 to review how Irish arts performed internationally and to draw up policy recommendations. The result was the foundation of Culture Ireland in 2005. "This was the big development," Downes told *ITM* in his first week on the job, "and the platform for Ireland's future work in



KNOTS, staged by Coisceim, one of the designs selected for PQ07, the Irish national exhibit of scenography at the Prague Quadrennial this month, supported by Eugene Downes's organisation, Culture Ireland.

this area, so immediately I thought, well it's obviously somewhere I would love to work."

Although Downes advised Culture Ireland's board on its five-year plan, he says he had no contact with the organisation for "approximately a year" prior to his appointment to the executive.

Downes has certainly carved out a niche in "this very specific area where arts and culture meet foreign policy and diplomatic relations" and speaks enthusiastically about his "twin passion for the arts and inter-



DOWNES

national affairs". Given that Downes's job involves a curatorial function in which he sanctions artists and organisations to demonstrate their wares internationally, *ITM* enquired about Downes's tastes. An opera enthusiast (which was the subject of his radio show), he has also been involved professionally in theatre and music. In other art forms, he says, "I'm basically a punter with a huge interest and excitement about it." He was reluctant to give examples. "On the one hand I could give you a list, then on the other hand I don't want

to play favourites publicly. As Chief Executive of Culture Ireland it's a massive temptation to programme or support work drawing on your personal taste. It's a temptation I tend to resist."

As a former diplomat, would he be disinclined to assist provocative work travelling to culturally sensitive regimes? "My own approach is that we need to support the full range of arts and cultural activity in Ireland with a focus on excellence," he says, "and I think our intention is to do that without fear or favour." There is, he notes, "an inherent tension between the diplomatic approaches of government and the imperatives of the nature of art" which "undermine the status quo rather than assert it." But, reassuringly, he adds: "One thing I learned from friends over the years is that you don't have to like what you support. Often the important call is to support something that you don't like, but that you respect."

Contracted until 2010, by which time he intends to deliver on the organisation's five-year plan, with a potential contract extension of two years, Downes is pushing a big agenda. He hopes that a bill will be soon passed under the new Minister for Arts to guarantee the organisation's autonomy, while he seeks an increase of the current budget of €4.5 million to expand his executive structure.

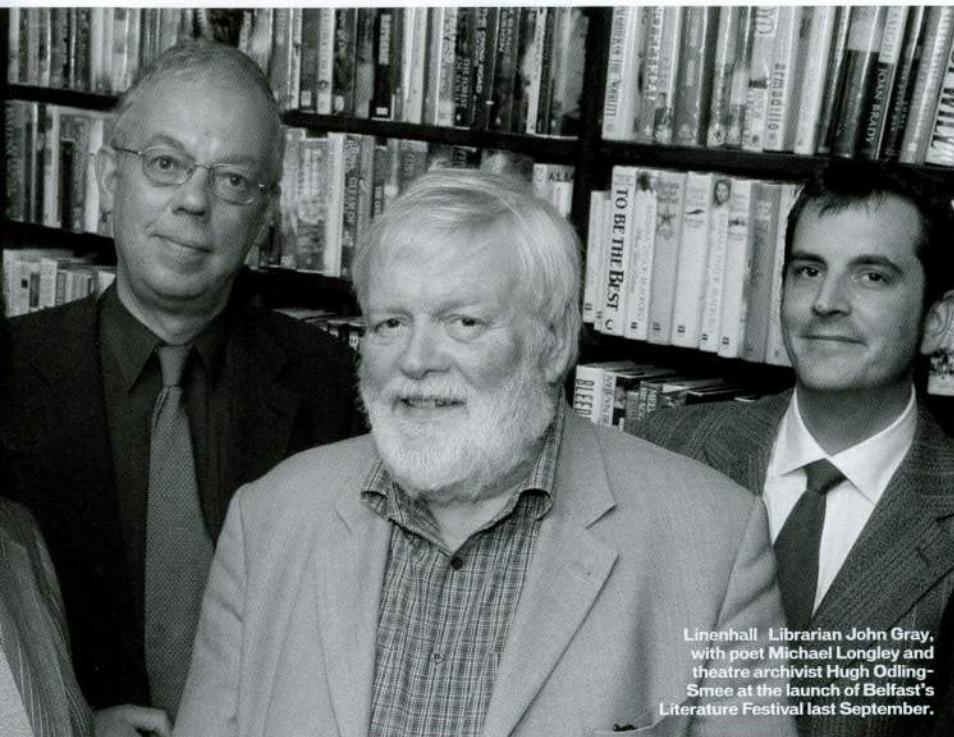
"We know that Ireland is the mod-

el of a globalised economy," he says, "where we have international flows of people and capital. One of the challenges we have to face is: can Ireland's cultural openness match our trading openness and our demographic openness?"

THE ABSENT ARCHIVIST

The Theatre and Performing Arts Archive at Belfast's Linenhall Library is not in any obvious jeopardy. The collection, which has been established and steadily developed over ten years and contains the archive of most major Northern Irish theatre companies, as well as having produced several publications of its own, is still accessible to the public. But when the Arts Council of Northern Ireland discontinued funding to the archive this year, the Linenhall was unable to retain the theatre archive's sole curator, Hugh Odling-Smee. The library's users, supporters and senior employees recognise that this brings serious consequences for the understanding and chronicling of theatre in Northern Ireland. "The collection will still be there," said one source. "But the collection is only as good as its staff."

"Essentially the theatre archive has run on one kind of temporary funding or another – project funding – for the ten years of its proactive existence," says the Linenhall's chief librarian John Gray. "In that ten years



Linenhall Librarian John Gray, with poet Michael Longley and theatre archivist Hugh Odling-Smee at the launch of Belfast's Literature Festival last September.

it has proved itself in every way you may define success or importance; either in organising the material we already had, bringing massive and important acquisitions into the public domain, assisting researchers, supporting the community, [establishing a] publication record, an exhibition record. In all those respects it has been a pioneering intervention."

Gray agrees that this has been made possible by the human agency of a curator. Since it began the archive has had just two: the journalist and broadcaster Ophelia Byrne (a former

guest editor of *ITM*) and Odling-Smee, who resigned late last month.

"There's so much stuff that we can't get hold of from the past," says Odling-Smee, "so our theory is that we have to actively collect now. I think there is going to be more pressure over the year and there are a lot of us who won't allow this to be forgotten. But I think at the end of the day the real decision lies with the Arts Council."

The archive began life effectively as an offshoot of the library's core collection, the Northern Ireland polit-

ical collection, which meant that some found it particularly galling to discover that on the same day that the N.I. Arts Council withdrew its funding of the theatre archive it announced plans for a new "Troubles archive".

The Linenhall is certainly not the only organisation in the North to suffer from a shortfall in funding. Encouraged to apply for Lottery funding, innumerable organisations in the UK – including the Arts Council – have borne the brunt of Lottery money being diverted into preparations for the 2012 London Olympics.

"The Roman games of our era," says Gray. "If the rest of the Empire is collapsing, you put on spectacular games."

But beyond the bread and circuses, the Library has some well-resourced users, who have a vested interest in the accessibility of the Theatre and Performing Arts archive.

"I can't stress how important a resource the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive is," says Prof Anna McMullan, Head of Drama at Queen's University, where Hugh Odling-Smeel facilitated a research methods course. "Our students use it, our staff use it, and we have integrated MA level research courses that draw from the Linenhall Library."

McMullan is aware of the importance of an archive specialist capable of drawing associations between ma-

terials and directing attention to otherwise overlooked nooks and crannies in Northern Ireland's theatre history. "You're losing someone with expert knowledge of the material. And that was true of Hugh and it was true of Ophelia Byrne before him. Those people were more than curators, they were really important resources for us and inspirations for students and staff. And of course this is for a whole range of users, from interested people to theatre professionals and academic researchers."

McMullan would not be drawn on whether Queens would be interested in acquiring the archive. "Those discussions simply haven't happened yet," she said. "For us the ideal is that the theatre and performing archive remains at the Linenhall with a curator. We're really interested in developing partnerships with the Linenhall. There's no doubt about that." There is, however, no financial commitment to such partnerships yet.

The necessary funds estimated to secure a curator have been curiously vague. At the Library's recent AGM a figure of £15,000 was mentioned, while more realistic projections extend to £25,000. "We are actually arguing about what seems to be a pathetically small sum of money," says Gray, who also attests that the Linenhall is "more than willing to talk partnerships with relevant prospective partners." Gray also wonders why

Cut-throat competition

HANG ON, HOLD THE RAZOR. Did The Gate Theatre give us the first professional Irish production of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*? No-one seems to have made such a claim. In fact the honour, though recent, seems to belong to Bare Space, a new Limerick-based theatre company headed by Michael Finneran, which was attuned to the contemporary parallels of Stephen Sondheim's musical earlier than The Gate. "I just thought there was lots of resonance for modern Ireland," says Finneran. "Duplicity and big business and ignoring what's going on in front of our very eyes."

We must not ignore the fact that Finneran's *Todd*, performed for just four nights at Limerick's Belltable where it proved a huge hit, beat The Gate to the honour of the Irish premiere by a matter of weeks. "Possibly," ventures Finneran, who directed six musicians and seventeen ensemble members (making it larger by two performers). "But I'm sure The Gate wouldn't appreciate you saying that... But, factually, yeah."

Before *ITM* could authenticate the honour, we double-checked that it was a professional production – it did incorporate some amateur performers – and learned that Bare Space secured the professional performing rights before The Gate. So that clinches it, really. Nothing if not magnanimous, Finneran even attended the runner-up *Todd* on Chatham Row which he "thoroughly enjoyed", praising David Shannon's performance as the barber in particular. "But obviously," he adds, "I'm biased towards our own."



the archive "is being mothballed" when, according to the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure's recent publication, 'Tomorrow's Libraries', unique collections with heritage importance are actively encouraged. He stresses however that this situation is temporary. *ITM* wondered if that meant an Olympian duration of up until 2013.

"Well by 2013 I will certainly have retired," Gray said, "and if temporary means 2013, I will have failed. And I have no intention of failing in terms of seeing the Theatre and Performing Arts archive back and doing what it should be doing." Instead he thought the situation should be resolved "within one calendar year".

"Any archive is alive," said McMullan, "so one would hope that it wouldn't just sit there, but that it would be added to. Theatre in the post-ceasefire and now possibly post-conflict context is fascinating."

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

If there is a list of obstacles that every international arts festival director hopes to avoid in an anniversary year, these could be three good examples: 1) disharmony among local artists which last year culminated in a rival festival, 2) the cessation of financial assistance from its long-time title sponsor 3) a nasty parasitic organism which resulted in a ban on drinking the running water.

Paul Fahy, now in the second year of his tenure with the Galway Arts Festival, must stare down all of the above. Fortunately, his programme – the event's thirtieth – does not seem to have suffered. Another crisis was narrowly averted when both Galway City Council and the outgoing Minister John O'Donoghue contributed additional funds to street theatre, ensuring that Macnas, twenty-one this year, would stage a parade. Macnas's *The Ninth Wonder of The World* takes place on 22 July, pursuing a B-Movie Horror theme, which our contextually-alert-semiotic-decoding division suspects is a reference to cryptosporidium.

Following last year's *King Ubu*, the festival is again producing new theatre work, albeit on a much smaller scale. Pat McCabe's new play *The Revenant*, staged in Druid Theatre, will be a one-man show directed by Joe O'Byrne, which was written specifically for Peter Trant, an Irish actor unseen since the 1970s, and whose retirement has lasted as long as the festival's existence. It will be designed by Paul Keogan, with original music by Gavin Friday.

A special thirtieth anniversary bursary for theatre productions has been extended to festival regulars Catastrophe and Chrysalis Dance, who co-produce *Love And Other Disguises*, a "theatre-dance" piece by Colm Maher performed in and around St Nicholas

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THE SUNSET LIMITED

Church. Meanwhile Pillow Fight Productions present Tanya McCrory's *The Projector of Dreams*, a "dance-theatre" piece; while Trevor Knight's performance installation piece *Slat* will run at the Radisson Hotel.

International works include the European premiere of Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*, from Steppenwolf Theatre, (pictured) and a near-obligatory example of political satire, *Get Your War On* from New York's The TEAM.

Guinness's sponsorship, reported in the *Irish Times* as worth €1 million over five years of contributions, is missed but not rued – "It was brilliant," says Fahy, "and it finished on fantastic terms" – but although there is no direct replacement in title sponsorship, Fahy points to an increase in state funding and Culture Ireland

support, adding, "we did manage to put on as big and as international a programme as we normally do."

Asked whether he expected a clearing of the air following the confrontational Project '06, Fahy was sanguine, highlighting the involvement of Project '06 participants such as McCrory and several others in the visual arts programme. And a clearing of the water? Given that fifty per cent of GAF's audience are tourists, the water situation is still a concern, and the box office will soon discover whether it has had an effect. "We got a lot of bad press," says Fahy, "probably taken out of all proportion really. But we have good marketing plans in place." Ballygowan, River Rock, if you've ever wanted to occupy a well-regarded title sponsorship, this is your golden opportunity.

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opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks key diary dates for the coming months.

Daghda Dance Company presents **FIELD STUDIES** Dance Performance Series at Daghda Dance Space, St John's Church, Limerick, from 10 May – 21 June.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE CRUCIBLE** by Arthur Miller from 26 May – 7 July.

DANCING AT LUGHNASA by Brian Friel plays at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, from 1 June – 7 July.

PurpleHeart Theatre Company presents **RED LIGHT WINTER** by Adam Rapp at The Mill Theatre, Dundrum from 4 June – 23 June.

Storytellers Theatre Company's production of **MUSHROOM** by Paul Meade tours from 6 June – 14 July, to Civic Theatre, Tallaght; Glór Theatre, Ennis; Backstage, Longford; Project Arts Centre, Dublin; Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray; Garage, Monaghan; Junction Festival, Clonmel.

TERMINUS, written and directed by Mark O'Rowe, plays at the Peacock

Theatre from 12 June – 7 July.

As part of Cork Midsummer Festival, Everyman Palace Theatre presents **GUESTS OF THE NATION** by Frank O'Connor from 18 – 23 June.

Corcadorka presents **WOYZECK** by Georg Büchner, directed by Pat Kieran, from 18 June – 1 July on the Naval Base at Haulbowline Island, Co. Cork.

Alec McAllister's new play **ROY**, presented by City Theatre Dublin, plays at Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, from 19 – 23 June.

From 20 June – 7 July, Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **HUE & CRY** by Deirdre Kinahan as part of 'Txts', a season of new plays by Irish women, at Bewleys Café Theatre.

Asylum Productions presents **MEAT** by Neil O'Sullivan at the Granary Theatre from 21 – 30 June.

MorWax Productions presents **JANE'S HERO** by Peadar de Burca at the Town



Natalia Kostrzewska and Carl Kennedy in **MUSHROOM**

hall Theatre, Galway from 2 – 7 July.

Siamsa Tíre, National Folk Theatre & Arts Centre, Tralee, will reprise **OILEÁN - CELEBRATING THE BLASKET ISLANDS**, and **CLANN LIR - AN ETERNAL TALE OF EVIL AND SALVATION**, (both devised by the Siamsa Tíre performing company), running in rep from 4 July throughout July and August.

Ouroboros Theatre will tour **MAKING HISTORY** by Brian Friel to historic sites throughout Munster, Leinster, Connacht and Ulster from 8 – 22 July, and 28 August – 13 September.

Granary Theatre, Cork, presents **DISCO PIGS** by Enda Walsh from 9 – 14 July.

Galway Arts Festival 2007 includes a new play by Patrick McCabe, **THE**

REVENANTS, directed by Joe O'Byrne at Druid Lane Theatre. Steppenwolf from Chicago bring Cormac McCarthy's **THE SUNSET LIMITED**.

The Abbey Theatre and Collectif Acrobatique de Tangier present **TAOUB** from 11 – 21 July.

Continuing the 'Txts' season of new plays by Irish women, Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **FIREWORKS** by Iseult Golden in Bewley's Café Theatre from 11 – 28 July.

PRIVATE LIVES by Noel Coward plays at the Gate Theatre from 12 July – 22 September.

FRANK PIG SAYS HELLO by Patrick McCabe runs at the Granary Theatre, Cork, from 16 – 21 July.

CAUGHT IN THE NET



Centre Stage Theatre Company will tour John Van Druten's play **BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE** throughout Ireland from 25 July – 10 August.

The Performance Corporation presents **LIZZIE LAVELLE AND THE VANISHING OF EMLYCLOCK** by Tom Swift in the natural amphitheatre in the sand dunes of Carne Golf Club, Belmullet, Co. Mayo from 28 July – 4 August.

THE BIG HOUSE by Lennox Robinson plays at the Abbey Theatre from 28 July – 8 September.

Mask Productions presents **CAUGHT IN THE NET** by Ray Cooney at the Royal Theatre, Castlebar from 30 July – 4 August, and at the Cork Opera House from 6 – 11 August.

Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **TIC** by Elizabeth Moynihan at the Bewley's Café Theatre from 1 – 18 August, ending the 'Txts' season of new

plays by Irish women.

Marie Jones' **A NIGHT IN NOVEMBER** runs at the Grand Opera House from 8 – 18 August.

Yew Tree Theatre will tour **FR. MATH-EW** by Sean McCarthy from 30 August – 13 October, from Hawkswell Theatre, Sligo, finishing at Half Moon Theatre, Cork.

Prime Cut Productions presents **SCENES FROM THE BIG PICTURE** by Owen McCafferty at the Waterfront Hall Studio, Belfast from 7 – 29 September.

MA'S LAST WORD by Mick Nolan and George McMahon will be toured by City Theatre Dublin to St. John's Theatre, Listowel on the 9 September and to Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown from 11 – 15 September.

KICKING A DEAD HORSE by Sam Shepard plays from 12 – 22 September at the Abbey Theatre.

Tearing up the Script

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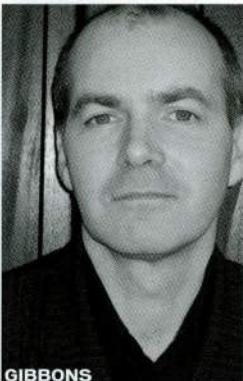
entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre.

Former General Manager of Macnas, **DECLAN GIBBONS**, (pictured) has taken over as Managing Director of Druid Theatre Company. He replaces **FERGAL MCGRATH**, who has taken up the position of Manager of Galway's Town Hall Theatre, replacing **MIKE DISKIN**... **EUGENE DOWNES**, a former consultant on international arts strategy, has been appointed as Chief Executive of Culture Ireland.

The International Dance Festival Ireland has appointed **Laurie Uprichard** to the post of Artistic Director, replacing **CATHERINE NUNES**... **PÁDRAIG CUSACK**, previously with the English National Theatre in London, has been appointed Chief Executive Officer of Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre and Arts Centre.

VERONICA COBURN is leaving Barabbas, which she co-founded, to be Artist in Residence at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght ... **SARAH LING**, General Manager and Producer with Bedrock is leaving the company. While finishing her studies she will work with photogra-



pher Ros Kavanagh.

LOUISE LOWE has been appointed as Education/Outreach Officer for Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise, replacing **CABRINI CAHILL**...

The former Editor-in-Chief of *Irish Theatre Magazine*, **KAREN FRICK**-

ER, has been appointed as Lecturer in Theatre at Royal Holloway College, University of London... The Performance Corporation has appointed **KELLY PHELAN** as Company Administrator.

SITUATIONS VACANT

THE ABBEY THEATRE is seeking a new Props Maker/Set Dresser and Assistant Production Manager.

THE DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL is seeking a new General Manager.

THE ARK CULTURAL CENTRE FOR CHILDREN is seeking an Exhibition Manager for its summer 2007 programme, *Toys!*

THE DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL is seeking a new Marketing Officer.





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August

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Networking events in Edinburgh presented by ITI in association with Culture Ireland.

September

ITI INFORMATION TOOLBOX

An event aimed at emerging companies and artists: one-to-one meetings with funding agencies, resource organisations, festivals, venue managers and promoters. **14 Sept** [Dublin Fringe Festival].

October

14TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING EVENT

A one and a half day, non-stop encounter with international presenters, producers & programmers.

4 & 5 Oct [Dublin Theatre Festival].

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The Story of the Night

MARK O'ROWE's new play, *Terminus*, races through a black night in Dublin, where events take a violent, then fantastical turn and are narrated in a series of monologues. Getting the rhythms of the language right and being true to his characters is what matters to O'Rowe, he says, as his own production of the play runs at The Peacock.

SOME PLAYS ARE ABSOLUTE TORTURE TO WRITE. I've written the simplest plays that have taken years. This one came from two key images: of a news story about a woman being pulled under a truck and killed on Aston Quay, and the thought of falling off the top of one of those cranes that are around the city. Both of these are incorporated in the final version. What came as a release when I was stuck was the idea of introducing a character who was a demon – a demon who's like an innocent kid and falls in love! Then I felt I was going somewhere; I realised the sky's the limit. I hadn't set out to write this fantastical metaphysical thing, but if you can put it down on paper – and it works – you can tell any story you want.

Crestfall (2003) was a move in that direction. It showed us greed, sex, violence, a lack of goodness, and although all of the things described by the characters could have happened, it was in a place outside of reality in its location.

For me, stories in their purest form are about people. I hate the notion of story telling in its pretentious form. And this expectation that a play is making a statement about our world today: of all the forms – film, the novel, the short story – theatre is the one that's saddled with the need to say something about society, about now, rather than about people. I do love seeing thematic threads in plays, but I prefer to find in them some essential truth about ourselves. All great plays say some-



Eileen Walsh in *Mark O'Rowe's Terminus*



thing about their time, but not *in* their time. That's retrospective.

My choice of the monologue form again is partly because the story necessitates it. There are things that have to be described rather than shown onstage. It also suits the style I write in – though this play is different in that there's a lot of rhyme, which was the hardest thing about writing it.

The monologue is somewhere between a novel and theatre. I could never write a novel, couldn't manage the length, the endurance. Also, I want to hear the text spoken, I'm stuck within that. I read it aloud as I write, to get the rhythm and the pure story – rather than the spiderweb of story you get with dialogue. I love the language, that's what propels it.

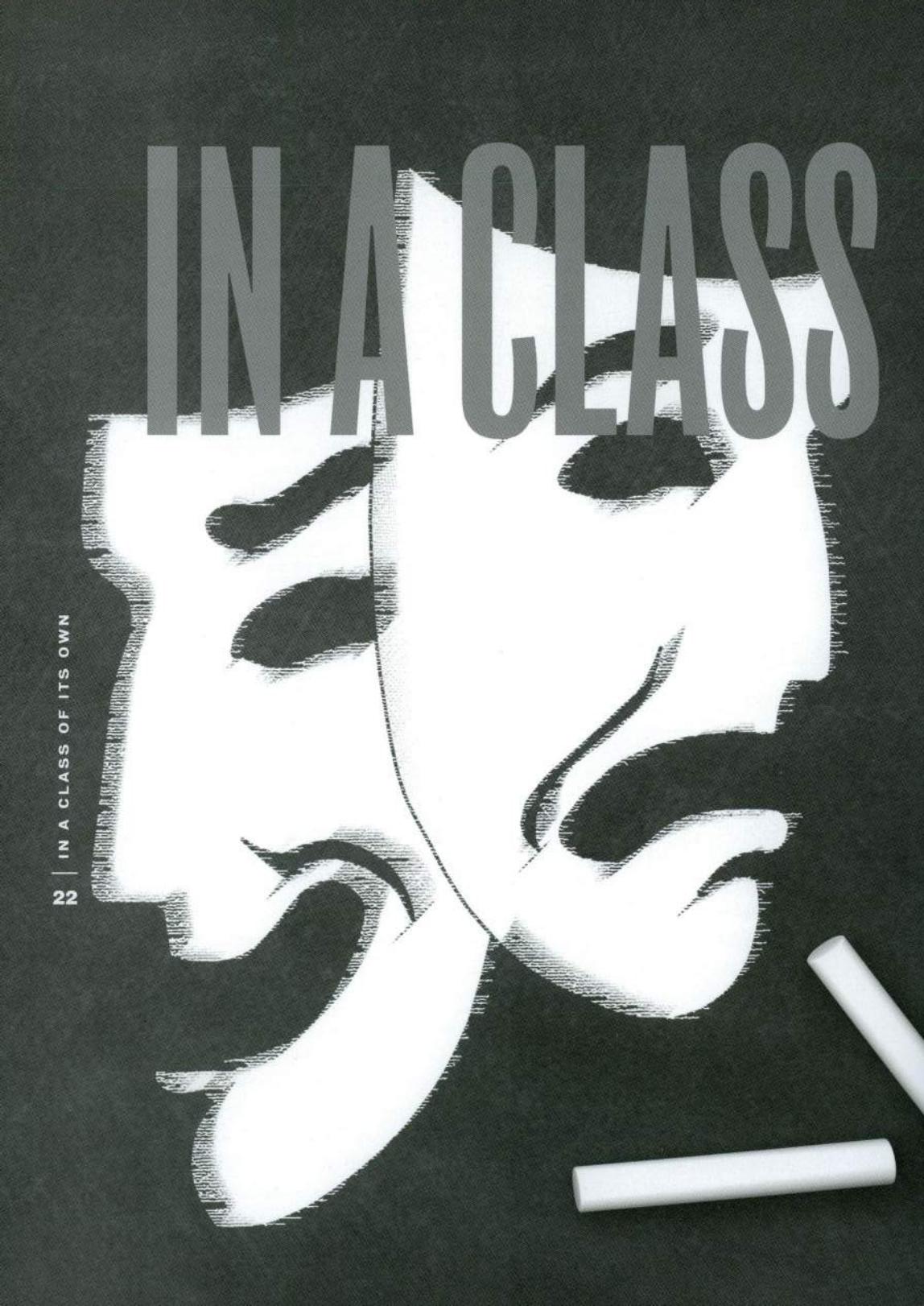
I don't write for a particular actor as I'm working; I only ever see words on a page. And I have only a very vague sense of staging until I go into the rehearsal room. Even though we can change it here and there in rehearsal, I've honed the text to a very great degree already.

My main concern when thinking about the audience is how clear the story is: I want them to get it, to understand the connections between the characters, like the one between the mother and daughter in this play. But I don't want them to be repelled by the violence. There is humour in there too, and the violence is often cartoonish, with guts spilling and people in almost a slow-motion dance – apart from one murder near the start which is extremely shocking. The character who does it, a serial killer, has sold his soul.

While *Crestfall*'s violence was unrelenting – I found it hard to stomach myself – here it's a dangerous world where everyone is a lost soul. You've got to humanise your characters and be true to them. They're lonely characters looking for love. 

Terminus runs at The Peacock, Dublin, until July 7th, performed by Andea Irvine, Eileen Walsh and Aidan Kelly. Mark O'Rowe was in conversation with Helen Meany.

IN A CLASS



OF ITS OWN

For some it's primarily a fun social outlet, but for others the university drama society provides a unique all-round grounding in the theatre, which can compliment academic Theatre Studies courses. **SARA KEATING** talks to some eminent 'Dramsoc' graduates, and assesses the current state of student drama.

STUDENT DRAMA IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS. FROM ADMINISTRATIVE organisation to artistic creation, from production to performance, the university 'Dramsoc' provides a forum for students to gain experience of all aspects of the theatre. And as theatre by its nature is collaborative, drama societies are intensely social, involving a network of relationships between actors, directors, designers and audiences that encourages the development of important inter-personal skills and life-long friendships. For many, the social element is the most important part of their experience, but for others Dramsoc is the first stepping-stone towards a professional career in the theatre.

Most of Ireland's student drama societies evolved before there was any formal theatre training in Ireland. Drama societies provided students with an opportunity to perform the plays that they came across on their literature courses, and to experiment with original ideas that were not being reflected in the drama being studied in classrooms.

Druid Theatre and Rough Magic, two of the most influential Irish theatre companies, nationally and internationally, grew out of creative relationships de-

veloped at student drama societies in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite having no formal training in theatre arts, both companies went on to challenge and revitalise the Irish theatre tradition. Siobhán Bourke, producer with the Irish Theatre Institute and one of the co-founders of Rough Magic, describes the evolution of the company in the 1980s as a product of "loose groupings, inter-connections and associations between Trinity Col-

People in the professional theatre would read about you in the paper and come to see your shows. It gave you access to professionals, who would often seek you out..

lege's Players and UCD's Dramsoc, the two major student drama societies in Dublin." Perhaps because there was no formal training in Ireland at the time, Bourke suggests, the status of student drama was fairly high; it was seen as the hotbed of theatrical experimentation. "All of the shows were reviewed in the [national] newspapers. People in the professional theatre would read about you in the paper and come to see your shows. It gave you access to professionals, who would often seek you out."

Opportunities for theatre training have since grown immensely. TCD, UCC, DIT Rathmines, IT Sligo and Queen's University Belfast now all offer full-time undergraduate degree programmes in Drama and Theatre Studies, with a key emphasis on practical theatre skills and performance. Meanwhile postgraduate courses at TCD, UCD, NUI Galway and Queen's offer MA's with similar practical emphasis, such as UCD's new postgraduate course in directing. However, as the reaction to the recent closure of the Acting Studies BA course at TCD has shown, the need for formal training opportunities remains a key issue for emerging and established theatre practitioners.



ORLA FLANAGAN



JEN COPPINGER



SIOBHAN BOURKE

URSULA RANI SARMA, Playwright

Ursula Rani Sarma was doing a BA in English and History at UCC when she became involved with the college drama society, Dramat. "There is a certain fearlessness which comes with being in a creative college environment, where everyone is giving up their time and energy to make this thing happen, purely because they want to. I had been writing creatively for years but only began writing for the stage when I joined Dramat. After staging some short pieces, I applied to Dramat to write and direct my first full-length play, *Like Sugar on Skin*, which would be staged at the Granary Theatre during my final year at UCC. The entire experience was incredible. The play was performed and then chosen as one of the plays to represent UCC at ISDA in Galway that year. The Granary Theatre commissioned me to write and direct a play, and two months after my final exams my first professional play ...touched...premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Although there wasn't any writing training or development involved, what Dramat offered me was practical experience in a supportive and secure environment. I think of my time there as an internship which allowed me to see how the wheels behind a production turn, and then to have a go myself."

work), there is a strong sense that the contemporary Dramsoc is striving to achieve high standards.

Project Arts Centre's Artistic Director Willie White – who acted, directed, and even audited UCD's Dramsoc in the late 1980s – believes that dramsoc is an extremely limited training ground for students hoping to gain experience of theatre practice. "Skills are developed on an *ad hoc* basis – you get experience of working in groups, you're working towards deadlines, and occasionally you work with professionals, but drama societies are inherently conservative – and their work has no relation to any other theatre practice except itself."

Orla Flanagan, who has just been awarded a Diageo Fulbright Scholarship to

Meanwhile, there are Dramsocs operating in almost every third-level institution throughout the country - there are independent drama societies operating at each of the five Institutes of Technology in the Dublin area, for example, as well as a high profile musical theatre group at DCU. This proliferation of student drama suggests that the interest in theatre and performance, as both hobby and potential career, is huge. With many of the Dramsocs having access to (small) production budgets, fully-kitted out theatre spaces, a chance to compete nationally against other universities at the annual Irish Student Drama Awards (ISDA) and their own internal critical review system (Queen's University Players, for example, have an extensive online forum where members can review both professional productions and each others'

study theatre management in the US disagrees, reflecting on her experience in UCD's Dramsoc. As a former literary officer at the Abbey Theatre and current General Manager of Fishamble Theatre Company, Flanagan says that "while, in retrospect, a formal background in theatre history might have been helpful, hands-on practical experience is really what counts in the theatre."

Jen Coppinger, Information and Events Officer at the Irish Theatre Institute, agrees, referring to her time at Trinity's Players as "a little degree in producing. We were serious and ambitious in the work we did. We treated it as a job." Hav-

TOM CREED, Director While studying English and Philosophy at UCC, Tom Creed honed his theatre skills at Dramat. "My time in Dramat coincided with Ali Robertson's tenure as Artistic Director of the Granary. He provided masses of support for student drama, especially for those of us who were aspiring professionals. As well as encouraging us to produce work in the summer seasons, he exposed us to a lot of exciting work through the Cork Fringe Festival and organised workshops with Fiona Shaw, John Crowley, as well as voice and movement practitioners. My production of *Equus* won five awards at ISDA 2000. That year, UCD had assembled the Rolls Royce of judging panels. It was fantastic to have that calibre of practitioner assess and approve the work I was doing.

Student drama societies are a place where people can learn about how theatre works, on and off stage. They can try out their maddest ideas and fail miserably. They can learn how to use the theatre to engage with the world. It strikes me that there really is no substitute for having the freedom and responsibility that you have in student theatre.

I think that a healthy dose of formal training and informal student theatre could work happily in parallel to create talented and committed new practitioners."

ing achieved considerable success as a student in a collaborative production with NCAD and UCD students grouped as Threefold Theatre, she later took an MA in Arts Administration at UCD; "That gave me some formal training, but I came in to it with more practical experience than most and that has been a big advantage."

How do the current members of Dramsocs around the country feel about their role in the future of Irish theatre? Sorcha Boyce, outgoing PR officer of UCD's Dramsoc says that with 1,200 current members and over 40 productions a year, the society is at the most productive stage in its history. It has just celebrated its eightieth anniversary with a gala event attended by famous alumni such as Rosaleen Linehan and Barry McGovern. UCD has only recently introduced drama as a subject for undergraduate

students, but Boyce says that the society is "working to build up our relationship with the Drama Studies Centre, as it will without doubt prove beneficial to both parties."

Trinity Players has no formal affiliation with TCD's Drama and Theatre Studies degree, but most of the students on that course are involved in Players, where they can experiment, as well as interact with students from other departments. Players will celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary later this year, with events being organised by a committee that includes Lynne Parker, Pauline McGlynn and Rough Magic Seeds participant, Sophie Motley. The society's secretary, Barry McStay says it is looking forward to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this August, where it will be staging *The Mercer Island Rodeo*.

As to the other student drama societies around the country, well, none of them responded to numerous attempts to contact them, perhaps confirming Gerry Stembridge's experience of Dramsoc: "Some people are only in it for fun, other people know that they're desperately serious about it, and still others find out when they're there that theatre is the life for them. It was at dramsoc that I began to learn the difference between being a professional instead of a talented amateur."

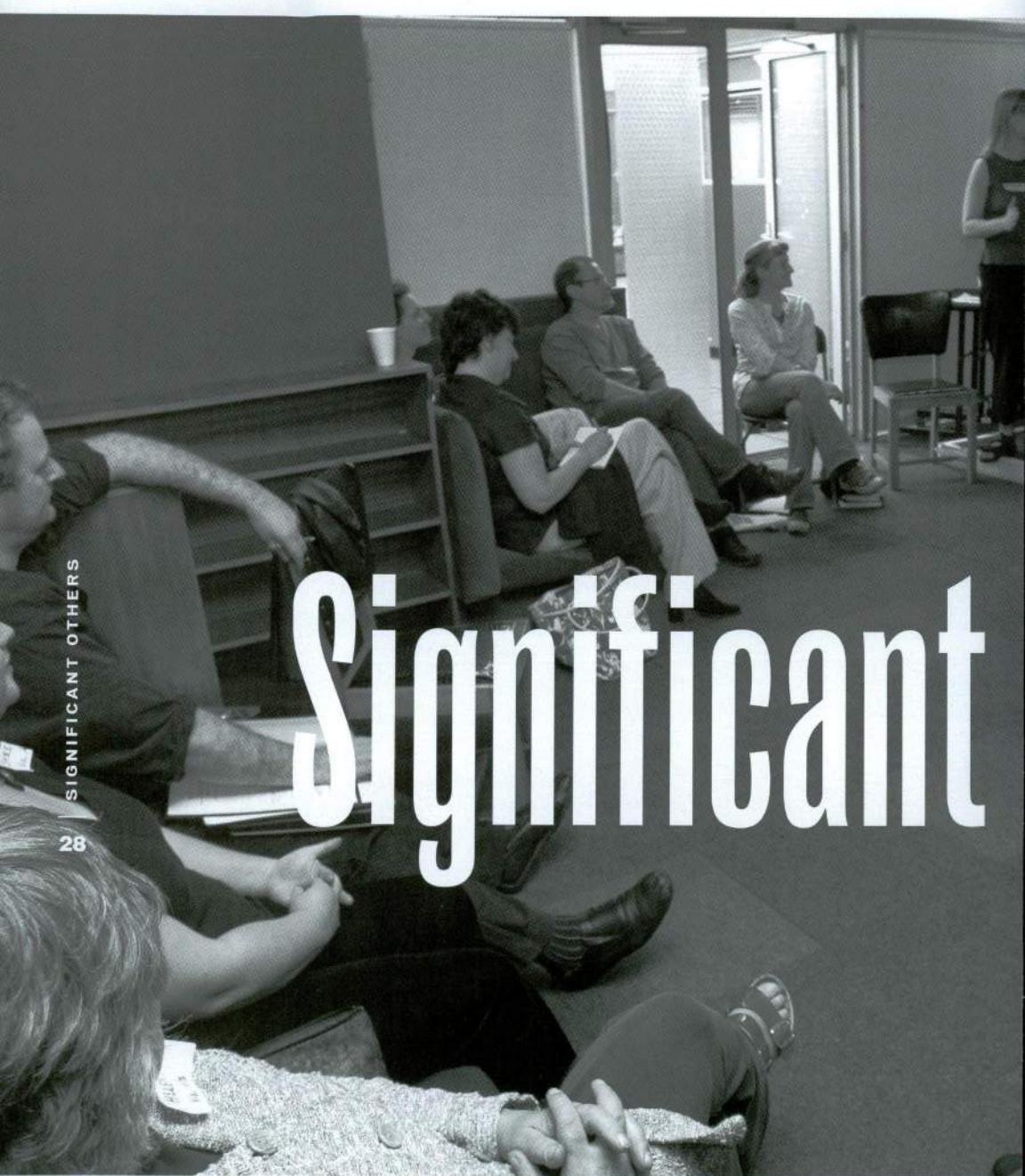
GERRY STEMBRIDGE, Writer and

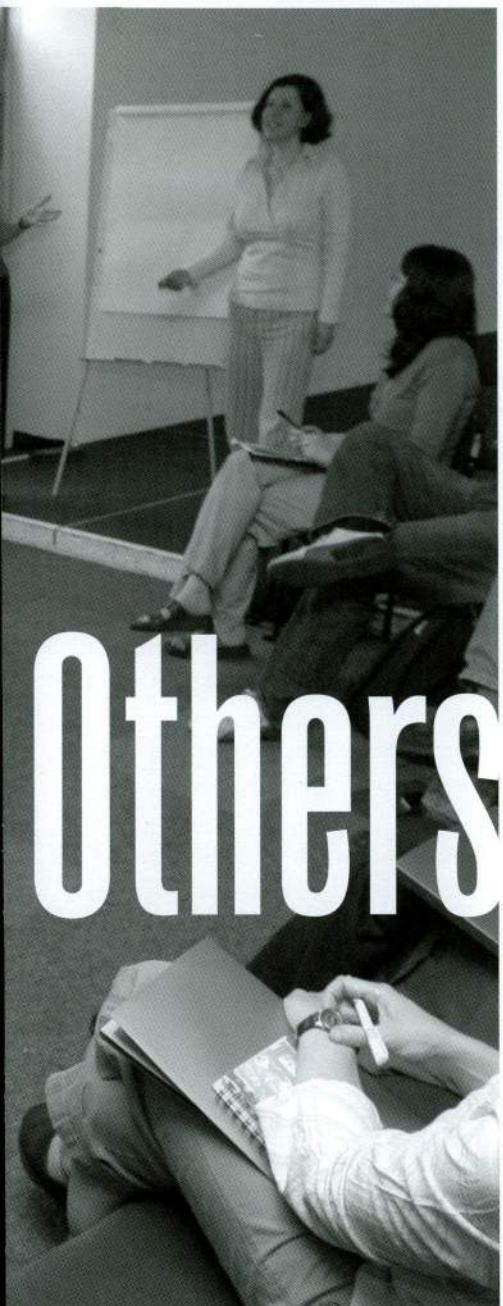
Director For Gerry Stembridge, who was a member of UCD's Dramsoc between 1976 and 1981, Dramsoc was the most important part of his university education. "One of the first things I did when I went to UCD was join it. I had come from Limerick, where I had little or no background in the theatre. I had done a couple of school things and knew I wanted to be involved in the theatre, but you wouldn't say that in an all-male Christian Brothers school. I really only acted in college; I never directed, and I only wrote one small thing, which Paul Mercier directed. But I did a lot of quite serious acting. At the start I was cast in comedy parts all the time, but the clown always wants to be Hamlet, and by Third Year I was doing some serious parts (including Richard the Third).

There were no acting or theatre training courses at that time, so Dramsoc was often a very direct route into a theatre career. In hindsight, I am actually biased in favour of the Dramsoc route into a theatre career: the free-for-all element, the lack of focus, can have its advantages. In Dramsoc you're expected to be involved with every level of production, and that's a good balancing thing; you get to try out different things. When I was leaving college, I had realised that I couldn't really be an actor and a director, and that directing and writing was a more compatible pairing."

Sara Keating writes about theatre for numerous publications, including the Irish Times.

Significant





Somewhere between artistic matchmaking and counselling, mentoring can be of invaluable help for practitioners who want to develop in new directions. Playwright **MICHELLE READ** reflects on the mentoring scheme she co-piloted with **VALERIE BISTANY**, and the results of its creative pairings.

T ALL STARTED WHEN I WAS IN AUSTRALIA in 2004. I'd arranged, through the Tyrone Guthrie Centre's excellent exchange programme, to spend two weeks at an artists' residency in the Blue Mountains just outside Sydney.

I thought I had an idea for a new stage play, but ended up spending a lot of time wondering about my process as a dramatist. So far, most of my theatre work had been short and funny; this new project was potentially neither. What should my starting point be? How would I 'unpack' and recreate the story-fragment rattling around in my head? Was the idea even viable? Should I give up and get a 'proper' job? Take yourself far enough away from familiar surroundings and the navel-gazing is bound to start. I realised I was trying to have a dialogue with myself about my working process, but I wasn't getting very far.

At this point (sitting in the 1930s library-cum-sitting room), I started to flick through *Getting Connected - Making Your Mentorship Work* by Mary Ann Hunter, a booklet produced by the Australia Council for the Arts. It seemed to be describing

exactly the kind of intervention I was looking for. I knew I didn't want a training course or a Master Class or a friendly chat, I wanted to discuss my work professionally, preferably with another playwright and I wanted that person to have

We thought the term 'partnership' was valuable because it implied a relationship based on trust and mutual respect, so we adopted it as part of our working definition.

been round the block a few more times than I had. Apparently I wanted a mentor.

When I got back to Dublin I started a conversation with my friend Valerie Bistany, an experienced arts facilitator and me-

diator. We talked about the potential for arts mentoring in Ireland and wondered how much of it was already in practice. We knew Rough Magic and a few dance companies were developing it, but apart from that we couldn't find a lot of joined-up information. Valerie suggested we approach the Arts Council with an action research proposal to give a 'snapshot' of current mentoring practice in Ireland and abroad, and to include a pilot scheme pairing up artists for a period of six months. This proposal, greeted with enthusiasm, was eventually taken up by the Arts Councils of both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with additional support from Dublin City Council. In January 2005, Valerie and I set up the Mentoring Development Project (MDP). The only drawback was that, as one of the facilitators, I couldn't take part in the scheme myself.

So what exactly is mentoring? Well the dictionary defines it as, 'trusted counselling, particularly in occupational settings' and Mary Ann Hunter, in the Australia Council handbook, described it as "a partnership between a more experienced person (the mentor) and a less experienced person (the mentee). The cross-section of practitioners and organisations we asked had a further spectrum of views, so we realised a clear definition was important. We thought the term 'partnership' was valuable because it implied a relationship based on trust and mutual respect, so we adopted it as part of our working definition and set about devising a best-practice, third-party-run mentoring scheme.

As the project had been sparked off by a so-called mid-career artist, (myself) and a perceived need for conceptual discussion around the artist's work, we decided that these would be the parameters for the pilot. The 'Call For Artists', circulated in February/March 2005 asked for expressions of interest from relatively experienced artists wishing to develop their process, plus well-established artists wishing to take on a mentoring role. We included five art forms: dance, theatre, music, literature and visual arts and received a highly encouraging response from both potential mentees and mentors.



Choreographer John Scott of Irish Modern Dance Theatre

with an experienced and wise dancer/teacher". At the time of the pilot John was touring a show, while also developing and rehearsing another one. The two men therefore agreed to meet four times over the contact period, timing the meetings to coincide with rehearsals and performances. Their meetings were the longest on the pilot, generally lasting for several hours over one to two days and reflecting the nature of the art form.

In theatre there were two successful mentee applicants, Iseult Golden, a performer and the co-director of a small-scale theatre company, Inis Theatre, and Priscilla Robinson, a stand-up comedian.

Out of 100-plus expressions of interest, we were able to take on nine case-studies. Observing and supporting these relationships over six months was fascinating. The MDP report, written by Valerie, gives a detailed account of the whole project and outlines how to set up a mentoring scheme. I'll limit myself here to describing the dance and theatre pairings.

Our dance mentee, John Scott, an established choreographer with his own Dublin-based company, Irish Modern Dance Theatre, was paired with Jean-Christophe Paré, a French choreographer and dancer, based in Paris, and with considerable international experience. John's application focused on a desire to explore how he observed his own work while he was making it and afterwards. He described his requirements as "an ongoing dialogue" about his "choreographic practice...

Iseult Golden aimed to develop her experience of co-devising into playwrighting. She had a specific goal and wanted “to complete the first draft of a play based on *The Changeling*”. She acknowledged that this would be a transitional process for

Some people are lucky enough to have mentors in their lives already, in a naturally occurring relationship that develops over time. Often this person is supportive and inspires confidence, and will help in the analysis of goals and ambitions

her and that it would be “a big challenge to leave the supportive environment of collaboration and go solo.” Iseult was paired with Rebecca Bartlett, an experienced playwright, teacher and lecturer.

Priscilla Robinson was also

focused on an end product and wanted to “devise and perform a one-woman show”. She requested a mentor who could help her “examine all the elements involved... ideas, writing/ devising, performance, production, evaluation”, and she described this person as a guide as she progressed through these stages, as well as someone who would help her “to develop confidence in the work”. Priscilla was paired with Paul Meade, actor, writer and director, with his own company, Gúna Nua, of which he is co-Artistic Director.

Some people are lucky enough to have mentors in their lives already, in a naturally occurring relationship that develops over time. Often this person is supportive and inspires confidence, and will help in the analysis of goals and ambitions by offering insights from experience, without imposing their own views or ideas.

MDP’s aim from the start was to recreate both the supportive and the analytical elements of organic mentoring within a structured, professional context. Like many of the successful mentoring schemes we’d researched, we hoped our pairings, all relative strangers, would succeed together in creating this kind of favourable environment for themselves.

One of the initial parts of the relationship then, was the “getting to know you” phase. This manifested itself slightly differently with each pair but generally included, “creating a working method”, where participants figured out how they would proceed together, and – of course - “socialising”, where they spent some time learning about each other’s external circumstances. In some instances it also included ‘storming’, where participants, supported by MDP, ironed out any issues or problems.

Mid-way through the pilot John Scott and Jean-Christophe felt their relationship was proceeding well. Jean-Christophe had a strong belief that his role as mentor was as an “active witness” to John’s work and that he should be as unobtrusive as possible. John responded well to this, noting that Jean-Christophe



Literature mentor Lia Mills and Iseult Golden.

"never enforced himself as a teacher or coach but sat discreetly in the rehearsal room". Though impressed by his mentor, John did not find him at all intimidating and said they had had some very robust conversations. Jean-Christophe reflected that his discussions with John were "occasions for asking specific questions... not to influence the work but to offer the possibility that John would observe his own personal workings."

Meanwhile Iseult Golden had been touring non-stop and was feeling the pressure of the task she had set herself. She had never written anything before in the traditional sense and was finding she lacked confidence in her ideas. By this stage Rebecca Bartlett encouraged her to revise and scale down her original goal and to take the pressure off herself. This seemed to be a good strategy and by their third session Iseult had finally begun to produce material and receive feedback from

Rebecca. She also felt she was finally coming to terms with dramatic structure. She noted, "Suddenly I have boundaries and limitations... writing has become so much easier, more possible, more enjoyable!"

Priscilla Robinson, on the other hand, had no problem generating material and came into the pilot with a wealth of stand-up routines and comic journalism. However, like Iseult, she lacked confidence in her ideas and was nervous about making the transition

By the end of the pilot some participants, like Iseult Golden, had changed or abandoned their original projects, although they did so through dialogue with their mentors.

from comedy club set to one-woman show. Paul Meade had a very calm and supportive style and through his experience in theatre helped Priscilla commit to ideas and find an initial structure for her show: "My mentor is good at picking up on my indecision and fear of making a wrong choice...he suggested committing to making a choice even if it got changed later". In turn, Paul became interested in the world of stand-up. Watching Priscilla perform at a club, he was struck by how the material came to life when performed - "the way Priscilla was working with props and slides. A looser, much more personal structure than my experience of theatre, freer... it could definitely influence me down the line I think."

By the end of the pilot some participants, like Iseult Golden, had changed or abandoned their original projects, although they did so through dialogue with their mentors and felt that focusing on their creative process with another practitioner had been valuable in itself. Other participants achieved their goals in full and felt that the support and advice of their mentor had helped to "speed them up", while those who had focused on process, like John Scott, felt that they had gained valuable insights into their own practice. None of the participants thought the contact time for the pilot was long enough, however, and time-frames of between nine months and two years were suggested instead.

So, just over a year later, John and Jean-Christophe are still in regular contact and have discussed formalising their relationship again in the future. Iseult describes her contact with Rebecca as having "lapsed naturally". Although she eventually parked the play she was working on during the pilot scheme, she has since been commissioned by Tall Tales theatre company, and her first play opens in Bewley's Café Theatre next month. Priscilla and Paul are still in contact and although Priscilla did not produce her show in her projected time frame, she has proposed it as a site-specific work-in-progress to the Dublin Fringe Festi-



Michelle Read, Priscilla Robinson and Paul Meade.

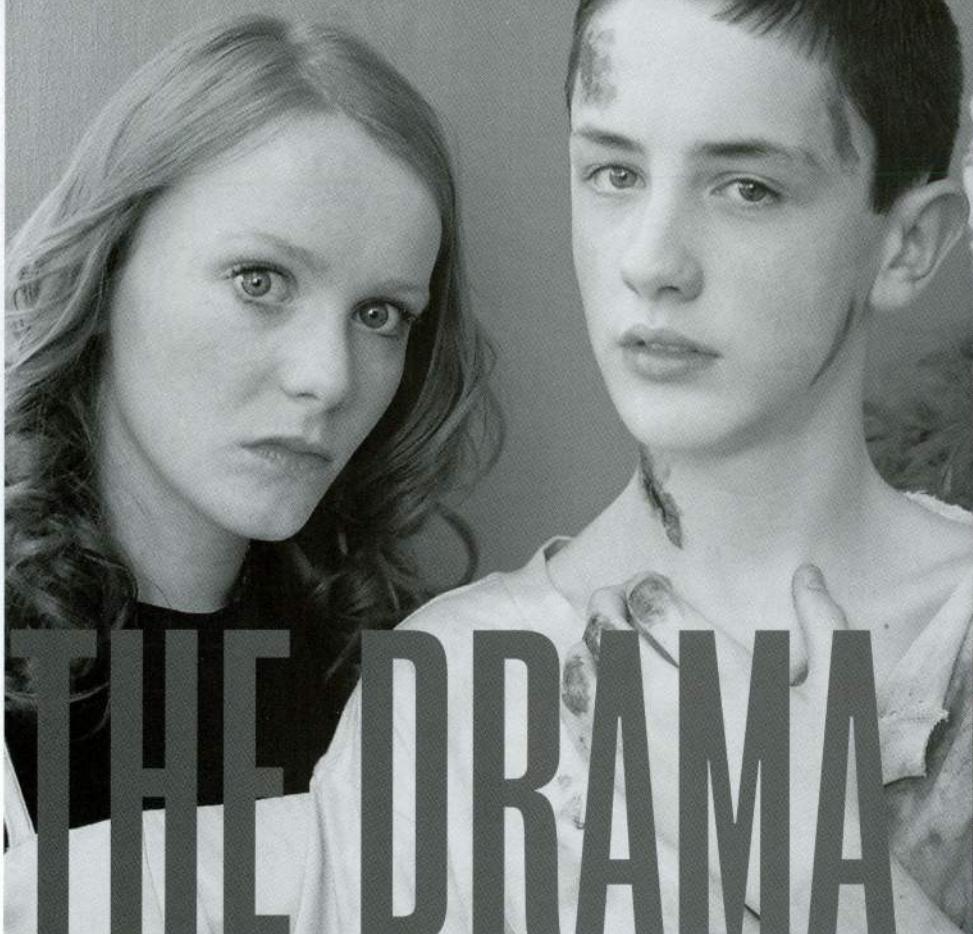
val selectors for inclusion in this year's programme.

And what about me? I've finally initiated my own mentoring relationship with a London-based playwright, Anne Devlin, who I got to know some years ago. This falls somewhere between the "organic" and the "structured" (Valerie has instructed me to keep notes). So far my mentor has forced me to question my choices and dig deeper into my text and I feel challenged and excited, intruded upon and stimulated in turn. I'd describe it as a robust but supportive exchange and the best thing is, I'm pretty sure I'm finally going to get the script finished.

The full report on the Mentoring Development Project was submitted to the two Arts Councils in Spring 2006. The abridged version, for general circulation, was ready in September 2006. It is frustrating that the report has not yet been printed or made available on the Arts Council's website. If you'd like further information about the project please contact Valerie Bistany at vbistany@hotmail.com.



Michelle Read is a Dublin-based performer and dramatist. Her English/Polish radio play Haven / Przysta will be broadcast on RTE Lyric FM later this year.



THE DRAMA OF BEING A TEENAGER

Ambitious and highly competitive, **NT SHELL CONNECTIONS**, the (UK) Royal National Theatre's festival of youth theatre, made its fourth annual appearance at Cork's Everyman Palace Theatre last month. Could it be the spur for the creation of homegrown festivals of new writing for young people asks **NICOLA DEPUIS**.



PREGNANT THIRTEEN-YEAR-olds, blood-thirsty zombies, murderers and body-swapping teenage girls were all on the menu for this year's NT Connections festival. Youth theatre comp-

panies from Kildare, Carlow, Portlaoise and Dublin descended on the Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork - the only Irish theatre affiliated with the (UK) Royal National Theatre's festival - for what is regarded as an extremely important youth theatre event.

The idea for the festival was first conceived in 1993 when Suzy Graham Adriani, Youth Theatre Producer for the National Theatre, decided it was time to respond to the growing demand for new plays specifically for young people. Associate Director of the NT Connections festival, Anthony Banks, explains: "There was

a culture of teenage actors performing adaptations of classic plays and twentieth-century plays written for the adult canon, which weren't a good fit stylistically or thematically and resulted in the actors playing stories that didn't really echo with their life experience."

In response, Suzy Graham-Adriani began commissioning established writers to write plays for young people. Each year since then, ten sixty-minute plays have been commissioned and there are now almost one hundred plays published in the NT Connections anthologies by Faber, Methuen and Collins.

"Suzy commissions the writers who are exciting and have proven they can write original, robust, interesting plays. The only guideline is that they have to last an hour or so and will be performed by teenagers," says Anthony. "The writers have about a year to write their play and during that time they work with the NT Young Company, thirty gifted actors who sight-read well for the initial readings, and are articulate and sensitive and have excellent analytical skills in test-

ing the plays and reckoning whether or not they chime for their age group."

Five years ago, the National Theatre expressed an interest in gaining a partner in the Republic of Ireland to produce the plays in an Irish festival, and con-

tacted the Everyman Palace Theatre. At the time Oonagh Kearney, Thomas Conway and Tom Creed were Directors of the Everyman Palace Studio and until it lost its funding in 2005, the Studio was responsi-

The participants' excitement and enthusiasm about the feast of shows was palpable, but where were the Cork youth theatre companies in all this? Where were Graffiti and Boomerang?

ble for creating the links between Irish youth theatres and the programme from the National Theatre.

Sarah Dee, Press Officer for the Everyman Palace Theatre believes that it was this dynamic trio who made the festival the success it is in Ireland today. "They worked tirelessly to get audiences in to the shows, to get young people interested in theatre criticism and they did a fantastic job publicising the festival," she says "They are responsible for the festival's success here, in my opinion."

Over the past four years, several Irish youth theatre companies have been chosen - including Galway Youth Theatre last year with *Liar* by Gregory Burke - to perform at the closing festival in July at the National Theatre in London, where each play from the portfolio is performed. These companies are considered to have produced the best version of their chosen script and are chosen by NT Connections assessors who attend the original production of each play. This year, however, no Irish companies were chosen.

To open the 2007 festival in Cork, Kildare Youth Theatre, under the direction of Peter Hussey, performed *DeoxyriboNucleic Acid* by Dennis Kelly. This dark play tells the story of a party that goes horrendously wrong when a group of teenagers begin to believe that they murdered one of their classmates. Seventeen year-old Sophie Cadogan, who plays the role of Lea in the play, has been acting since she joined the Kildare Youth Theatre in 2003. "I thought it was going to be one of those awful stage school outfits, all dancing and flashing smiles, but it turned out to be about learning how to act. I was hooked pretty soon and once I saw that there were learnable skills that I could master like articulation, interpretation, composition, breath management...I thought I would like to develop this further. And so now I really want to be a professional actor."

This is Sophie's third year participating in the NT Connections festival and she describes the play her company chose this year as: "a wonderfully imaginative take on philosophical issues such as...what is happiness? And where does



Chatroom by Enda Walsh, which was staged at the NT Connections festival, in London in 2005.

human morality fit in the context of a universe full of titanic explosions and nuclear reactions? It's a wonderful play and we're still discussing it."

Before the shows started, hundreds of teenagers from the theatre companies involved, or from local schools, were found gathered around the front door of the Everyman, chatting, smoking and discussing the workshops held earlier. Every year, as part of the festival, the youth groups involved are treated to various workshops. This year, John Lillis and John Gough facilitated a Hip Hop / Performance studio, while Marcus Bale from the Snatch Comedy Troupe had the young crowd roaring with laughter during a Comedy Improvisation workshop. Erin Bell Fanore led the group in Characterisation, and Donal Gallagher, the director who brought Cork's Boomerang Theatre to London in 2005 with *Chatroom*, gave workshops on Performance.

Having worked very hard throughout the day, there's a heaving mass of crossed legs and limbs splayed across the foyer floor. The participants' excitement and enthusiasm about the feast of shows was palpable, but where were the Cork theatre companies in all this? Where was Boomerang? Where was Graffiti?

Emelie Fitzgibbon, Artistic Director of Graffiti Theatre in Cork, explains. "We participated in the festival in 2002 and 2005 and found it a very mixed experience," she says "We have reservations about the competitive nature of the

whole process and it is quite expensive to take part. Also the standard of the scripts is very variable, including some which - even though we do very hard-hitting work - we found unsuitable or just inappropriate for Irish teenagers."

The standard of the scripts is very variable, including some which we found unsuitable or just inappropriate for Irish teenagers.

Louise Rowe, Artistic Director of Performance Lab@ Roundabout Youth Theatre, Ballymun, attended this year's festival with a production of the hard-hitting *Baby*

Girl by Roy Williams. She too believes that the plays commissioned by the NT Connections Festival aren't always suitable for Irish teenagers. "If I am honest, I think that some of them are not a particularly valid representation of Irish teen life. But I do think it is important for youth theatre festivals to happen, just maybe not NT Connections, which, in my opinion, is too competitive."

In order to fill the void of plays written for Irish young people, and produced in a non-competitive way, the National Association of Youth Drama (NAYD) in Ireland is currently commissioning Irish writers to write plays for teenagers to perform. It has already published a collection of plays by well-known playwrights: Mark O'Rowe, Veronica Coburn, Gerry Stemberidge, Max Hafler and Ciarán Gray in *Playshare, Vol 1* (2005), edited by Fíona Ní Chinnéide.

Orlaith McBride from the NAYD says: "Historically NAYD has a policy of non-competitive work and the Board have always felt that the NT Connections programme does have a competitive element to it, regardless of how this is presented. We also feel that this process is not specifically developed to meet the needs of young people as young artists in the process. We want the voice of youth theatre in Ireland represented in the canon of Irish theatre, so we have commissioned a number of Irish writers and have created a panel of dramaturgs to support them in developing the plays. The first drafts will be complete in the autumn."

Peter Hussey, Artistic Director of Kildare Youth Theatre, has participated in the NT festival since 2002. In 2003, their production of Mark Ravenhill's play *Totally Over You*, with Keith Burke in the lead role, was selected to open the NT's festival in London. Peter believes this festival to be "exceptionally important" and that the group's participation in it has opened up many avenues for them.

"It allows us the opportunity to develop networks and exchanges. For example, we met Teatro della Limonaia from Florence through this festival in 2003 and we've gone on to develop close working relations with this company since. We've trained together and produced joint theatre projects – and continue to do so.

"It also gives young people a sense of being involved in something connected



Baby Girl staged by Performance Lab@Roundabout Theatre, Ballymun.

to an international community, that they are participating in a theatre event of major significance internationally."

But are the plays valid representations of teenage life today? "We don't necessarily look for so-called 'teen' plays, as this implies that teenagers are somehow not quite as human as other people," Hussey says. "The issues of violence, love, salvation, loyalty and discovering the meaning of life in general are issues that are as relevant to teenagers as they are to adults."

Louise Rowe says she had reservations about bringing *Baby Girl* to the festival, but it was the cast who made the final decision. "I thought that the play might be too stereotypical. We did our original production as a site-specific event. We took over an empty tower block in Ballymun - I think that had a lot more energy and authenticity."

It's clear that while the competitive aspect of the NT Connections festival is a source of contention for many youth theatre practitioners in Ireland, there is no doubt that this festival is a very important means of producing new work written specially for young people - even if not specifically for Irish young people. Hopefully, now that the NAYD has set the wheels in motion by commissioning new work from Irish writers, it won't be long before youth theatre companies have their pick of festivals in Ireland to work towards.



Nicola Depuis is a journalist and playwright based in Cork. For more information see www.ntconnections.org.uk and NAYD's website, www.youthdrama.ie.

Anything

ANYTHING BUT MAINSTREAM

42

Jack The Lad, *based, of course,*
on Jack and The Beanstalk.

but Mainstream

Experiments in performance rather than issue plays marked the fifth **INTERNATIONAL DUBLIN GAY THEATRE FESTIVAL**. It could go even further in that direction and become a wider gay cultural event rather than a theatre festival writes **FINTAN WALSH**. But in the meantime, the quality of productions left a lot to be desired.

Gay performance in Irish culture does not begin or end with the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival (IDGTF). Even prior to its birth five years ago, local gay audiences had been enjoying a wealth of high-quality, diverse performance practices for some time, in the form of established drag artists (Shirley Templebar, Miss Panti); pageants (The Alternative Miss Ireland, 1987-); parades (Pride, St. Patrick's Day) and festivals (A.L.A.F./A Lesbian Arts Festival). More recently, this tradition has expanded under the contribution of performance troops (Shamcocks, DoppleGäng) and the development of sporting events (Gay Soccer, Gay Rugby).

From a cultural point of view, one of the most interesting dimensions to this pattern of the public performance of gay culture has been the tradition's apparent lack of interest in negotiating with mainstream theatrical convention, leaving the deconstruction of exclusionary grand narratives to lefty academics, writers, and independent theatre makers who were so inclined.

Of course, this relationship to dominant culture has also been compounded by the institutional and infrastructural embeddedness of theatre, and by the perception of it as a complicated, fixed realm, sometimes hostile to any kind of dissidence. In an Irish context, this situation is undoubtedly informed by the

historical predominance of cultural nationalism, and its literary and naturalist mode of representation.

Although Ireland does not have a definable performance art tradition like that of America and Europe, its gay/queer performance culture has prioritised a similar mobility of place, form and categorisation which is not typically associated with formal theatre establishments. The truth is, for many living

The festival seems to have embraced more fully the fact that naturalism and queer culture are uneasy bedfellows, putting more biographical performances, cabarets, musicals and lectures on offer.

and working on the margins, mainstream theatre has long been the enemy of performance.

It appears that one of the aims of the IDGTF is to name and elevate an already existing tradition, with a view to opening it up and stretching it in new directions. Now in its fifth year, the festival seems more confident in this objective, by bending its gay agenda with a higher dose of some good old-fashioned queer performance, prioritising formal experiment over issue-driven drama. Most notably, the festival seems to have embraced more fully the fact that naturalism and queer culture are uneasy bedfellows, putting more biographical performances, cabarets, musicals and lectures on offer, from international and Irish contingents.

While formal innovation is consistent, production quality remains less predictable, and you still get the sense that the festival judges its success on the mere fact of its existence as a cultural or community event, rather than as a highly professional theatre festival. Thankfully, with 171 performances or events scheduled over a two-week period, from youth, amateur and professional contributors, the odds of some hits amid the misses are pretty high.

In the first week, Mark Harris's *Jack the Lad* at Project prepared the way for a number of confessional or biographically-oriented performances. Produced by London New Play Festival, with Nordic Nomad Productions, the piece strove to give the tale of *Jack and the Beanstalk* a contemporary resonance. There are no beans in this version, however, only a monstrous pimp who never materialises on stage and a number of male clients to whom the young Jack prostitutes himself. In this fast-paced, high-pitched performance, Allistar Barton does well in the title role, dipping in and out of direct-address and internal action. But this does not compensate for the play's incredulous catalogue of Ravenhill-esque sexual perversions. Unfortunately, the social context isn't as vivid as it is in the latter's work and the result feels a little gratuitous.



The Boy Who Fell From The Roof, from Artscape New Writing Programme, South Africa.

An interesting take on gay biography came in the form of Pat Bond's *Lorena Hickok and Eleanor Roosevelt: A Love Story*. Produced by Conn Artists Performance Event INC, New York, this piece features Marjorie Conn as acclaimed journalist Lorena Hickok, who describes her thirty-year affair with Eleanor Roosevelt. Conn negotiates the physical intimacy of Cobalt Café with incredible ease, cleverly luring the audience into a world of fact and inference. By theatrically giving voice to a silenced relationship, reality and imagination are brought teasingly close here, and this dynamic holds the performance in rewarding tension.

While this is essentially a monologue, it feels more like traditional storytelling. Conn has performed the role for over nine years in Provincetown, and written other work on the subject, and her enthusiasm for the material shows. This is made very apparent when she breaks from role at the end of her performance to ask the small number of people present if they would like to ask her anything about the relationship. 'Feel free' she adds, 'being Irish you probably don't know much about it already.' The house of American tourists chuckle, but ask regardless.

The show's companion, *Another Lousy Day*, built on this trend of giving voice to the historically silenced, forgotten or forgettable. Developed by Chicago-based David Kodeski, the piece challenges what we consider to be theatre and

what might be included in a gay theatre festival. Kodeski begins the piece by saying that he will not play a character, but will be himself throughout the hour that follows. True to his word, he proceeds to inform the spectators about his re-

Although there was little new Irish writing in the festival, there was a healthy representation of cabaret and musical performances from Irish groups.

search into the life of a woman called Dolores, whose diaries and scrapbooks he discovered in antique stores over a period of time. Dolores was not gay. But her mundane diary entries – which frequently

included the word ‘lousy’ – were interesting enough to draw the attention of the presenter. In addition to showing us the diaries and scrapbooks, Kodeski describes how he eventually discovered Dolores’ true identity. By this time she was dead, but her friends were glad to fill him in about her life, which apparently was not so lousy after all; supplying him with photographs of the face behind the writing. In this movement, the distinction between authorial and personal identity becomes blurred. When the photographs of Dolores are projected behind Kodeski at the end of the hour, we are reminded that this confusion of roles has been mirrored in form. Here, the personal is not political a la the 1970s, but performative for all the parties.

Although there was little new Irish writing in the festival, there was a healthy representation of cabaret and musical performances from Irish groups. *Pageant: The Musical*, directed by festival director Brian Merriman, took over Smock Alley for a week, documenting the final of a US beauty pageant. The six female contestants are all played by cross-dressed male actors to high entertainment, and are joined on stage by a host (Frankie Cavalier) and a cameo appearance by regular drag act Dizzy Dyin’ For it (Noel Sutton). As light entertainment this works well, although the shabby set belies any pretension of glamour. The piece also takes itself too seriously by framing itself as a televised event, complete with a crew that separates the main performance from the audience.

Dublin collective DoppelGäng also played in Smock Alley with their particular brand of queer cabaret. *Mein Camp* figures itself as an homage to the ‘last great era of cabaret,’ supposedly moving from Weimar Berlin, to 1920s’ Paris, to blitzed London. While the troop’s brand of all-lip-syncing, all-dancing, all-cross-dressing may work well in the bars and clubs at which the group sometimes plays, the style does not transfer well to a theatre space. Both the historical and generic contexts of cabaret are purely notional here, and there is nothing that renders the work innovative. Although there are a couple of live numbers



Local favourite Miss Panti in *In These Shoes*

(Shani Williams' performance as Slick O' stands out), the group's fidelity to the lip-syncing convention of drag is perhaps its greatest let-down, as neither the choreography nor costuming are impressive enough to keep the piece afloat.

Menno Kuijper's *The Gaydar Diaries* at The New Theater functions as a welcome update on social and sexual networking, mixing theatricality with musicality and comedy. Produced by Naked Angel Productions London, this Edinburgh hit explores the ups-and-downs of life using the popular gay connection website. The six cast members are as comfortable with abject comedy as they are with ribald show tunes. The only shame is that the production is often over-cautious, and many scenes on the brink of fabulousness are cut short. Quick-fire gags, rather than long-linger laughs seems to be the objective here.

As internationally focused as this programme was, the best talent was home spun. Thisispopbaby - the exciting new company behind last year's Dublin Fringe Festival hit, *Danny and Chantelle* - bring *In These Shoes* to the New Theatre. Starring Miss Panti, the piece represented the most successful synthesis of many of the recurring elements of the festival, incorporating a lecture format and confessional thrust with cross-dressing, singing and stand-up comedy.

Usually, Panti is her own man, but in a break with tradition she is directed here by Phillip McMahon in her delivery of a module on the blondes that inspired her.

The class of aspiring gender illusionists is treated to their incandescent teacher's astute observations on Catherine Nevin, Anne Doyle and Twink, as well as analysis of international icons. The show moves lanes when Panti becomes her own, and our, subject of investigation. In another break with the conventions of drag and those of Panti's persona, the Mayo girl recalls the death of her childhood pet

sheep, Dusty Springfield. In these moments, the persona and the person shift and slide to great intrigue, culminating in an extract from an American talk show that featured Panti's transformation from a 'daughter'

It remains to be seen how or if the festival will control the poor quality of many of its performances, not to mention justifying the gayness of a piece of theatre in the first place.

into a hunky son: Rory O'Neill. In many ways, the trajectory of the piece mirrors a trend of the festival: it emphasises the personal in the performance. It also reminds us that Panti's highly accomplished queer performance style both precedes and exceeds the festival of which her show is part. Which begs the question, why worship at stony effigies next to the real deal?

Above all else, the IDGTF seems intent on having a classificatory function, seeking to remind its audience of the relationship between gayness and queer culture, reclaiming homosexuality as a political category from its life as device in 'high' artistic culture, or its assimilation as queer aesthetic in popular culture. In this, the festival is as much recuperative as it is innovative.

It still remains to be seen how or if the festival will control the poor quality of many of its performances, not to mention justifying the gayness of a piece of theatre in the first place. Just because the festival may be highly attended does not mean that it is producing good theatre or even fostering theatre audiences in the long term. The most obvious solution would be to reframe the festival as a gay cultural event that might make links with similar events such as the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival or Pride, for example. From a critical perspective, this kind of reorganisation would liberate the festival from defending the quality of its theatre productions - as I suggest it needs to do if it is to be taken seriously - and enable it to focus on political issues, public awareness and community-building. Surely we need more of these kinds of events than we need another theatre festival.



Fintan Walsh recently completed a PhD at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin, where he teaches part-time.



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Slipping through the Nets

A new collection of essays on women in Irish theatre recovers work by playwrights well worth reviving and asks some important questions about the obstacles to women's participation in theatre, writes CAITRÍONA CROWE.

THE FINDINGS REPORT OF THE Irish Playography placed online in mid-2006 provides a breakdown of original produced plays by gender which reveals that, for the period 1904 – 2006, seventy-six per cent were written by males and twenty-four per cent by females.

Within this stark imbalance, some interesting counter-facts emerge: Lady Gregory comes first among playwrights for new plays or adaptations professionally produced, with Marie Jones, Christine Longford and Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy in eighth, ninth and tenth places. All four women are ahead of Sean O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, John B. Keane and W. B. Yeats. Ria Mooney and Caroline Fitzgerald appear among the top ten directors, in terms of new plays di-

rected, and Bronwen Casson, Wendy Shea and Tanya Moisewitsch among the top ten designers. As expected, female actors are particularly well represented, at forty-two per cent of the acting cohort in the twentieth century.

So while far more men than women wrote, directed and designed plays in Ireland in the twentieth century, those women who did these things were prolific and successful. This new volume of essays on women in Irish theatre poses a number of questions: what was it that prevented women from playing a larger part in theatre? What kinds of subject matter were explored by female playwrights, and what light do these explorations shed on women's position in theatre and in the broader society? How did societal structures and attitudes affect women's participation

**WOMEN IN IRISH DRAMA:
A CENTURY OF AUTHOR-
SHIP AND REPRESENTATION**

EDITED BY MELISSA SIHRA

Palgrave, 2007

in theatre, and how are women represented by (some) male playwrights?

The question that doesn't get answered is why certain women, including those named above, flourished in Irish theatre in spite of the many obstacles which confronted them. Class, financial independence, the more fluid world of the theatre, personal connections and determination must all have played a part in their achievements, and undoubtedly a study of successful women practitioners would tell us more than merely the stories of those individuals.

This is a fascinating, instructive set of essays, set out chronologically in three periods (1900 – 1939, 1940 – 1969, 1970 – 2005) with four essays for each period, and contextual interchapters which give an overview of each timeframe. There is a helpful introduction by the Editor, short and interesting pieces by two practitioners, Marina Carr and Olwen Fouéré, and a most useful list of Irish women playwrights from 1663 to date (they number 258 in all).

There is an emphasis on recuperation of lost or unproduced women writers, particularly for the earlier period, and a pervasive intention to locate the studies of particular writers in their time and place. Writers such as

The question that doesn't get answered is why certain women, including those named here, flourished in Irish theatre in spite of the many obstacles which confronted them.

Suzanne Day, Geraldine Cummins, Alice Milligan, Patricia O'Connor and Margaret O'Leary have their work explored and contextualised, while better known writers such as Lady Gregory, Anne Devlin and Marina Carr are examined from new perspectives.

Lisa Fitzpatrick concludes her essay on Teresa Deevy, Margaret O'Leary and Lady Gregory with this observation: "It can be no coincidence that, at

the time when legislation was increasingly confining women to the domestic sphere, there should appear on stage so many female-authored heroines who long for, and are denied, a life of freedom and adventure."

After the creative turmoil of the Revival and revolutionary periods, the 1920s and 1930s saw a progressive disempowerment of Irish women, some of whom had expected a very different outcome following independence.

A conservative and socially powerful church, poor economic circumstances, strong lay patriarchal convictions and highly traditional conceptions of the family combined to banish women from juries and public service jobs (after marriage), to ban contraception and information about it, and to formalise women's role as wife and mother to the detriment of other choices. There were many heroic resistors to

this programme, but sadly, many more women internalised the dominant male concept of womanhood and vocally opposed moves to change it.

Teresa Deevy's play, *The King of Spain's Daughter*, written in 1935 and performed at the Abbey Theatre, gives us a young woman, Annie Kinsella, who longs for travel and adventure, but instead is forced by her brutal father, and society in general as represented by the sour and disapproving Mrs. Marks, to marry a staid young man who has been courting her for years. She convinces herself of the feasibility of this outcome by ascribing to him a potential for violence which makes him at least less dull, although dangerous. The Irish family as presented here is violent, unloving, greedy and anti-sexual. Fitzpatrick is particularly interesting on the play's critical reception: all of the (male) critics misunderstood the ending, presuming that Annie's decision to marry is an escape rather than a new confinement.

There is an illuminating essay by Mark Phelan on neglected Northern Irish women playwrights, Alice Milligan, Helen Waddell and Patricia O'Connor. Milligan invented the Revivalist *tableau vivant*, a popular theatrical form which statically dramatised Irish mythological characters such as Cuchulain, Queen Maeve, Oisín, Diarmaid and Gráinne, and personifications of Ireland like Dark Rosaleen and the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

Phelan argues convincingly that these *tableaux* "partially paved the way, dramaturgically, visually and politically, for the most famous stage entrance in Irish theatre history: Maud Gonne's onstage embodiment of Kathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's and Gregory's 1902 drama."

Helen Waddell, better known as an historian and novelist, also wrote two plays. The first, *The Spoiled Buddha*, was produced at the Ulster Theatre in 1915. The play is an attack on the institutional misogyny of organised religions, both eastern and western. Waddell herself was the victim of sexist discrimination, in that she was passed over three times for a lecturing post at Queen's University's English department.

Patricia O'Connor, a schoolteacher by profession, wrote plays in the 1940s about education, emigration, work, family life and abortion, and was more interested in interrogating state structures than dealing with broad philosophical notions of the "nation". Phelan quotes extensively from a few of her plays, and the excerpts strongly support his call for a revival of her work. Her forthright, uncompromising feminism is a wonderful shock, coming as she did from the rigidly patriarchal Ulster Protestant community.

The use of otherworld figures, folkloric, mythological or ghostly, runs right through the repertoire, from La-

dy Gregory and Helen Waddell to Éilis Ní Dhuibhne and Marina Carr. It may be that the symbolic flexibility, dramatic potential and stereotypical strengths of such figures provide ways for women writers to evade the nets of patriarchal society and realistic representation, nets which might entangle them in dullness or bare didacticism. It is a rich seam of ambiguity, allowing for representations of female power which transgress contemporary norms, but have the support of the state's founding myths.

The section on male playwrights' representation of women focuses on Samuel Beckett, Stewart Parker and Frank McGuinness. Beckett's formidable matrons are described by Anna McMullan as "domestic enforcers of the social norms of their milieu", and she traces the gradual disappearance of the female body from Beckett's drama, from *All That Fall*, a radio play, to *Happy Days*, where Winnie gradually vanishes into the ground, to *Not I*, in which only a mouth appears. Eamonn Jordan gives a thorough picture of Frank McGuinness's women, and explores his empathy with fluid gender roles, which allows him to create memorable and believable

The symbolic flexibility, dramatic potential and stereotypical strengths of otherworld figures provide ways for women writers to evade the nets of patriarchal society and realistic representation, nets which might entangle them in dullness or bare didacticism.

strong female characters.

The final essay on Marina Carr, by Melissa Sihra, Editor of the volume, is cheering in its representation of a woman playwright who has always done what she liked, and never felt obliged to compromise on subject matter, language or staging. There is a lovely quote from Garry Hynes: "Marina is one of those people who confidently walks down the road where other people are saying "Don't even think of going there". And Marina says "Of course. Let's go. Of course I'm going there".

There is much more in this volume to enjoy and absorb; while it does not amount to a history of women in Irish drama in this period, it provides a spectrum of exemplary practitioners, some of whom are well-known, others almost forgotten. Hopefully, its appearance will encourage further scholarship in the area. A biography of Dorothy McArdle is needed, and inter-genre studies and international comparative studies are fruitful fields for exploitation. It must be time for a festival of Irish women's drama, with full productions and readings, which would give us the opportunity to experience these pieces as they

were meant to be – on stage, with actors. Perhaps one of the university schools of drama or women's studies would consider taking this project on, and allow these characters to

breathe again through some of our wonderful actors.

Catriona Crowe is Chair of the Irish Theatre Institute.

Through the Leaves

PATRICK LONERGAN browses through the latest publications on Irish theatre.

W.B. YEATS ONCE FAMOUSLY ASKED if his *Countess Cathleen* had sent out "certain men the English shot" in 1916. This idea – that a play at the Abbey could inspire people to insurrection – has always seemed self-indulgent, but it has been placed in context by the publication of a fascinating new anthology called *Four Irish Rebel Plays* from James Moran (Irish Academic Press, €19.95).

Moran has gathered together works by three signatories of the 1916 Proclamation – Pádraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and James Connolly – together with a play by Terence McSwinney, the Lord Mayor of Cork who died on hunger strike in 1920. The plays all aimed to encourage support for military action in Ireland, but they're more than simple propaganda, with each writer attempting to find new ways of representing Irish culture, often with interesting results.

The book also features a finely written introduction by Moran, and an epilogue charting the attempts of various theatre companies to revive these plays after the death of their authors. We may not see any of these plays in production in the near future, but this anthology will be invaluable to anyone interested in the history of Irish theatre. It also provides a useful counterpoint to the works of living writers who have been involved in Irish paramilitarism, such as Laurence McKeon and Danny Morrison.

Also just out is Anthony Roche's *Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel* (£17.99stg). The Companion series is geared mainly towards undergraduate students: each book features short explanatory essays written in plain English by academics. Roche's book achieves these aims, but does much more, giving us a study that will be

as useful to theatre practitioners as it is enjoyable to general readers. It covers the major elements of Friel's career: there are individual essays on *Translations*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Faith Healer*, together with discussions of Friel's work in relation to the Troubles and Russian drama.

Most usefully, the book features essays by other writers – Thomas Kilroy and Frank

McGuinness both contribute. And there are important considerations of the visual and performative elements of Friel's work too. When so much of the criticism of Friel's plays exaggerates the political elements of his work at the expense of his theatricality, Roche's book deserves praise for achieving an easy balance between the two.

Performativity is also an important element of Ondrej Pilny's new book, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Litteraria Pragensia, €12). Focussing on major figures from Yeats and Synge up to Friel, Stewart Parker, and McDonagh, Pilny considers how important irony is for the representation of Irish identity in our drama. Written with clarity and insight, his book provides innovative new readings of familiar plays.

The Prague-based Litteraria Pra-

gensia has also recently produced *Monologues* by Clare Wallace, a collection of essays on a form that is certainly well known in Ireland. As the book illustrates, the one-man shows of O'Rowe, McPherson, and similar Irish writers occurred at a time when monologue was thriving internationally

With so many Irish plays premiering overseas lately, we're dependent on the work of publishers such as Nick Hern Books to have a full sense of what's going on. One of their most interesting new arrivals is Ailis Ní Riain's *Tilt*

(£8.99stg), a lyrical and poetic family drama that is reminiscent both of Enda Walsh and Marina Carr. Meanwhile, US-based publisher DPS has brought out Thomas Kilroy's latest adaptation: *Henry (After Pirandello)*.

Finally, we have a new anthology of plays in Irish, featuring the winners of a recent competition to celebrate the 75th anniversary of An Taibhdhearc. Published by Cló Iar-Chonnachta, its highlight is *Jude*, another excellent play from Micheál Ó Conghaile, about a dysfunctional Connemara family (is there any other kind?). The volume also features new work from Breandán Ó hEaghra and Caitríona Ní Chonaola, and retails at €12. 



So, what did you think?

ITM's team of reviewers reflect on the past three months' productions around the country. Some of these reviews were first published on our website: www.irishthemagazine.ie

Daisy Maguire and Penelope Maguire in Leaves

On the Brink

Alcohol abuse, suicide and nervous breakdown are perennial themes in drama, but they're also serious social problems, growing worse in recent years. Are playwrights looking for answers or simply using these issues as plot devices?

DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES

By J.P. Miller, in a new version

by Owen McCafferty

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Directed by Roy Heayberd

Design: Sabine D'Argent

Lighting: Conleth White

Sound Design: Rod McVey

With Gemma Mae Halligan

and Fergal McElherron

27 April – 26 May 2007. Reviewed 1 May

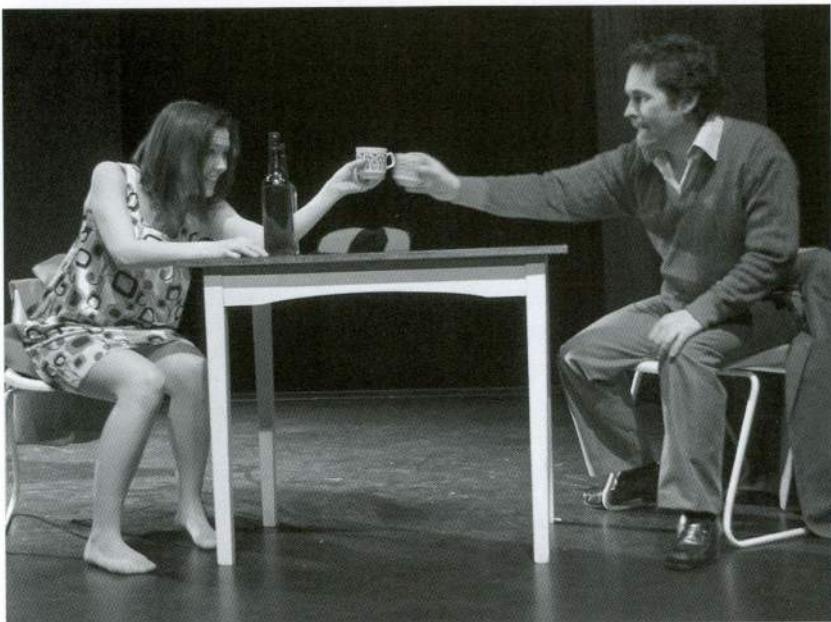
BY DAVID GRANT

WHEN OWEN MCCAFFERTY'S VERSION of J.P. Miller's award-winning 1962 screenplay was premiered at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2005, the producer's primary intention was probably to bring the original story to the attention of a new generation of theatre-goers. This new production at the Lyric rightly throws the focus more on Owen McCafferty. For this is much more than a simple revisiting of another writer's earlier work. It is a bringing-together of two quite distinct aspects of McCafferty's writing. In *Days of Wine and Roses* we see a fusion of the

youthful exuberance of plays like *Freefalling* and *Mojo Mickeybo* with the more reflective world-weariness of *Closing Time* and *Cold Comfort*. *Shoot the Crow* and *Scenes from the Big Picture* have mixed these elements, but in *Days of Wine and Roses* they have become inseparable.

This is a deeply personal and intimate story of a young couple's terrifying trajectory from first love to the ravages of their shared alcoholism. Watching the play, I was reminded of the explanation of classical tragedy offered by Arthur Miller (who features fleetingly in one of the photographic sequences used to punctuate the play) – that tragedy is not about showing why something happens, but why it almost doesn't happen. In this sense, *Days of Wine and Roses* rises to the heights of true tragedy in that we are allowed to see glimpses of more hopeful possible futures, even as the couple grapple with their illness, only for their aspirations to come crashing down in the next scene.

The move from its original American setting to Belfast and London and



Gemma Mae Halligan and Fergal McElherron in *Days Of Wine and Roses*

to a timespan right across the 1960s gives a Northern Ireland audience a special sense of connection with the two protagonists, Donal and Mona. But as always in McCafferty's work, place and history are incidental to his main preoccupation with character. The unfolding years are artfully evoked by music and photo montages that capture the spirit of the period and this includes the onset of the Troubles. But this is significant more for its lack of influence on the action than as a material part of the story. It serves to heighten the emotional power of Donal's final return to his homeland, but does not intrude into the privacy of the characters' collapsing world.

The use of only two actors creates a powerful sense of intimacy. Both characters have an exceptional complexity and depth and Fergal McElherron (Donal) and Gemma Mae Halligan (Mona) are well matched as they ride the roller-coaster action together. After a slightly tentative start, they quickly achieve a total intimacy, even when they seem most estranged. Roy Heayberd's direction deftly negotiates their constantly changing relationship through a mise-en-scene of great delicacy. Deprived of an interval drink (perhaps appropriately!), some audience members I spoke to afterwards found the relentless accumulation of scene on

scene for nearly two hours without interruption almost overwhelming, but the pace of the production and total engagement of both performers held me rapt from beginning to end.

Sabine D'Argent's darkly monochrome setting, though spare and simple, held many surprises, with sliding panels smoothly changing the topography of the stage and marking the transitions between scenes. Clothes rails left and right allowed the audience to monitor the costume changes and heightened their significance, though that significance was not always clear. Conleth White's precise lighting took full advantage of the set's sombre surfaces and used venetian blinds to telling effect. But the device of marking pivotal moments of the action with the collapse of these blinds seemed somewhat trite, as was the decision to hold a final light on the bottle of drink left on stage after the actors' final exit. Apart from being rather obvious, this image also seemed to take away from the agency of the characters, suggesting that it was, after all, all the fault of the drink – a conclusion refuted by almost every line of dialogue.

These minor quibbles aside, this was in every respect a fine production and a timely reassertion of the Lyric's capacity to deliver work of international quality. All the more gratifying, therefore, that both actors have strong local links, Gemma Mae Halligan hav-

ing trained and Fergal McElherron having begun his professional career here. This endorsement of local talent, combined with the use of a veteran Belfast director and a French designer amounts to an encouraging signpost towards the Lyric's future. With a brand new building in prospect and the welcome appointment of Michael Diskin as Executive Producer there is every reason to hope that a bright future for the Lyric is heralded by this production.

David Grant is a lecturer in Drama at Queen's University Belfast.

DUBLIN CAROL

by Conor McPherson

Eveyman Palace Theatre

Directed by Patrick Talbot

Set: Sabine D'Argent. Lighting: Conleth White

Costumes: Leonore McDonagh

With Liam Carney, Vanessa Keogh,

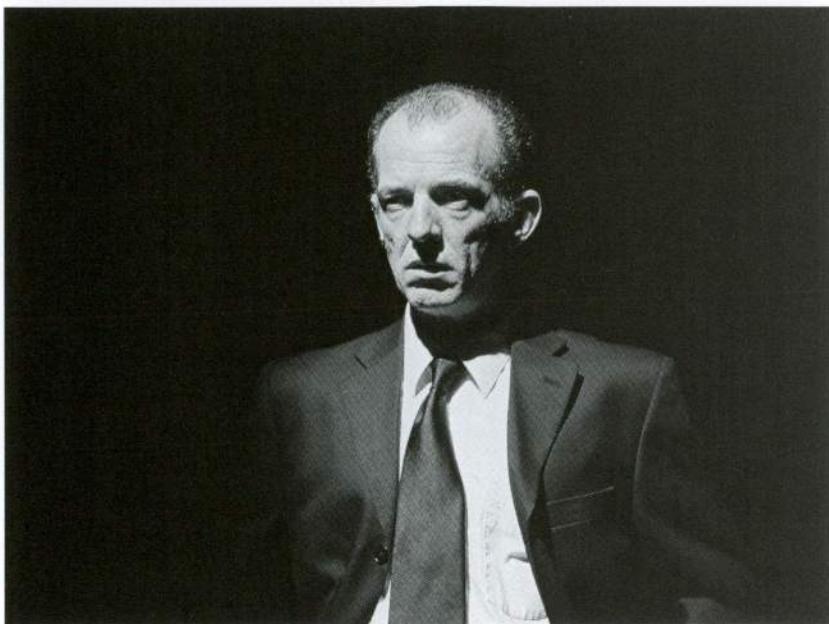
Stephen Kelly

On tour, Town Hall Theatre, Galway,

Reviewed 21 February

BY CLAIRE-LOUISE BENNETT

BINGE-DRINKING AMONG THE YOUNG generates considerable media interest, with TV dramas as well as news broadcasts exploiting this unfortunate trend in our society for dramatic effect. Conor McPherson makes a commendable and ultimately successful decision to explore alcohol use by focusing on the experiences, or ex-



Liam Carney in *Dublin Carol*

cuses, of a group that, in contrast, is ubiquitous but largely ignored: the fifty-something working-class male.

John, played by Liam Carney, works in an undertakers' office, though his occupation is of secondary importance to other elements of his character. We come to know him through his interaction with two younger characters: Mark (Stephen Keogh), who has just started at the undertakers, and a daughter (Vanessa Keogh) he hasn't seen for a long time who has come to tell him her mother, his estranged wife, is close to death. John also connects with a third presence with reflex-regularity: a bottle of whiskey.

Ostensibly *Dublin Carol* could be

seen as story that explores alcoholism. However, to accept that interpretation would be to prioritise issues over individuals. In McPherson's play the protagonist's isolation is in part due to an erroneous belief that unconditional love is something to be feared and avoided: John is shown to be emotionally inadequate; an inconstant husband and unreliable father. Compassionate audiences, reluctant to censure a pathetic soul, require a bit of back story when faced with a character like this – the bleak tales from childhood that will absolve John from the full burden of his careless behaviour. Given the sensational detail that current confes-

sional goes in for, you wonder what ogre McPherson will pull from the bag to explain John's inertia. The hardship he comes up with is neither monstrous nor unusual. As a child, John witnessed his father beating his mother; he became afraid and ran away. His cautious reaction as a child has been reconfigured in his mind as a demonstration of cowardice and, as he got older and had a family of his own, it became a more complex fear of being unable to protect his family from harm. John is therefore governed by an irrational fear, made worse by alcohol. There's nothing manifestly tragic or dramatic about a drinker's life: the day-to-day routine is dull. John's present circumstances and past experiences are not especially unfortunate: McPherson's laudable achievement is to reveal how poignant, enduring, inescapable and tyrannical the commonplace can become.

The meaning of McPherson's play extends further than the world of his characters. There is a peculiar lack of ownership, of authority: this isn't a story dealing in outcomes. A notable aspect of the play is that McPherson resists an anthropomorphic treatment of alcohol –it does not possess John, it does not control him, he is not in its 'grip'. This implies that John's independence is, to a meaningful extent, still intact so that the idea of rehabilitation becomes thorny; indeed

there is nothing to indicate that John will 'change his ways'. By refusing to diagnose John, McPherson bypasses the need to find solutions or, indeed, remedies.

This is a huge dramatic risk because so much hangs on the curative process; thematically it enables reconciliation with loved ones and reintegration into society, and ultimately it facilitates dramatic resolution. The clock chimes five in John's office, the time his daughter is due to return to take him to see his dying wife, the lights fade but the image of John lingers: by putting into focus those men who ordinarily flicker along the periphery, immediately recognisable, instantly forgettable, McPherson shows us that for some the lyrical age never ends.

That I have focused on McPherson's writing is a testament to Patrick Talbot's direction, a less sensitive approach would have buckled the even-handedness of McPherson's script and rendered it prescriptive. The performances were cohesive, with all three actors aiming for subtlety and balance, creating an understated and modestly pitched whole. Sabine D'Argent's set captured the enduring gloom of the small office and evidence of sporadic attempts at brightening the place up. However, the special effect which saw the back wall become the mortuary was somewhat incongruous, and perhaps perversely, high-

lighted the production's strength: its overall lack of contrivance.

Claire-Louise Bennett is a Research Fellow at NUI Galway.

LEAVES

by Lucy Caldwell

Druid Theatre

Directed by Gary Hynes

Design: Francis O'Connor.

Lighting: Ben Ormerod.

With Fiona Bell, Conor Lovett, Kathy Rose

O'Brien, Penelope Maguire and Daisy

Maguire/Alanna Brennan.

1 March – 10 March 2007. Reviewed 2 March

BY SARA KEATING

LUCY CALDWELL'S DEBUT PLAY IS about growing up. Set in a middle-class home in contemporary Belfast, it explores familial relationships brought under pressure when the eldest daughter, Lori, attempts suicide. However, it is not her psychology that is at stake here; instead, the family's reactions to her attempted suicide prove that we cannot control what happens to those we love.

The play opens on the eve of Lori's return from university in England, but her imminent homecoming predicates a traumatic rather than a joyful reunion. High-achiever Lori has hit a low away from home, but her attempted suicide, in her family's eyes, is not only uncharacteristic but illogical. Lori's parents are uncompre-

hending: Belfast's brutal social history has hardly impinged on their privileged middle-class world and they can think of no reason for Lori's depression. Teenager Clover (Penelope Maguire) is livid – not just because her older sister has caused everyone so much anxiety, but because an idol has let her down. Meanwhile, youngest sister Poppy (Daisy Maguire), on the cusp of adolescence, is in denial, preferring to embrace childlike optimism than accept the gravity of events.

The actual return of Lori (Kathy Rose O'Brien) does nothing to dispel the family's pain and confusion: she is withdrawn and listless, and unwilling to shed any light on the circumstances that triggered her suicide attempt. As Caldwell's play unfolds, however, it becomes obvious that *Leaves* will not endeavour to penetrate Lori's darkness or to provide an answer to the questions that families ask when a relative decides to take his or her own life. There are various allusions to the possible environmental, genetic and natural causes for Lori's despair ("It's always been there, inside of me – the sadness – like a shadow"), but none of these potential catalysts is explored.

Suicide appears to be a plot device rather than a real theme in Caldwell's play, which seems much more interested in exploring the crisis of youth becoming adulthood from various

perspectives. Lori's depression, for example, is a reaction to the disjunction of her departure from the stability of family life; while her parents, who have tried to protect their children from the world around them, have yet to realise that with maturity comes independence. Clover's steely anger, meanwhile, is a guard against her vulnerability, as is Poppy's refusal to acknowledge her sister's difficulty. These different positions make for well-drawn characters in the heightened situation; however, without any deeper exploration of the issues that the play raises, the overall impact falls flat.

Francis O'Connor's design empha-

sises the transitional thrust of the plot. The central area of the abstracted stage space is littered with the paraphernalia of Lori's teenage years, while butterflies, worry-dolls, dream catchers and mobiles hang from the ceiling. A long glass bench that spans the width of the stage's back walls is filled with teddy bears lying forlorn, abandoned, on their sides. As the play progresses the girlish geegaws are tidied away, and the stripped emotional plane of adult life looms large. Ben Ormerod's lighting evokes an atmospheric limbo space for the action, particularly in the final scene, where Caldwell's play moves into flashback mode, showing us a



Daisy Maguire and Fiona Bell in Leaves

pre-lapsarian glimpse of the family.

The ensemble cast does a fine job at balancing the high emotions of the piece without ever resorting to hysterics. Conor Lovett gives a powerful performance as the powerless father David, a linguist without the words to comfort his daughters or his wife. Fiona Bell as the mother, Phyllis, teeters close to the edge of emotional collapse herself, while O'Brien is like a raw open wound in a fine performance as the suicidal teenager. For a play that relies so heavily on child actors, Garry Hynes' production copes admirably, and under her direction Penelope Maguire's Clover realistically sways between sulky brat, bossy older sister and drama queen, while Daisy Maguire gives an inspiring performance as the twelve-year-old Poppy. The younger actors, however, struggle to sustain their Belfast accents throughout the ninety-minute performance, a fine detail, perhaps, but one made grating when the Belfast setting seems largely incidental to the play.

Leaves is a strong debut, but while Caldwell shows a real talent for characterisation, she shows a less developed facility for drama: her play fails to find theatrical depth in the very incident – the attempted suicide – that inspires it.

Sara Keating is a journalist and critic. She writes about theatre for a number of publications, including the Irish Times.

KICKING A DEAD HORSE

by Sam Shepard

Peacock Theatre

Directed by Sam Shepard

Sets: Brian Vahey. Lighting: John Comiskey

Costumes: Joan Bergin

With Stephen Rea and Joanne Crawford

12 March - 29 April. Reviewed 24 April

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS FACING Irish drama is that our best writers want to be viewed on the international stage – which, for most of them, means opening in London. The best way of tempting them home is not to appeal to their sense of patriotism but to promote Dublin as one hub on the international network: to ensure that what happens here gets noticed in other countries. So as an exercise in international branding, the Abbey's production of *Kicking A Dead Horse* is as significant as the Gate's Beckett and Pinter festivals: it isn't simply a production of a new play but a statement to the world – and to Ireland's writers – that what happens in Irish theatre can be of international significance.

But in making such a statement, *Kicking A Dead Horse* created such high expectations that it was always likely to be more significant as an event than as a play. Billed as a new work by a major international writer (amazing!), it had convinced Stephen Rea to come back to the theatre

(wow!). The run would only be four weeks' long (gosh!), meaning that tickets were already scarce before the play even opened (where's my credit card?). That the play survived such advance publicity seems miraculous, and certainly made it difficult to ask an essential question: is *Kicking A Dead Horse* any good?

Again, we're dealing with issues of scale here. It's certainly the best new play that the Abbey/Peacock has produced in five years: it feels complete and coherent, and there's a much stronger sense of the author being allowed to develop ideas than we've seen in some time. But as a new work by Shepard, *Dead Horse* is somewhat disappointing: rather like Friel's *Performances*, it's a very short exploration by the writer of the value of his work, considering issues of authenticity, appropriation, and the representation of the self and others. Those themes are very interesting, but the play operates as a coda to work which, it's assumed, we already know, and that might leave some audiences feeling short-changed.

If Shepard is in dialogue with his younger self, he's also in deep conversation with Samuel Beckett: *Kicking A Dead Horse* plays at times like an inversion of *Happy Days*. It opens with Hobart Struther (Stephen Rea) digging a grave in the desert for his horse: Shepard has given us a miser-

able male protagonist where Beckett gives us a happy woman, and a grave where Beckett gives us a mound. But the essential set-up is the same: both plays consider issues of identity and mortality in a hostile and oppressive environment. Whereas Beckett achieves this through monologue, Shepard uses a form of internal dialogue.

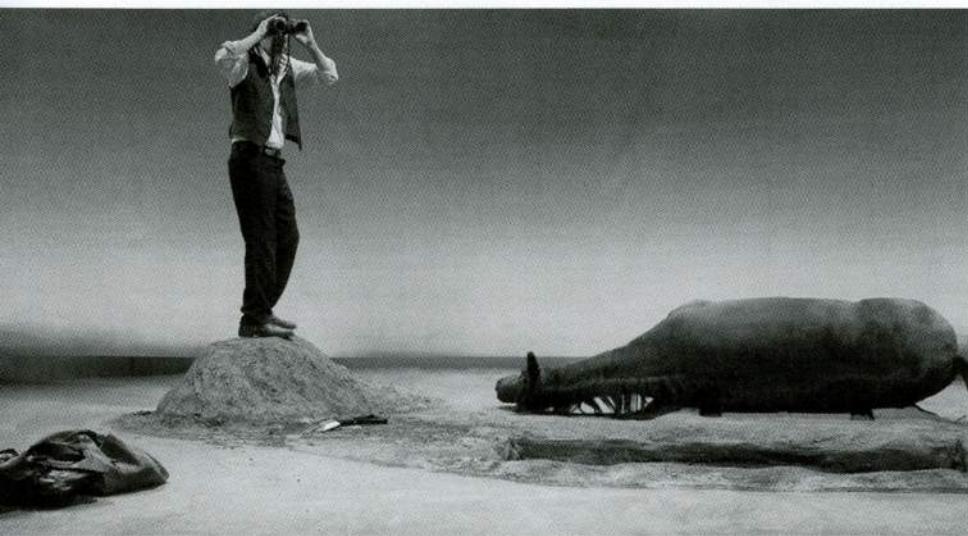
Struther is not addressing the audience but is talking to himself, a point underlined by Shepard's direction, which has Rea adopting distinctive personae for Struther's public and private selves. Rea modulates his voice and stance depending on which aspect of the personality is speaking. He provides us with recognisably different elements of what remains one coherent character - a difficult task that is brilliantly realised.

The play fascinates for a well-paced ninety minutes. The only misstep occurs with the arrival of a "Young Woman" (Joanne Crawford) who emerges from the grave to place a cowboy hat on Struther's head before leaving again without speaking. In the stage directions, we're told that this character should be naked; in



production, however, she's wearing a slip. Struther commodifies American art: his dilemma is that he sees people merely as objects, which he relates to an idealised version of his country's west. As such, he operates as a satirical version of Shepard himself – and could also be compared to

since this makes it difficult for audiences to distinguish between the nudity of the character and the nudity of the actor. But the production's unwillingness to present this character without clothing indicates a nervousness about the material (or about Irish audiences' reaction to it), which



Stephen Rea in *Kicking A Dead Horse*

the Abbey's founder, WB Yeats. But in any case, the woman must be seen not as a person in her own right, but as another commodity – as a manifestation of Struther's imagination (if not his libido).

There is a difficult line between objectifying women and representing male characters who objectify women; and there are also problems with having a character appear on stage who is naked but has no lines,

plays as though Shepard the director has overruled Shepard the writer. While that clash between two manifestations of one person is in keeping with the play's themes, it means that the final moments of the action have been robbed of some of their energy and significance.

Patrick Lonergan is the Reviews Editor of Irish Theatre Magazine and lectures in Drama at NUI Galway.

Talking about Terrorism

English and Scottish drama has experienced a renaissance during the last ten years, due partly to the politicisation caused by the 'war against terror' at home and abroad. Our critics listen to the arguments.

TALKING TO TERRORISTS

By Robin Soans

Calypso Productions

Directed by Barbara Ní Chaoimh

Set: Maggie Douglas

Costumes: Catherine Fay

Lighting: Eamon Fox . Sound: Denis Clohessy

With Damien Devaney, Laurietta Essien,

Michael Grennell, Padraic McIntyre, Chris

McHaleem, Donna Nikolaisen, Helen Norton,

David Pearse

The Beckett Centre, TCD 21-31 March

On tour 2 - 14 April 2007. Reviewed 23 March

BY DEREK WEST

TALKING TO TERRORISTS IS A PIECE OF 'verbatim theatre' – purporting to give us access to the voice of the terrorist. But the invitation implicit in the title is not direct: we also spend a lot of time in the company of victims, observers, negotiators and intermediaries, with a resulting diffusion of effect.

The problem for verbatim theatre in general and Soans in particular is that, having embarked on transcribing conversations, he is dependent on the quality of what he is allowed to hear. There is a promise in verba-

tim theatre that we will receive greater enlightenment than would be offered by an imagined reconstruction or a fictionalised version of events. So in this production we hear Terry Waite (a vivid raconteur), Mo Mowlam (cosy-homely), Norman Tebbitt (home-bound with a disabled wife), and Pat McGee (Brighton bomber). We also hear the voices of British Muslims and African child soldiers. And yet, it's not quite them, because author Robin Soans stops short of naming them and also admits that in order to keep 'things very informal' he did not use a tape recorder. Thus the audience is sold short on the issue of authenticity.

The potency of the piece is its capacity to provoke discussion and debate, which is compatible with Calypso's declared mission to produce plays 'that raise contemporary issues of social injustice and human rights.' On some occasions, Soans achieves a heart-chilling directness in the narrative detail; at others, he is stranded in banality. Who cares if Mo Mowlam's biscuit is broken in three pieces? And don't the efforts of



Calypso Productions' Talking To Terrorists

Nadira – a belly-dancer spouse collected by a British diplomat on a far Eastern tour – to catch the author's attention dilute the horror of which said diplomat wishes to speak? Trouble is, both examples are only mildly amusing; Soans bastes them lightly with irony, but it takes away flavour from the meat underneath.

Another problem for this play is that it is being carried by celebrity. David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (mixing real and imagined conversations of the main players in US-led invasion of Iraq) had similar difficulties. If you use known figures from the recent past, the outcomes are known and the audience is distracted by a kind

of talent-spotting task to Rate the Impersonations. The atmosphere of the subversive war is conveyed far more effectively in theatrical terms through a play such as *Someone to Watch Over Me*, where Frank McGuinness has allowed his creative imagination work on – and achieve some distance from – the bare facts.

Soans elects to present a montage of twenty-nine characters. We do get a sense of the common threads that bind terrorists of different regimes together – childhoods marred by the cruelties and tyrannies of petty officialdom, the slow-burning resentment that arises from the humiliation and horror of official torture - but

somewhat the breadth is eroded by a sense of 'having to get through' all these voices, interchangeable, but not connected.

Many of the insights are provided by a psychiatrist/chorus/commentator. His analysis is lucid but detached from the immediacy of the horror. He provides interesting theories on the structures of terrorism – the charismatic individual (armed with a sense of history and a grudge) who creates the widening ripples of influence that include the tacit supporters at the edges, but nearer the centre the hapless foot soldiers who carry guns and bombs against the enemy. He focuses on the adolescent who is drawn to the 'committed organisation' whose self-esteem is boosted by clandestine brotherhood and who lives through exciting moments of 'peak experience'. This serves to render Soans's reportage coherent, but it's not an arresting dramatic device.

The first-person narratives of the terrorists constitute the most vivid part of the drama – not good on analysis, but gripping in the detail: 'When they put electrodes on your testicles you faint..... When I heard a woman had been killed it near tore a hole in my heart..... Ripping underwear off corpses soon became part of everyday life.... I was supervising torture at the age of 13'.

Director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, working on the bottle-green set of

slamming doors and menacing barbed wire (designed by Moggie Douglas and lit by Eamon Fox), manages this linear narrative with the assistance of eight multi-tasking actors, playing with admirable vigour and pace. The allocation of parts is uneven – Laurietta Essien fares best as the girl soldier (largely because her lines are so horrific), David Pearse inhabits the role of the ex-British Ambassador with a nonchalant authenticity. Helen Norton, Michael Grennell and Chris McHallem are versatile and effective.

Derek West is a member of the Arts and Education Committee (advising the Arts Council) and administers 'Creative Engagement', an arts-promotion scheme for second-level schools.

GAGARIN WAY

by **Gregory Burke**

Island Theatre Company

Directed and designed by Karl Sheils

Lighting: Nick McCall. Costumes:

Jacquie Fitzpatrick

With Ronan Leahy, Gary Murphy, Domhnall O'Donoghue, Jimmy Watson

The Beltable, Limerick, 23 April - 5 May;
Andrew's Lane Studio, 21- 26 May.

Reviewed 21 May

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

GREGORY BURKE'S FIRST PLAY HAS been picking up rave reviews and various awards since its first appear-

ance in July 2001, but perhaps its time for true potency has passed rather more quickly than might have been anticipated. A tale of factory workers who kidnap a company executive with a view to making a political statement, it is a modest comic thriller buoyed by a confident grounding in nineteenth and twentieth century political philosophy. Burke works hard to establish a zone of conflict between varying ideas as to the value and meaning of acts of political violence, deploying transparently 'representative' characters to play out different established political views. However, it is entirely pre-9/11 in sensibility. There is something hollow in its all-white all-male post-socialist end-of-ideology setting, intricately worked as it is. In the age of global terror and the new crusades, talk of the miner's strike, the Genoa riots and Sergei Nechayev just seems a little too last century for its own good.

It would be easier to lay all of this aside if it were not for the fact that, after a tightly plotted first hour, the play stops dead in its tracks for nearly twenty-five minutes while the four characters lay out the philosophy of post-Soviet communism and its relationship with unbridled capitalism, Scottish nationalism, anarchy, nihilism, existentialism, and middle ground liberalism. Drained of its narrative urgency and descending quickly into first play syndrome as the play-

wright speaks altogether too directly through his characters, it is forced to an abrupt and hasty resolution that does not convince except as trope.

Island Theatre Company's production makes the very best of the material. When the play concentrates on suspense and comedy, it works well, and director Karl Shiels marshals his quartet of performers very well. The set is cleverly designed to seem like the rear end of the theatre, complete with fire exit, a few stacked boxes, a broom, some masking tape – the detritus of an anonymous backstage space, in this case the rear of a computer manufacturing concern in Fife. The four actors move around this space with focused economy and deliberation. Ronan Leahy's pugnacious, bristling mastermind wannabe Eddie moves with the arms-akimbo posture of a man likely to lash out at any minute and who frequently does. Domhnall O'Donoghue's deferential recently graduated politics student steps about hesitantly, gently, as if excusing himself with every footfall (when he's not being beaten around the stage). Jimmy Watson's towering Gary, the truly committed socialist yearning for meaning and nobility in his struggle to be heard, conveys a stillness and concentration that complements and contrasts with both of the other characters. Finally Gary Murphy's kidnap victim Frank spends most of his time tied to a chair



Jimmy Watson, Gary Murphy and Ronan Leahy in *Gagarin Way*

while his words (when they come) sow doubt in the minds of his captors about the value of their proposed acts of terror. Shiel keeps them all moving about very well, and all four actors do a creditable job with the accents, though Leahy and O'Donoghue are strongest. However, once they literally sit into the protracted political debate of the last third, the whole play seems to grind to a halt, enlivened only by the continuous stream of sarcastic one-liners and asides which pepper the discourse.

Part of the play's sense of humour comes from its use of the vernacular. Talk of 'cants' and 'pish' elicit the usual giggles, but also bring with

them a healthy sense of skepticism about much of the political rhetoric. The idiom of the working class Scots is as vital as the sense of the Scottish history of socialist resistance, and though Burke is questioning the validity of ideology, there is a wistful nostalgia for a sense of righteousness that again feels just a little removed from the contemporary. That nervy Eddie eventually blows his top comes as no real surprise, particularly as he virtually comes with the word 'chaos' tattooed on his proverbial forehead, but the weight of his violence falls merely on the side of would-be affect – dripping in gore and horror but not nearly chilling

enough to pull off the closing tableau. This and the fact that the entire debate at the centre of this play has completely shifted its frames of reference since September of the year of its first production make it a less than satisfying experience.

ATTEMPTS ON HER LIFE

By Martin Crimp

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Directed by Tom Creed

Design: Conor Murphy

Lighting: Sinéad McKenna.

With Kathy Kiera Clarke, Peter Daly, Ruth Hegarty, Darragh Kelly, Rory Nolan and Hilary O'Shaughnessy
Project Arts Centre, Dublin
20 April – 5 May 2007
Reviewed 28 April

CRUEL AND TENDER

By Martin Crimp

Directed by Anabelle Comyn.

Designed by Ferdia Murphy

Lighting by Kevin McFadden

With Liam Carney, Mark Fitzgerald, Andrea Irvine, Conrad Kemp, Garreth and Justin Keogh, Owen McDonnell, Catríona Ní Mhuirchú, Robert O'Mahoney, Judith Roddy, Yvonne Wandera, India Whisker, Project Arts Centre, Dublin
4 – 19 May 2007
Reviewed 8 May

BY SARA KEATING

ONLY A PLAYWRIGHT BRAVE ENOUGH
to destroy traditional structures of

the theatre could follow such an act with a return to Greek tragedy. For many writers this might be seen as an abandonment of principle: a return to a conservative mode of expression or a surrender to obsolescence. For Martin Crimp, however, such a reversal of form seems a confirmation of his theatrical radicalism. In *Attempts on Her Life* and *Cruel and Tender*, which played back-to-back in unconnected productions at the Project Arts Centre this Spring, Crimp's uncompromising commitment to discomfiting his audience provided a clear through-line between the post-dramatic structure of the former play and the classical form of the latter.

In *Attempts on Her Life*, written in 1995, Crimp is interested in destroying the structures of plot, character, and story that traditionally define the theatrical experience. In a series of seventeen scenes, a group of performers loosely inhabit shifting roles as they trace the movements of Annie, the play's single 'character', who we learn is under threat of death. As the scenes unfold by way of answering machine messages, witness statements, advertisements, and script development meetings, the accumulating evidence suggests three contrasting possibilities: a) Annie is being assassinated by the various sources that describe her movements; b) Annie is being murdered by the various mediums that threaten individual

Kathy Kiera Clarke in *Attempts on Her Life*



identity in the post-modern age; or c) Annie is, understandably, suicidal as she struggles to survive in the face of (either or both of) these dangers.

Of course, Annie herself never appears, and Crimp never lets us know, first-hand, whether Annie is in fact still alive or not. Annie is not really a 'character', but a metaphor for a character, a metaphor for the theatre. She is a cipher killed off as a symbol of Crimp's crisis of faith in a world that is 'overwhelmed by the totality of three-dimensionality.'

Tom Creed's visually arresting and fast-paced production approaches Crimp's play like a series of extended television commercials on a variety of shopping channels. Conor Brady's functional set is not unlike the innards of a television studio, and Crimp's scenes flicker on and off the stage under Sinéad McKenna's spot-lighting as if Crimp or Creed or a virtual God is sitting on the remote control. The ensemble, dressed in an acid palette of primary colours, present themselves with the shallow persuasion of sales representatives; a task more 'exacting than acting', as Crimp's self-referential script lets us know. They are not only selling products within the frame of the play – cars, scripts, art, a lifestyle – they are selling us the play itself. They are attempting to persuade us to stay, to watch, to make us understand Crimp's 'protest against late twenty-

eth-century capitalism.'

And intellectually they succeed, but there are some key aesthetic problems with Creed's production. The decision to place the stage lengthways in the small Project Cube space (a production choice also made in his recent production of *Dream of Autumn*) creates an uncomfortably cramped viewing area for the audience and seriously inhibits sight-lines. The production also relies on some overly fussy and unnecessary 'stage business' to give the scenes movement and fluidity (the multiple rearrangement of tables and chairs, for example, is a key transition moment between scenes). A more imaginative use of choreography or multi-media would have been more visually effective and would have underscored both the structural rhythm of Crimp's play and the themes at its heart.

In fact the absence of any multi-media devices is thoroughly perplexing (although perhaps it was a budgetary rather than an aesthetic choice); with a play that is so invested in the impact that technology has had on modern life, the decision not to engage with technology threatens to make the production obsolete. However, the innovation of Crimp's post-modern theatricality – particularly in the relatively conservative context of contemporary Irish theatre-making – manages to ensure that the produc-

tion remains engaging until the end, even if the resonant feeling when the lights come up is akin to the exhaustion felt after a shopping spree, when the adrenalin has gone and your credit card bill weighs heavy in your hand.

Shopping seems to be a metaphor for female sexuality in Crimp's 2004 play, *Cruel and Tender*, a version of Sophocles' tragedy, *The Women of Tracchis*. Shaped by a classical structure, familiar mythological characters and a plot that will move unflinchingly towards a fatalistic end, on the surface it might seem that *Cruel and Tender* marks a U-turn in Crimp's dramaturgy; that his faith in the theatre as a moral compass for mankind has been re-awakened. Any expectation of such an altruistic aesthetic, however, is immediately deflated, as *Cruel and Tender* is ultimately devoid of any of the consolation of Sophocles' original play.

The Women of Tracchis has always been an uncomfortable 'feminist' play. It presents a familiar hero, Herakles, in an unfavourable light, in order to highlight the plight of his wife Deianeira. By doing so Sophocles seeks to show how the domestic world is often torn apart by political decisions. However, Herakles' biggest mistake is not political but personal, and as Deianeira finds her position usurped by a slave girl captured in the war, her revenge begins the undoing of the household; just desserts for

Herakles, perhaps, but female autonomy, the tragedy makes clear, is dangerous ground for the state.

In *Cruel and Tender* Crimp transposes the classical story to contemporary times. Herakles is a British general in the Middle East, and the political stakes seem just as high as those in Sophocles' imagined polis. And indeed they are, but Crimp's attempt to draw parallels between gender politics and the politics of war come with some troubling consequences that are more serious than those of the Greek original. As Amelia (Crimp's Deianeira) proclaims in one of the play's first lines that victim 'is not a part I am willing to play', Crimp lays his feminist cards on the table. Yet in his unflinchingly unsympathetic characterisation of Amelia, his misogynistic representation of her chorus of cute beauticians, and his unbearably patronising representation of a young girl's growth into womanhood, Crimp does not merely make his women victims; he makes them victims of their own desire for feminist liberation.

His women talk about masturbation as the most important stage of foreplay. They use their sexuality and their vulnerability for material gain. They think that children are 'tiny terrorists' and that 'motherhood is a waste of time. And – that key marker of liberated womanhood – they use *Cosmo* as their guide to getting what



ROS KAVANAGH

Liam Carney and Andrea Irvine in Cruel and Tender

they want from life. Crimp's foot is firmly on the 'post-' side of the feminism – the side that can deconstruct the dangers of essentialised concepts of womanhood. If Crimp were to suggest some positive agency for women, his overwhelming negative standpoint might be palatable; but there is none.

Anabelle Comyn's production unfolds with the staginess of an episode of *Jerry Springer*. A hanging metal trellis marks out the parameters of Ferdia Murphy's chic set, while projecting the gridded shadows of a prison cell when Kevin McFadden's lights dim. The play's structure too suggests an episodic, chat-show format: the first half dominated by the women's hysteria; the post-interval section given over to the rage of the men.

Andrea Irvine is a cold, perhaps clinically depressed Amelia, a woman so consumed by herself and her aging body that she is indifferent to the world at war around her, and callously uninterested in her only son. But the unhappy world that Amelia is trapped in is a world of her own making; with an education and a burgeoning career ahead of her, she sacrifices it all for her sexual relationship with her husband, staking her life on a physical beauty that will not last. Catríona Ní Mhuruchú, India Whisker, and Judith Roddy's 'girls' attempt to draw comedy from their limited roles as dominatrices to Con-

rad Kemp's Robert, and as preening panderers to their mistress. Yvonne Wanderaas the slave-girl is delightfully self-aware of her sexual primacy, but no manner of canniness can compensate for a life so devoid of content that shopping is the only consolation for the trauma of terrorism.

And yet the men are no better, exploiting their political power for sexual favours and inflicting their rage upon the women who have supported them despite their transgressions. *Attempts on Her Life* may have taken its interest in the deconstruction of character literally, but *Cruel and Tender*'s unflinchingly unsympathetic view of human nature is a character assassination of a far more brutal kind. Despite some fine poetic speeches about the nature of war and the endless spawn of terror breeding terror, Crimp seems to have no interest in providing either a political message or consolation for his audience.

Attempts on Her Life may leave you cold with its deconstruction of the shallow surfaces of the contemporary world, but the chilling effect of *Cruel and Tender* resonates more deeply. Not because there are characters with which we can identify, a plot which we can follow, and a definite conclusion that we can see through to its end, but because in the superficial post-modern world of late Twentieth Century capitalism mankind is still capable of atrocities of such abhor-



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OTHELLO

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Second Age Theatre Company

Directed by Alan Stanford

Designed by Carol Betera

Featuring Johnny Lee Davenport,

Maeve Fitzgerald, Colin O'Donoghue,

Simon O'Gorman

The Helix, 13 February - 9 March

Reviewed 1 March

BY FINTAN WALSH

THE STAGING OF PRESCRIBED curriculum texts is often considered to be an uncreative and vaguely opportunistic enterprise. There is something about the clarification of an artwork for a ready-made school audience that jars with our romantic notions of theatre. While Second Age might well be seen to lead this tradition in Irish theatre by frequently staging Leaving Certificate texts, the sparkly insight of the company's *Othello* is more illuminating than exploitative.

As two coaches offload students outside the Helix, the preconceptions are hard to shake off. Fears are heightened as I, and a few teachery-

types, clamber through the student-heave to our seats, dodging knees, interrupting conversations, and ignoring grunts of annoyance. As if she spotted a few of us outsiders from the wings, the company's Box Office Manager, playing the cranky headmaster, steps on stage to promote good manners and school the audience in theatrical convention: 'If you can see and hear the actors,' she advises, 'they can see and hear you. This is not the cinema or television'. She softens the caution by advising that inattention will prevent a full appreciation of the 'very attractive cast', and in doing so encourages a degree of Elizabethan ribaldry. The wolf-whistles resound before we can even judge for ourselves. The perennial 'compare and contrast' exercise just got more interesting.

Shakespeare's tragedy opens as we'd expect: Desdemona (Maeve Fitzgerald) elopes with Othello (Davenport); Iago (O'Gorman), hungry for power and jealous of Cassio's (O'Donoghue) promotion to Lieutenant, strives to destroy Othello and



Johnny Lee Davenport and Simon O'Gorman in *Othello*

his superiors when they are sent on a mission to ward off an invasion by Turks in Cyprus. Less predictable however is the design. Costuming choices seem to resituate this revenge drama to the early twentieth century, possibly around the 1920s. This seems like a random transposition, with little other than the reverberations of the First World War to offer anchorage. In the Cyprus scenes, Carol Betera's stage design suggests some kind of military base, but there is nothing specific in the production's mise-en-scène that definitively identifies the time or place of action. Nonetheless, and perhaps accidentally, this vagueness also liberates the drama from the textual and historical confines of the classroom, without

forcing it into the kind of soap-operatic cum hip-hop register often assumed to be the vernacular of youth.

What the company prioritises in this version is a clear articulation of the revenge plot through strong performances. Under Alan Stanford's direction, the young cast play like old hands, confident and in command. The male protagonists – Othello and Iago – receive classical treatment in the hands of Davenport and O'Gorman; while Desdemona retains at least the semblance of dignity in Fitzgerald's starchy performance. Colin O'Donoghue's Cassio is as handsome as he is self-possessed, and wins most whistles on the night. The audience clearly took the invitation to talent-spot at face value, and

neither a lusty glance nor a sly kiss was exchanged without some kind of lascivious commentary.

As a result of this dynamic, there are moments when the performance teeters on melodrama. Certainly, this seems to be the result of playing to the crowd a little too zealously on the night. Desdemona's wheezy demise and Othello's grand lunge are met with chuckles rather than gasps, and the tragic structure risks being subsumed by the pantomimic. It's hard to fault this too much, seeing as the audience seemed to invite it in the first place. All's well that ends well, after all, in wolf-whistles and cheers.

SILLY BITS OF SKY

by Maeve Ingoldsby

Barnstorm Theatre Company

Directed by Philip Hardy

Designed by Carol Betera

Lights by Mark Galione

With Shonagh Lyons, Gus McDonagh,

Niall McDonagh, John Morton, Aileen Mythen,

Helen Roche

Touring 6 February – 30 March 2007

Iontas Theatre, Castleblayney.

Reviewed 30 March

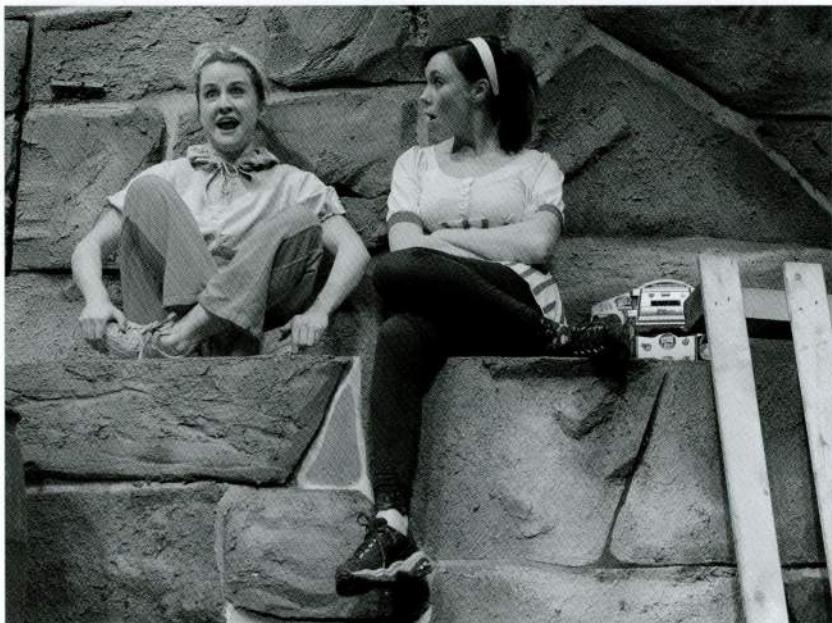
BY DEREK WEST

THIS PLAY (ORIGINALLY STAGED BY Barnstorm in 1998) opens arrestingly with a storm at sea, conveyed mainly by the vocal potency of actors Gus and Niall McDonagh but, as light gradually fills the stage, it transpire

that this is a fantasy played out by two little boys, whose story (growing up in a seaside village, confronting problems and situations of their own making and in conflict with the adult world) constitutes the drama. Maeve Ingoldsby knows the territory occupied by her protagonists and her play rings true – the slagging, the knocks to self-esteem, the volatility of relationships, the preoccupation with branded goods (sleeping bags with hoods and matching zips - none of yer second-hand stuff).

The production features a cast of six (including Shonagh Lyons, Aileen Mythen and John Morton), all exploding with energy. These actors seem barely older than the characters they depict, subsuming their adulthood into the physical and vocal gestures of the young. The adults are less convincing – Helen Roche's Granny has her marbles intact and is physically mobile; she is also a repository of granny-wisdom and folksy moralising – but she also has an unreasonably saintly tolerance of the young.

The moody pier setting (designed by Carol Betera and lit by Mark Galione) is a place for both the fantastic and the ominous. Beyond its wall the sea is deep and threatening: it emerges that the father in the play drowned. The transformation to cosy cottage, for the alternating scenes, is slick and impressive, although the domesticity was not as striking as the



Aileen Mythen and Shonagh Lyons in *Silly Bits of Sky*

lonely pier.

Philip Hardy's pacy direction whisks through the action. One feels he is conscious of the responsibility of bringing the watching children along with the story in what may well be the first experience of theatre for many. On this showing, they will be keen to return. It would be curmudgeonly not to mention that the performance in Castleblayney held more than three hundred children for an hour-and-a-half (very little wriggling or trips to the loo – sure indicators of wavering attention).

Chirpy songs on name-calling, fraternal relationships, and in the feel-good finale ('Just make the best out of

what you have got/Some things that you think are important are not') prove to be the best vehicle for the 'messages' that litter the play like clues. It's an issue-driven piece, designed as much to keep teachers alert to the potential classroom analysis as to keep the target audience (7 - 11-year-olds) on the edges of their seats. The play touches some nerves – mother in penury battling the materialism of offspring; one scene features a knife, the horrors of death (the staring eyes and dripping hair of the drowned) – which can be pursued or ignored, but ultimately we are in an orderly, optimistic universe. It has to be seen in the context of the genre

and it doesn't conceal its design to be both theatrical and educational.

THE GARDENER

by Mike Kenny

Directed by Emelie FitzGibbon

Graffiti Theatre Company

Design by Ronan FitzGibbon

Sound Design by Cormac O' Connor

With Cormac Costello and Ciaran Ruby

On tour, 5 February – 30 March 2007

Reviewed 22 February

BY NICOLA DEPUIS

GARDENERS ARE KEENLY AWARE OF the changes in weather that the altering seasons bring with them, but they are also aware that within each season, traces of the other seasons can be found: as Uncle Harry says in Graffiti's latest production for schools. This idea can of course also be applied to the changing seasons of life, and it is this that is at the heart of this very affecting play for the 6 - 8 age-group.

Graffiti staged two showcase performances of *The Gardener* at their new premises in a renovated church on Assumption Hill, in Cork. On the way into the performance space, audience members were flanked by colourful paper flowers, which had been painted by children who had already attended the play and its accompanying workshop with actress Karen Kelleher at their school.

Large pillows were spread out directly in front of the stage so that the

children in the audience could have a prime view while adults sat behind. On the staging area, a garden set was visible, complete with gardening tools and a vegetable bed. As the hour-long play begins, we meet Joe the Gardener (Ciaran Ruby) who introduces us to his story of the year in which he gained a baby sister, but lost an uncle and friend. He then retreats into the shadows and re-emerges as Joe the young boy, who is taking refuge in the garden after the birth of his sister, whom he fondly refers to as 'prune-face'.

While he prods angrily at the earth, Uncle Harry (Cormac Costello) emerges and reveals that he also takes refuge in the garden, fleeing from a home life in which he feels unnecessary. As the play progresses, we learn that Uncle Harry has Alzheimer's disease and that his forgetfulness is causing problems between himself and his own younger sister, who is also Joe's grandmother. This comes to a head when Uncle Harry forgets that he is babysitting Joe's young sister and instead tends to his garden. And while the child emerges unharmed from the incident, the same can't be said for Uncle Harry, who begins to realise how his forgetfulness may be dangerous to the people he loves. With Joe looking on, Uncle Harry is admonished by his little sister before he retreats again to the garden, where he never forgets



Ciaran Ruby in *The Gardener*

his duties. Time passes and we see both Uncle Harry and Joe tending to the garden as the seasons change, with the ultimate result being a full and lush vegetable garden, from which Joe and Uncle Harry pluck cabbages and assorted vegetables.

For the entire play, the children on the cushions in front of me sat transfixed by the events unfolding on the stage. They laughed when Joe picked his nose and there were visible frowns on their faces during the sadder scenes. The soothing sonorous voices of the two actors and the gen-

tle graceful pace of the direction helped to create the effect of storytelling by lullaby.

However, in playing a young boy of between 6-8 years, Cieran Ruby's deep resounding voice was ineffective and there was very little done to highlight the change between Joe the man and Joe the boy. It is questionable whether a young audience would have engaged more deeply with the character if he were more representative of that age group, with its inherent energy: after the play, I asked my six-year-old guest about

the characters and he kept referring to them as two men, and not man and boy. I would worry that the meaning of the play won't hit home with its target age group if they don't see Joe as one of their own. Although the set is clearly inventive and creative in its use of space, it could have benefited from the use of a few real plants or flowers to breathe life into a cardboard garden. The sound design is

however particularly impressive, with the rain almost palpable in some scenes. Overall, this is a perfectly paced and effective play with touching performances and an enlightening story.

Nicola Depuis is a playwright and journalist. Her first play The Queen of Fucking Everything is currently in pre-production.

Speaking for Silent Minorities

As a group of new productions focus on the marginalised in our society, our critics ask who these plays are speaking for - and who they're being addressed to ...

THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN

by Sean O' Casey

New Theatre , Dublin

Directed by Ronan Wilmot

Set by Victor Grennan

Costumes by Therese Browne

Lighting by Mannix McPhilips

26 February –13 April 2007

Reviewed 20 March

BY IAN R. WALSH

WITH THE LACK OF PERFORMANCE venues in Dublin made worse by the imminent closure of Andrew's Lane, the opening of the refurbished New Theatre is to be welcomed. To cele-

brate that event and its ten years in business, the New Theatre Company begins its new season with the first professional Dublin production of Sean O' Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* for more than a decade. Despite the importance of the occasion, the production was disappointingly lacklustre and poorly acted: perhaps the revival of a protest play against nationalist violence was too incongruous at a time when Sinn Fein and the DUP were finally agreed to share power in Northern Ireland.

A fundamental problem for Ronan Wilmot's production is the set design



Daniel Reardon and Nick Devlin in *The Shadow of a Gunman*

by Victor Grennan, which presents a fragment of a tenement room to us without walled boundaries: that is, the stage space is not enclosed. This robs O' Casey's play of much of its power. For Davoren, the immature poet, is not only stuck for words but also stuck in the room/womb where he tries to hide from the raging political forces outside. He is unsuccessful in this, as these forces repeatedly break into his space through the verbose tenement dwellers who are continually calling in

and traversing the stage. O' Casey's Marxist lesson is presented by his use of space: nobody is able to disengage from his/her environment, he suggests; nobody is excluded from the class-struggle and above politics. Because the set is wide open, these dynamics are lost and so too is much of the impact of the work.

The costuming by Therese Browne seemed equally dismissive of the content of O' Casey's play. All the impoverished tenement dwellers' clothes were clean and unsullied; indeed, some cast member's shoes were so

shiny that they winked at the audience in the glare of the stage lights.

Wilmot's casting of a young fresh-faced Sean Stewart as the world-weary thirty-year-old Donal Davoren is another irksome element. O'Casey describes Davoren as a man who 'bears upon his body the marks of the struggle for existence and the efforts towards self-expression'. Stewart seems much younger than he should and never convinces us of such struggle within his character. Indeed, by

the closing of the play when Minnie Powell has been taken away by the Black and Tans after saving him from capture, Stewart does not communicate any sense of real emotion and so the play ends robbed of its tragic power. Equally uncommitted performances were given by Nick Devlin as Seamus Shields and Vanessa Fahy as Minnie Powell all contributing to this sense of apathy at the close of what was should have been an explosively emotive piece.

Ian R. Walsh is Doctoral Fellow in the School of English and Drama, UCD, researching a PhD on Irish Theatre of the 1940s and 1950s.

NOAH AND THE TOWER FLOWER

by Sean McLoughlin

Fishamble

Directed by Jim Culleton

Set and Costumes: by Sinéad O'Hanlon.

Lighting: Mark Galione

Sound design: Ivan Birthistle

and Vincent Doherty

With Darren Healy and Mary Murray

17 – 28 April 2007

Reviewed 19 April.

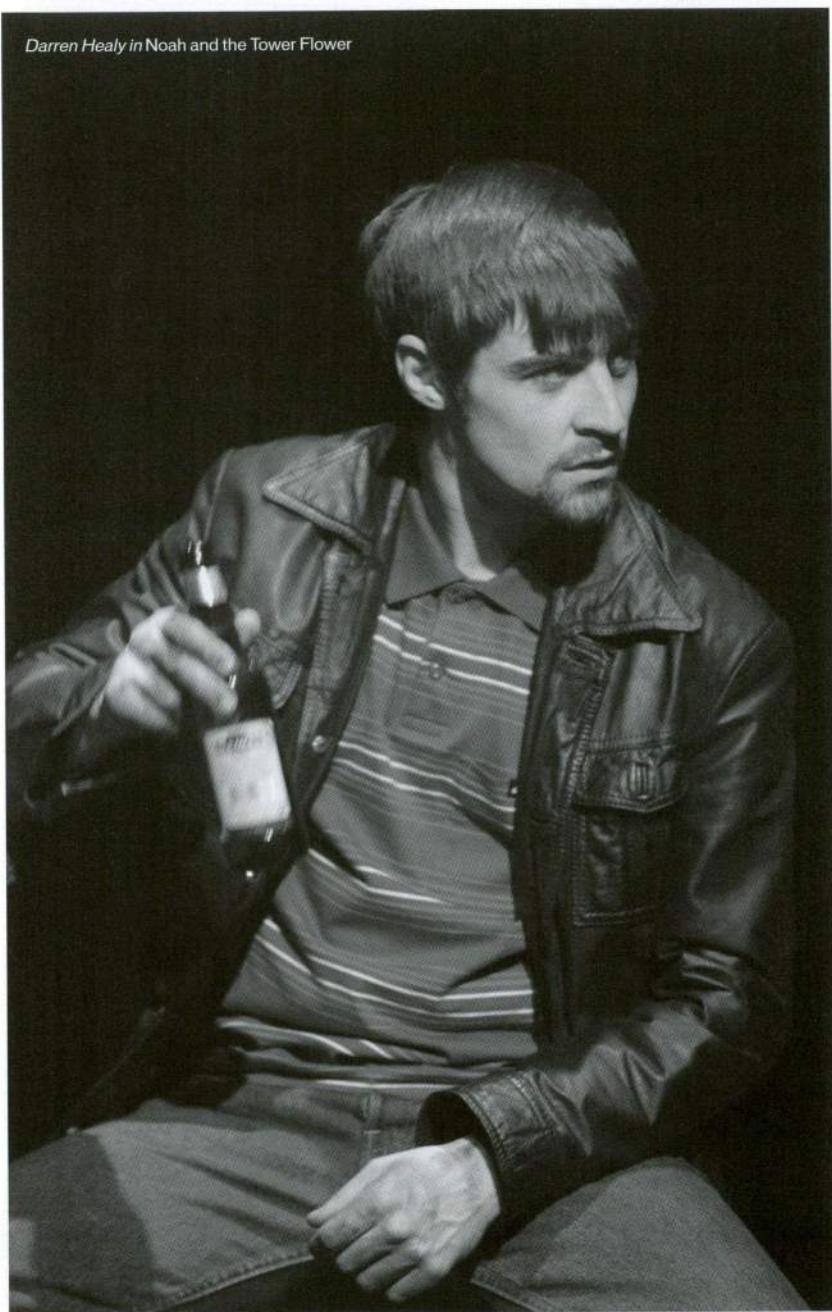
BY TANYA DEAN

FISHAMBLE'S PRODUCTION OF *NOAH and the Tower Flower* by first-time playwright Sean McLoughlin is firmly and proudly rooted in its location: set in Ballymun, performed in Ballymun, and seeking to stage an authen-

tic elicitation of Ballymun. In the programme, a foreword written by Dermot Bolger describes the area as 'a place locked in a permanent battle between hope and experience, between a battle-hardened cynicism about former failed promises and a need to embrace the possibilities of hope and renewal.' Sinéad O'Hanlon's stylish set echoes these sentiments, using a series of hanging lightboxes to beautifully evoke the windows of the neighbourhood flats, managing to combine their grey urban conformity with elegant lines: fitting for a production where location almost becomes a third protagonist.

Noah (Darren Healy) is fresh out of Mountjoy prison when he first meets Natalie – a fellow Ballymun resident and the 'Tower Flower' of the title – in a local pub. They strike up a friendly conversation, during which Natalie (Mary Murray) reveals she's recently kicked her heroin addiction. Jim Culleton's canny direction makes eloquent use of the Axis stage, and the development of Natalie and Noah's fledgling relationship is marked by tentative and respectful distance. At their first meeting in the pub, the two sit at tables at opposite ends of the stage and Noah crosses the gap between them only briefly, to shake Natalie's hand to congratulate her for kicking the gear, before returning to his own table. Even when they retire to Natalie's flat for a few

Darren Healy in Noah and the Tower Flower



COLUM HOGAN

drinks, they sit at a distance – Natalie curled up in an armchair, with Noah opposite on the sofa – while continuing to banter.

These two oddly fragile characters are at first cautious in their attraction to each other, and the physical distance between them is only finally decisively breached when Natalie crosses over to the sofa and charmingly asks Noah's permission to kiss him. During this first romantic foray, Healy's body language is hilariously and uncompromisingly masculine: even as they tenderly kiss, his body remains facing resolutely forward with arms rigidly locked across his chest, his only concession to the kiss being to turn his head. The two relax somewhat after this, and openly express their feelings for each other: to wit, 'I fancy the balls off ya!'

A few points hamper this animated production and, unfortunately, let it down badly. An unnecessary and slightly clumsy prelude features Noah at one end of the front of the stage ostentatiously digging up a gun, and Natalie at the other (sitting, for some reason, on a swing) reciting the addict's prayer. This awkward plot device does a disservice to the likeable pair by introducing the audience to their flaws (Noah's troubles with the law, Natalie's addiction) before introducing the characters themselves.

A lack of structure in the second half means that when the tone veers

abruptly from tender to threatening (as Noah unwittingly terrorises Natalie with the gun in a manic apogee of his De Niro impressions), the transition from comedy is not clearly marked. A large portion of the audience did not seem to notice the change in tone, and continued to laugh at Natalie's terrified struggles to break free from Noah's grip. This highlighted the ever-present threat this production faces: walking the fine line between authenticity and caricature.

McLoughlin awards endearingly quirky traits to each character: Natalie's love of Elton John, Noah's sense of humour and his admiration for anything to do with Robert De Niro. This can be seen as an attempt to balance those characteristics in the pair that are traditionally deemed socially unacceptable: Natalie is on the dole and says she is content to be a 'tosspot' while she waits for her new council home; Noah has a history of vandalism and violent anger.

Both Healy and Murray turn in strong and nuanced performances, and it is largely thanks to their skill that the relationship between the two protagonists is credible and, more to the point, empathetic. Despite a few awkward structural moments, Fishamble's dedication to producing new playwrights is to be commended as they once more consolidate their position as 'The New Play Company' with this fresh and engaging produc-

tion. It would be interesting to see what the impact would be if this production was uprooted from the Axis: could this hymn to Ballymun be as relevant elsewhere or would *Noah and the Flower Tower* remain as ghettoised as the area it performs?

THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST

by Ama Ata Aidoo

Arambe Productions

Directed by Bisi Adigun

Featuring Gabriel Akujobi and Merrina Milsapp

Project Arts Centre

17 – 21 April, 2007. Reviewed 18 April

BY FINTAN WALSH

FOR A LONG TIME SOCIAL INTEGRATION in Ireland was seen as a problem of adaptation: the reluctant acceptance of dominant culture by national, ethnic, political, religious, gender, or sexual others. Irish theatre has often functioned as the site where these 'others' were framed for closer inspection. While Yeats may have been interested in imagining an idealised, self-sacrificing individual; numerous writers since – from Synge, through McGuinness to Carr – have considered the problem of accommodating diverse identities. In the independent theatre sector, companies such as Calypso stand out for responding to issues of ethnicity and racism in terms that aim to challenge the often circular and self-perpetuating discourses of Irish national identity.

More recently still, Arambe Productions have extended these explorations of difference by questioning the nature and value of interculturalism. On the heels of the successful *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*, the company bring Ghana-born Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964) to Project; a play that builds on the company's brief to promote African-Irish exchange, while cautioning against a simplistic understanding of this process.

Aidoo's play opens in the United States where Ato Quayson (Akujobi) attends university miles away from his Ghana home. He appears to have embraced Western intellectual and cultural traditions comfortably, and marries an African-American student, Eulalie (Milsapp). After university, they move to Ghana. Although both are initially enthusiastic, it soon becomes apparent that neither the couple nor Ato's family are prepared for the clash that ensues. Although Aido feels attached to his family and home, he has become relatively westernised. While Eulalie has longed to return to 'the source' all her life, she cannot cope with the 'savage' and 'primitive' ways of her in-laws. When her Coca-Cola supply runs out, and she is forced to 'go native,' it appears that for Eulalie, Ghana was at worst a Western fetish, or at best, a diasporic fantasy all along.

The complexity of the situation is

compounded by the fact that Aido's family are resistant to any kind of infiltration, whether in the form of Aido's education or his bride. When Eulalie refuses to conceive children at her in-law's insistence, reconciliation is rendered impossible. While her husband falters under family pressure, Eulalie succumbs to alcoholism and despair.

The play's strength resides in its ability to problematise the whole notion of interculturalism as an easy swapping of traditions, beliefs, and practices. Crucially, it presents the sharing of culture not as the happy-go-lucky celebration of both worlds, but as the necessary submission of cultures to questioning and change. It is the fear of change that holds parties back.

Second, by virtue of the fact that the outsiders in the play are African and African-American, the play moves the challenges of interculturalism beyond Black-White, African-Western or even Irish-African divisions, instead seeing them as examples of a kind of transnational tribalism that compels communities to actively distinguish themselves from one another. While capitalism and globalisation may have altered the physical and geographical nature of the tribe, it is nonetheless a pattern as relevant to Ireland as it is to Africa. When, in Brian Friel's *Translations*, Jimmy Jack explains that when you 'marry outside the tribe [...] both

sides get very angry', it is precisely to this problem in Ireland's history with Britain that he is referring. Here, this difficulty takes on a more current resonance.

While the play raises interesting questions, it is not without weaknesses. First, it is too long, and suffers under the weight of a single thesis, four decades, and its origin as a first play. At times the characters are painfully functional, offering little room for audience identification. Unfortunately, under Bisi Adigun's direction, the production does not successfully overcome these hurdles through editing or appropriate pacing. Attempts are made to animate the play in percussive eruptions and occasions of ensemble-playing. However, the performance lacks an enthusiasm of delivery, felt most sharply in the torpid physicality and poor voice projection of the large cast. Much of the comic writing transfers well to the stage, and is received well by some members of the audience, although it is rarely rip-roaring. While there may be some bold questions in the text, there is little bold about the production.

Arambe raises topical issues with this play and in doing so affirms its position as an important force in contemporary Irish theatre. Unfortunately, like a can of Eulalie's Cola left out in the sun too long, this production is in need of a good shake-up to fizz.

THE TINKER'S CURSE

by Michael Harding

Livin' Dred Theatre Company

In association with The Ramor Theatre

Directed by Padraic McIntyre

With Mary McEvoy, Aaron Monaghan, Andrew

Bennett

Design: Barry McKinney

Music: Dennis Clohessy

On tour 8-26 May; reviewed 17 May

Town Hall Theatre, Dundalk

BY HELEN MEANY

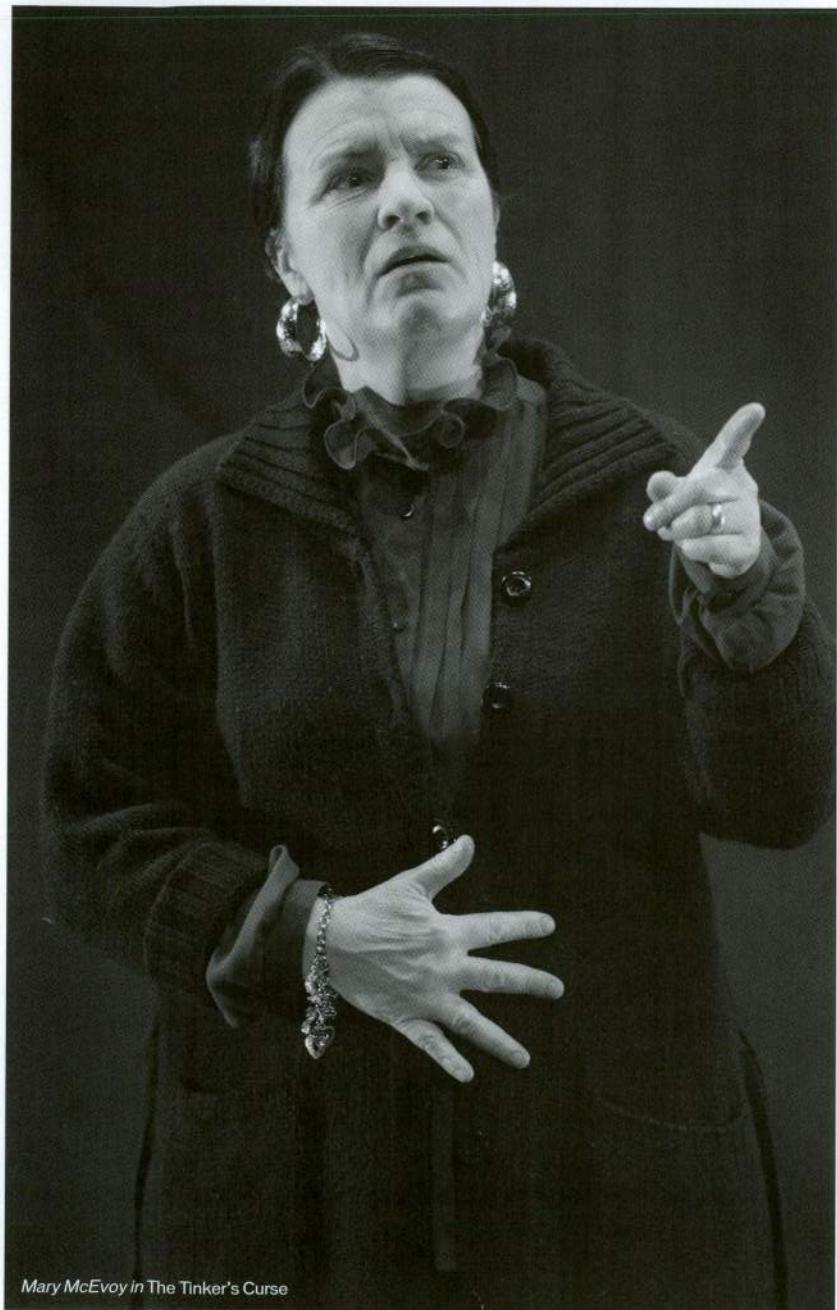
'I KNOW HORSES AND SPIRITS', A WOMAN warns us, her face spookily streaked with shadows. The setting may be abstract and minimalist, but the air is full of ghastly apparitions of serpents and wild horses, terrible creatures with long black teeth ... Welcome into the mindscape of Delia Rattigan (Mary McEvoy), a Traveller whose familiarity with the spirit world has turned her into Exhibit A 'among the parish councils of Westmeath'. Making public appearances with her son, she presents the tales, language and lore of 'the Itinerants' to condescending audiences, at the behest of her well-meaning employer.

In Michael Harding's puzzling new play commissioned by Livin' Dred, a lot depends upon how much we can sympathise with this woman or take the supernatural theme seriously. Her son repeatedly describes her as 'wrong in the head', and there are plausible psychological and emo-

tional reasons for her overwrought state. Can we even believe that she believes in her visions? As she addresses her two monologues to us, with full melodramatic emphasis, are we witnessing one of her virtuoso performances, or someone on the edge of breakdown? The ambiguities pile up - and trip us up.

Michael Harding has added distancing layers to his subject by using the form of four monologues to tell the story of this Traveller family and the tragedy that befalls Delia's adult son, Mikey (Aaron Monaghan). The events are recounted by her, then by Mikey, then his lover, Johnny Reilly (Andrew Bennett), in a series of recapitulating narratives, full of evasions and repetitions. Having lost one child in infancy, Delia is heartbroken to lose the charismatic Mikey to his new relationship, and it's mainly for this sense of loss and jealousy – along with a matter of some stolen china plates and a distaste for homosexuality – that she puts a curse on Johnny Reilly. Later she meets him again, when Mikey is dead, and realises that she's the one who is cursed. Ahah.

Within the formal frame of the four monologues, presented on an almost-bare stage, except for a tree left over from *Waiting For Godot*, there are individual phrases and sequences that have the lyrical intensity and rhythm characteristic of this playwright at his best. Under Padraic McIntyre's direc-



Mary McEvoy in *The Tinker's Curse*

tion, the cast make the very most of the heightened, colloquial language and salty humour. There's quiet passion and pathos in Aaron Monaghan's and Andrew Bennett's fine performances: the longing between the two men is palpable. The theme of lonely men is further echoed in the descriptions of Reilly's destitute brother who dies alone, and Mikey's father, a lost Traveller, returning after years in Manchester.

Behind the dominant supernatural theme, we're offered some glimpses of the life of Travellers in Ireland today, but they're hard to keep in sight. Displacement, prejudice and misunderstanding from settled society greet them at every turn. Mikey's father (also played by Andrew Bennett, switching character) gives voice to a lament for the old days of pot-making and metalwork made redundant by the introduction of plastic, while all the best green spaces for halting sites have been swallowed up by new motorways and overdevelopment.

It's notable that this expression of pride in Travellers' culture is presented at one remove – it's recounted to us anecdotally, quoted by Johnny Reilly, who is not a Traveller. Throughout, it seems as if the Travellers are wearing borrowed clothes, and speaking through a series of distorting mirrors. With its formal and thematic echoes of Brian Friel (in particular), Yeats and Synge, and its aes-

thetic straight out of Beckett, *A Tinker's Curse* seems so derivative that it's difficult to appreciate its intentions. If there's a point being made about the historical objectification, exoticisation or even silencing of Travellers, is this not another example of that same tendency? And if it's not, why not find a new way of presenting it, rather than falling back on theatrical allusion and pastiche?

Helen Meany is the Editor of Irish Theatre Magazine.

SAVED

by Edward Bond

Peacock Theatre

Directed by Jimmy Fay

Lighting: Sinead Wallace. Set: Paul O'Mahony.

Costumes: Catherine Fay

With Eileen Walsh, Rory Keenan,

Tom Vaughan Lawlor

27 April -26 May 2007. Reviewed 16 May

BY IAN R. WALSH

'SOONER MURDER AN INFANT IN ITS cradle than nurse unacted desires'. This quote from William Blake's *Proverbs from Hell* seems apt in describing both plot and theme in Edward Bond's *Saved*, which tells of the frustration and powerlessness of the 1960s' London underclass. Len (Tom Vaughan Lawlor) relentlessly seeks a feeling of genuine belonging in the unrequited love of a promiscuous young woman, Pam (Eileen Walsh) and her dysfunc-



Tom Vaughan Lawlor, Eileen Walsh and Paul Moriarty in Saved

tional family. The climax of the play comes when a group of impotent youths murder Pam's baby for fun, a shocking scene that made *Saved* the last play ever to be banned by Britain's Lord Chamberlain.

Bond's overstated thesis is that of environmental determinism, in which violence is an inevitable consequence of social depravity. This theme is problematic particularly in an Irish context after the high profile



ROS KAVANAGH

case of the murder of Brian Murphy by a gang of privately educated, middle class university students in Dublin. *Saved* seems unable to escape its own historical moment, however. In its fidelity both to naturalism and the original period, Jimmy Fay's production does nothing to free the play from this bind.

The language is still admirable in its grim elliptical reserve, although some phrasing is so dated as to shock us out of our disbelief, such as a hardened youth saying "What a giggle". It is handled admirably by the entire committed cast. Tom Vaughan Lawlor is particularly convincing as the ineffectual but likeable Len and

Rory Keenan is assured and understated as the self-servingly rakish Fred. Eleanor Methven and Paul Moriarty are both sadly credible as the defeated older couple, bonded in silence and occasional violence in a dead marriage. Eileen Walsh does well with the im-

probable character of Pam, although when her character finally admits the loss of her baby, I felt she robbed the moment of its significance by resorting to screaming and histrionics, a decision (whether by her or Fay) that seemed inconsistent with her earlier performance – as does the constant and distracting drying of her short hair in one of the latter scenes, causing her to deliver much of her dialogue from under a towel.

All of these actors are meticulously turned out in 1960s' fashion by Catherine Fay. The sitting room set by Paul O'Mahony is well conceived, with its sharp angled walls and stark furnishings creating a claustrophobic but uncluttered stage that cleverly signaled the home as a prison. The other settings of the park (represented by a faded backdrop of rushes) and the café are also simple and effective but the transitions from one to the other are slow, clunky and disruptive.

After all the violence and suffering in the play, we are denied purgation. We end with a picture of a family that continues to live together in silence, all going about their inane tasks, internalising their trauma and continuing to nurse their 'unacted desires'. This denial of catharsis is supposed to provoke the audience into action. Fay dragged this scene out too long, however, so that his finale is likely to provoke only one response: apathy.

Taking the Long View

Announcing its staging of *Julius Caesar*, the Abbey reminded audiences that this was an election year. The suggestion that historical events might provide us with a clearer view of the present also informed productions of new plays about the Irish Famine and the sinking of the Titanic.

JULIUS CAESAR

by William Shakespeare

The Abbey Theatre

Directed by Jason Byrne

Set and Costumes: Jon Bausor

Lighting: Paul Keogan

With Robert O'Mahoney, Declan Conlon,

Frank McCusker, Aidan Kelly, Peter Hanly,

Mark D'Aughton, Deirdre Roycroft, Des Nealon,

Bosco Hogan, Tadhg Murphy, Will O'Connell,

Jack Walsh, Dairine Ni Dhonnchú,

Ciaran O'Brien

12 February - 17 March 2007.

Reviewed 12 February

BY HELEN MEANY

A PLAYWRIGHT WRITING *JULIUS CAESAR* today would probably end the play after Act Three. With the drama brought to the highest pitch, the audience stirred by Mark Antony's rhetoric over Caesar's bloodied corpse, the mob scattering to do its worst – it's the moment to be freeze-framed, its aftermath inevitable and all too imaginable. Had Shakespeare left it there, though, Irish audiences would have missed out on the experi-

ence of seeing two superb actors portray the fraying friendship between Brutus and Cassius, as the strains and disappointments among the conspirators mount to match the body-count. These scenes on the eve of battle between Declan Conlon (Brutus) and Frank McCusker (Cassius) are suffused with barely suppressed emotion and the intensity often lacking elsewhere in this production.

The fact that the play falls away sharply from the high point of Caesar's murder in the Capitol is one of the awkward aspects of staging it. Shakespeare himself might have had an inkling of that – the two appearances of Caesar's ghost seem to be an acknowledgement that, dramatically, Acts Four and Five could do with a bit of help. Probably for the same reason, the set in this Abbey production changes completely after the interval, moving from an abstract white cube to a high ridge of earthwork, suggesting the trench warfare of the first World War, complete with stirring soundtrack and hazy light.





Declan Conlon, Frank McCusker, Peter Hanly and Jack Walsh in *Julius Caesar*

The difficulty of maintaining a focus on the lead characters in the context of a series of battle scenes is undeniable; *Julius Caesar* is more of a group portrait than any of Shakespeare's other tragedies or history plays, and that does mean that a sense of the characters' dramatic trajectory is harder to sustain. But instead of working against this danger of dramatic dissipation, Jason Byrne's production seems to increase it.

Designer John Bauser's strikingly bare white walls (in the first half) and classical-meets-military costumes

were elegant and stylish, confidently vaunting their anachronism. Avoiding any historicist reading – but without imposing any deliberately contemporary references either – the imagery expressed the timelessness of this play in its astute portrayal of political expediency, spin and manipulation. But the actors seemed a bit lost in the empty space, standing apart from each other like anaemic figures in a ritualised dance, while the Plebeian mob moved in exaggerated unison, resembling marionettes. This sense of inertia was only over-

come in the compelling performances of Declan Conlon and Frank McCusker. Conlon's Brutus was a cerebral, introspective figure, musing on Stoical issues of honour, while remaining aloof. The more distant he was, the more McCusker's Cassius craved his attention, bringing plausible erotic overtones to his initial overtures to Brutus and to his hurt quarrelling with him in the later battle scenes, which were played like lovers' tiffs.

Not all of the cast seemed to be in the same production, however. The delivery of the verse came in a series of different registers: while Conlon and McCusker spoke with understated ease and a conversational rhythm, Robert O'Mahoney's Caesar was rendered in declamatory, *haut Laurence Olivier* style. Mark Antony, played by Aidan Kelly in forcefully demotic Dublin mode, came across as a dangerous demagogue, whom Cassius would surely have killed along with Caesar rather than allowing him to address the mob. The unfortunate self-mutilating Portia (Deirdre Roycroft), meanwhile, had arrived to Rome with her Dart accent intact and some curious eurhythmic gestures.

In the pared-back productions of Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy staged by Jason Byrne's own company, Loose Canon, over a period of a decade, their intimacy and urgency have been consistent. Avoiding over-

ly-insistent directorial interpretation, Byrne's strength as a director is his confident marshalling of ensembles, while paying meticulous attention to language and the lucid communication of the verse. An ideal choice, then, to direct the Abbey's first production of *Julius Caesar*, but it seems that in the transfer to the larger stage and auditorium, something changed; as if the energy got lost somewhere in the exchange of Loose Canon's no-budget, no-set, no-costumes aesthetic for the fully resourced Abbey treatment.

This is not to suggest that the National Theatre is somehow stifling by its institutional nature, nor that we need be nostalgic for the straitened circumstances of small theatre companies in the 1990s; just that, evidently, taking charge of the Abbey stage is a lot more difficult than it looks – especially during the Ides of March.

THIS PIECE OF EARTH

by Richard Dorner

Ransom Productions

Directed by Rachel O'Riordan

Set by Diego Pitarch

Lights by James Whiteside

With Lalor Roddy and Pauline Goldsmith

On tour, Town Hall Theatre Galway

Reviewed 17 May 2007

BY CHARLIE McBRIDE

THOUGH THE GREAT FAMINE IS ONE of the defining events in Irish history, it is a subject that the country's



Pauline Goldsmith and Lalor Roddy in *This Piece Of Earth*

dramatists have tended to shy away from. Doubtless, the sheer enormity of the disaster makes it a daunting prospect and the few previous attempts at engaging with the issue have opted for a large canvas, with Tom Murphy's *Famine* featuring a cast of 32 and Eoghan Harris's *Souper Sullivan* utilising 24 actors, several of whom played multiple roles.

So the first thing that strikes one about Richard Dormer's famine play, *This Piece of Earth*, is that it focuses almost entirely on just two characters - a man and his pregnant wife (played by Lalor Roddy and Pauline Goldsmith) who are desperately trying to reach the Antrim coast where they

can board ship for America. But sorely weakened by hunger, they can scarcely walk - the play indeed commences with the man, John, struggling to raise his prone wife, Maeve, from the ground after she has collapsed in exhaustion.

Dormer's sparely written script gives a stark, absorbing portrayal of humanity in extremis. And though the couple are in profound emotional and physical distress it is moving to see that their love for each other somehow endures as they do their best to support each other. They even manage to make the occasional humorous quip in the midst of their misery. And though we are only

watching two people, Dormer's script skilfully conveys an awareness that the calamity which has befallen them is widespread, that they are in a land of death and devastation.

Under Rachel O'Riordan's assured direction, both Roddy and Goldsmith deliver utterly compelling performances and the production also benefits from Diego Pitarch's spare design and James Whiteside's nuanced lighting. The action unfolds on a small circle of peat flooring with the brown tones of the actors' clothing creating the impression that their characters are perhaps about to sink into the earth. Whiteside's lighting at one point makes Roddy's face eerily resemble a mask, the open mouth and eyes dark apertures in an alabaster visage.

Dormer himself appears near the end of the play in the role of a priest but it has to be said this character's tendency toward speechifying felt at odds with the sparseness of the writing which had gone before. Similarly, the revelation that Maeve's pregnancy was as a result of a rape by a soldier seemed a gratuitous detail. But for the most part, Richard Dormer and Ransom Productions have met the daunting challenge of engaging with the Famine in a play that is intelligent and engrossing.

Charlie McBride is a Government of Ireland Scholar at NUI Galway.

DON CARLOS

by Friedrich Schiller,

In a new version by Mike Poulton

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre

Directed by Lynne Parker

Set: Paul O'Mahony

Costumes: Eimer Ni Mhaoldomhnaigh

Lighting: Sinead Wallace

Composer: Denis Clohessy

With Kathy Kiera Clarke, Nick Dunning,

Peter Daly, Gerard Jordan, Matthew Keenan,

Rory Keenan, Darragh Kelly, Simone Kirby,

Pat Laffan, Mark Lambert, Fergal McElherron,

Eleanor Methven, Rory Nolan

8-31 March 2007. Reviewed 23 March

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS PUBLISHED version of this play, Mike Poulton describes Schiller's *Don Carlos* as an animal that needs to be tamed. At seven hours in length (reduced by Poulton to just over three), the play blends several different storylines and approaches to dramatic representation, giving us a work that is sometimes as exciting as the cheesiest melodrama, while at others as insightful as the best of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Ostensibly it's about a conspiracy against Spain's King Philip II (Nick Dunning) by his son Carlos (Rory Keenan) and the queen Elizabeth (Kathy Kierra Clarke), which is motivated by sexual jealousy as much as politics: the play's most impressive achievement is that it shows convinc-

Nick Dunning in Don Carlos



ingly how the personal may be used to understand the political. But it also focuses on a range of other issues: the clash between Protestantism and Catholicism in Europe, the impact of Enlightenment philosophy on the *ancien régime*, and the idea that if power corrupts absolutely it does so by isolating the powerful from friends, family, and others who might love them.

In Rough Magic's terrific production, the play is performed with an astonishing pace, and every scene feels as though it has enough material for an entire play in its own right: indeed, it feels at times as if we're watching (at least) three different plays simultaneously. This requires a huge investment of energy and concentration from the audience, but it's extraordinarily rewarding to encounter a play that feels so urgently contemporary despite its historical setting.

As we're led into the theatre, we're immediately introduced to this disjunction between past and present, as actors in full Eighteenth-Century costume greet and ask us to switch off our mobile phones in their own voices: no *faux* Elizabethan accents or phrasing here, thankfully. Paul O'Mahony's set is, in contrast, an entirely naturalistic presentation of a medieval court. The audience is seated in promenade, with an exit on one side and two enormous oak doors on the other: we are positioned, that is,

like courtiers in a palace, dwarfed by our surroundings, and awaiting the arrival of royalty.

These disjunctions persist. As performed by Rory Keenan, Carlos is an unnervingly complex figure: he is broken down by despair to such an extent that he is at times pathetic, yet because he has the friendship of Rodrigo (Fergal McElherron), as well as the love of his father's new bride Elizabeth, we know he must have some redeeming qualities. Keenan plays nicely with this clash, giving us a Carlos who is a lustier version of Hamlet, convincingly portraying a character who plays so many different roles within his own life – son, prince, lover, friend – that it's never really clear who the real man might be.

Clashing with this psychological complexity, we have two melodramatic baddies: Domingo (Darragh Kelly), the King's confessor, and Alba (Rory Nolan), the leader of the king's army. Nodding back to Rough Magic's *Taming of the Shrew*, Kelly's Domingo plays like a 1950s Irish Christian Brother, stopping from time to time to light a cigarette, succeeding in life with a canny combination of manipulation and abuse of the church's power. Nolan in contrast is the stereotypical dim-witted soldier who uses brutality to compensate for what he lacks in intelligence.

Both characters are so cartoonish that one never really feels a sense of

threat from them – a performative decision that only makes sense when, in the play's final scene, the Grand Inquisitor (Mark Lambert) arrives to deliver a verdict on the play's events that is genuinely unsettling and frightening. This provides an excellent example of what *Don Carlos* does well: for most of the play the performances by Kelly and Nolan feel inappropriate and one-dimensional – one has to await the conclusion of the action to realise that we've been shown a simplistic version of evil so that we'll better appreciate the real thing when we see it.

Perhaps the best example of such a clash is the characterisation of Rodrigo, the only character to be dressed by Eimer Ni Mhaoldomhnaigh in contemporary costume. The play's central moment is a lengthy discussion between Rodrigo and Philip about political power and its relationship to religion, terrorism, and individuality. The dressing of Rodrigo in a modern suit initially had appeared gimmicky, but in this wonderfully written scene, it places him as our contemporary, in conversation with an Eighteenth-Century king. The fact that Philip's views on political power sound contemporary – while Rodrigo's sound utopian – disrupts any lingering notions the audience might have about our relationship with history. Indeed, the overall effect of the play is to ask exactly how

much Europe (and by extension the West) has progressed since the Reformation: that 'war against terror' is an obvious presence in this play, though it is never mentioned explicitly.

Very few directors in Ireland could hold together such a variety of complex elements – most, one assumes, would have felt tempted to impose a uniform vision on this monstrously difficult text. Lynne Parker, however, allows each element to speak for itself before drawing all of the strands together at the play's conclusion. In doing so, she's given us one of the richest productions of the year so far – a compelling and rich play, brilliantly performed.

HENRY AND HARRIET

by Carlo Gébler

Kabosh Theatre Company

Directed by Paula McFetridge

Set and Costume design by Sabine Dargent

With Jo Donnelly, James Doran,

Gerard McCabe, Joe Rea

Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival,

Belfast, 2 May – 12 May 2007.

Reviewed 11 May

BY PAUL DEVLIN

CONTINUING THEIR COMMITMENT TO site-specific performance, Kabosh Theatre Company's *Henry and Harriet* is both set and staged in and around Belfast city centre's Cathedral Quarter. The play, written by Carlo Gébler, is Kabosh's offering as part of the area's annual, and increasingly suc-

cessful, arts festival.

The action unfolds against the backdrop of a busy city centre in a real time, promenade performance across four main sites: a travel/shipping agents, a leather goods shop, a menswear shop, and a Cash Converters. Set on the evening when the *Titanic* left Belfast for Southampton in 1912, Gébler's drama traces the events in the life of Henry Surphlis, a carpenter from Moria who worked on the construction of the *Titanic* in Belfast's shipyards. He is hastily preparing to meet his true love, Harriet Sweetlove, whom he intends to sail away with on the luxury liner as it makes its maiden journey to New York.

Henry invites the audience to accompany him as he travels across town buying his tickets and a case for his trip, collecting an impressive jacket to match his new trousers, and finally attempting to buy and send a present home to his widowed mother, who doesn't know he is leaving. As the narrative gathers speed, the events of the day before the beginning of the play start to catch up with Henry. It becomes clear that he has in fact stolen the money for his trip from the offices of the Ulster Unionist Council's anti-Home Rule collection fund and that Leonard Loudan, his arch rival and competitor for the affections of Harriet, is just one step behind him, hell bent on revenge and determined to reclaim the stolen money.

Gébler's entertaining script sits somewhat problematically, but also somewhat usefully, between an urge to dramatically push stereotypes into melodrama on the one hand, and a pseudo-Dostoevskyian desire to deconstruct character motivation on the other. When it works, this blend is engaging and lively, but the play's claims for psychological realism are, at best, thinly argued. Characters ultimately remain within the familiar skins of the likable working man, the honest working woman, the lovelorn rival, and a chauvinistically loyal Ultonian. Similarly, the twists of plot here are at times heavily signposted. The 'certain ship' of Henry's opening narrative, for example, is clearly the *Titanic*, and clumsy exposition of this type defuses the audience's surprise when its assumptions are later confirmed, depriving the closing scene of the play of its implied tensions.

The script itself attempts to compensate for this lack of subtlety in dramatic structure by adopting a playful knowingness. Henry's obsession with all things waterproof, for example, is a nod in the direction of those who have guessed the play's climax. Similarly, but less subtly (and less successfully), Maggie Boyd's closing suggestion that we already know what will happen to Henry, Leonard, and Harriet (that he will die and they will marry), attempts to soften the melodramatic edges of the



Joe Rea and Niall Cusack in *Henry and Harriet*

play's central conceit. Gébler's play-text ultimately performs like an enjoyable and formulaic 'whyhedunit'. Its promenade scheme is pleasing but not quite provocative and its engagement with the site-specifics is interesting rather than integral to the performance of his text.

However, Paula McFetridge's direction does manage to draw the spaces and text together in this performance in a judicious and unified orchestration of pace and energy. Her direction compensates for what the script may lack in dramatic tension, through a clean and simple delivery of character and situation. Major scenes in the shops are bridged with short pit-stop scenes in entries en route to the next major location. This further implicates the audience in the role of Henry's confidant, and usefully stops them

disengaging from events in what otherwise would have been overlong set changes. Internally, the major scenes are well structured by McFetridge. Most mirror the promenade staging of the performance's overall design, with characters pacing back and fourth in the narrow confines of back-street shops. Only in the play's final scene, in the largest of the spaces, does this open out into a more proscenium-style presentational form.

The affable charisma of Gerard McCabe in the part of Henry, one of two actors simultaneously playing the role to facilitate four performances per evening (Joe Rea also played Henry), establishes the core warmth and morality of Gébler's lovable thief. McCabe is hugely engaging as he fearlessly strides through the streets of Belfast propounding the

narrative of that day's events.

Other actors also give strong performances. In Langford's Shoe Shop Walter Oaten's abrasive egalitarianism is confidently established by Gordon Fulton in the role as an effective counterpoint to the more creeping supremacy of Cobb Quigley, one of Belfast's loyal brethren and Ulster Unionist Council members played by Niall Cusack, in the men's outfitters scene. James Doran and Jo Donnelly, as Leonard and Harriet respectively, do all that is asked of them in underdeveloped parts. Brigid Erin Bates, as Maggie Boyd in the closing scene, rel-

ishes the opportunity to play to type and interact with the audience.

While Gébler's script doesn't really attempt to resonate with the socio-cultural references of the spaces it occupies in any deeply meaningful way, his text and characters are sufficiently connected to the sites they occupy to make the staging conceptually valid. Robbed of the momentum of the performance's journey, or played in a more conventional theatre space, the text might seem much heavier in performance.

Paul Devlin Lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster's School of Creative Arts.

Players and the Painted Stage

Cross-gender casting, plays within plays, puppetry ... Irish theatre companies are increasingly using new techniques, making plays that are about how theatre itself is made

APOCALYPSE, THEN

by Ciaran Fitzpatrick and

John F. McCarthy

Everyman Palace, Cork

Directed by Sarah Jane Power

Set: Ruairí McKernan. Lighting: Ruairí Hennebry

With Paul Mulcahy and Raymond Scannell

20 February – 3 March 2007. Reviewed 1 March

BY NICOLA DEPUIS

IN ESCHATOLOGICAL TERMS, THE

Apocalypse is the final destruction of the world as described in the biblical Book of Revelation: the second vision begins with a 'door...opened in heaven' and ends with Satan's rebellion, defeat, and the restoration of peace. In cultural terms, *Apocalypse Now*, the Francis Ford Coppola film of 1979, tells the story of an army captain who was sent into the jungle to assassinate a special forces colonel believed to be



Director Sarah Jane Power (left) with cast and crew of *Apocalypse, Then*

insane. The first play to re-open the Everyman Palace Studio, *Apocalypse, Then*, takes ideas from both of these sources. The play features a rebellion, a defeat, and a restoration of peace, like the Bible. However, unlike Copolla's movie, *Apocalypse, Then* cannot be seen as a journey into the darkness of the human psyche, but instead as a journey into the stupidity of the male psyche. It was advertised as a comedy, asking an intriguing question. What would happen if the apocalypse struck, leaving the world under water and two Cork men and a cactus plant alive? The answer is, very little.

The Everyman Palace Studio is a

small space with room for thirty audience members, which means that the audience is extremely close to the actors. In such an intimate setting, authenticity of characterisation is essential to the play's success and this is part of this production's downfall: the play's two characters of Declan (Paul Mulcahy) and Felix (Raymond Scannell) are little more realistic than the cardboard sea in which they float. The first image that the play presents is of Declan's hairy legs hanging over the side of a bath-tub, which we are to believe is adrift in the sea above Mitchelstown. Declan, dressed in a wetsuit, awakens, tears a snack from the stash in his bum-

bag and upon hearing the sound of life in a box floating beside him, proceeds to grunt and guffaw in an irritated manner as Felix bursts through the top of the box he's floating in. This is the most exciting moment of the play.

The characters of Felix and Declan soon appear to have derived from taking two of the most unappealing human traits; stupidity and wrath, and building characters around these attributes. Declan is continually furious with Felix's happy-go-lucky ape-like approach to the apocalypse, and this conflict creates the basis for fifty minutes of unenlightening filler.

The play begins and ends with engaging scenes and Raymond Scannell gives a very natural performance, but unfortunately, the imaginative set and interesting idea behind the play promise more than is delivered.

BLOOD WEDDING

by **Frederico García Lorca**

Theatrecorp Theatre Company

Directed by Max Hafler

Set: Mary Doyle

Costumes: Petra Bhreathnach

With Daniel Guinnane, Andrea Kelly,

Franchise Mulrooney

Black Box Theatre, Galway

6-10 March 2007; reviewed 7 March

BY AOIFE SPILLANE-HINKS

ON A SIMPLE STAGE, COMPRISED OF large shapes of bright colours — an

electric blue rectangle of scrim, a yellow circle on the floor — six actors describe a tense and passionate world with the pitch of their voices, the thrum of their feet, the sharp, darting motion of their eyes. The play tells the story of two people in love, Leonardo and the Bride (as she is known). He has married someone else, she is about do the same, and they run off on her wedding day. But their courage fails before they can carry out the full escape, and the tale ends in bloodshed. Director Max Hafler and his stripped-down staging and cast (six actors playing nearly 20 roles) tell this story with relentless innovation.

A table can be a drum. A door in Mary Doyle's economical set can drop to the floor and become a dance platform. Five actors singing and dancing together suggest a much larger band of wedding guests. Performers who minutes before had played central dramatic characters don masks with pink ribbons (some of the many effective masks constructed by costume designer Petra Bhreathnach) and become pesky children. The voice of a passing man singing a plaintive song joins with two women singing a strange dark lullaby to a baby, and that combination of voices make up a choir's worth of lamentation.

Hafler has chosen some of his actors for physical traits that help de-

Sean O Meallaigh and Franchise Mulrooney in Blood Wedding



JOE SHAUGHNESSY

scribe and intensify the dramatic circumstances of the characters. In her portrayal of the Bride, Andrea Kelly's icy eyes tell the story of a woman who must keep an iron grip on her own passion. With his radiant skin and crown of curls, Daniel Guinnane as Leonardo has a surface of serenity, but his jaw clenches like a steel trap when he is around Kelly. Franchise Mulrooney's curvy body and long billowing hair allow a surprising sensuousness in her portrayal of the Mother and the Beggar Woman.

The double casting allows Hafler to amplify the sense of the inescapability of this small community. Young people who might otherwise be brave lovers end up knuckling under to the fierce regulations of their families and neighbours. This is the kind of iron-fist community rule that keeps its grip on the lovers even after they have run away, so that even in rebellion, they cannot consummate their love.

Hafler and crew have created a village in which people endlessly roil with passion, rage, and wild anticipation, but will never have the nerve to satisfy their own cravings.

Aoife Spillane-Hinks is the artistic director of Mephisto Theatre Company. She is writing at dissertation at NUI Galway on the Dublin Theatre Festival.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

By William Shakespeare

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Directed by Rachel O'Riordan

Set and costumes: Gary McCann

Lighting: James C McFetridge

Sound: Ivan Birthistle and Vincent Doherty

With Michael Condron, Tony Flynn,

Gregory Floy, David Heap, Frankie McCafferty,

Matt Odell, Conan Sweeney

29 January -24 February; reviewed 12 February

BY TOM MAGUIRE

I CANNOT HAVE BEEN ALONE IN thinking there was a conceptual contradiction at work in the decision to present *Much Ado About Nothing* as 'an examination of the injustice of being a woman in a society in which masculinity is intrinsically valued' – and then staging it with an all-male cast, thereby excluding any number of working actresses from the plum roles on offer. That said, Rachel O'Riordan's tightly controlled production offers the compensation of its delight in theatricality and its precisely played emotional tuning. She uses her small cast of seven to populate the drama, with the central quartet of Beatrice/Claudio and Benedick/Hero played by Matt Odell and Michael Condron respectively.

This required precision, verve and inventiveness, particularly when the four are meant to be in simultaneous conversation, qualities apparent throughout the production. The



Frankie McCafferty, Matt Odell, Conan Sweeny, Tony Flynn and David Heap in *Much Ado About Nothing*

opening scene is delivered at a gallop and while it took a while for the audience to tune in, the cast maintained the integrity of the plot and the delivery of the dialogue in ways that made absolute sense throughout.

The play does of course raise the central problem of the relative authority of women and men, whereby Hero's honour and marriage are jeopardised on the basis of a deception organised by the untrustworthy Don John (David Heap). Her reputation crumbles as she stands accused at the altar by her fiancé Claudio with all the male characters, including her father (Gregory Floy), accepting the lie about her. This, then, is a familiar Shakespearean theme, artic-

ulating a distrust of words and appearances in place of personal integrity. This being a romantic comedy, Hero is eventually vindicated and she and Claudio are reunited.

Benedick and Beatrice likewise undergo a journey of realisation through which they recognise that their verbal sparring and apparently mutual antipathy conceals a deep-seated attraction, which blossoms into love when the right conditions are provided by their friends and servants.

The performance does not, however, require a *Mrs Doubtfire* or *Tootsie* transformation. Instead, Gary McCann's design strips everything back to essentials. Apart from a large dark wooden gantry, accessed by steps on

both sides, the black stage walls and floor are denuded of set, revealing a working theatre with lighting towers and stage ropes left visible. The actors work from a basic outfit of a white vest and black trousers to which great coats, rehearsal skirts, occasional hats and odd pieces of jewellery are added to provide for character changes. These are hung from various parts of the set, providing for occasional moments of great effect, such as when Michael Condron's Hero prepares for her wedding day and is dressed in the centre of the gantry, the white material of the skirt cascading over the rail. While this may suggest a lowering of production budget, it did not affect the production values.

O'Riordain's strong grasp of the visual impact of performance was apparent throughout in conjunction with James C. McFetridge's lighting design. She had marshalled a strong sense of an ensemble working as one unit, from the choreographed donning of costumes in the opening, through the attentive shifting between multiple roles throughout.

One danger of cross-casting the female roles is that the emotional integrity of the characters might be lost as men play camp rather than feminine. The opening scenes seemed to tip into this, but by the time Condron's Hero collapses in a heap, following her denunciation by Claudio,

comforted by Odell's Beatrice, the actors had established the conventions of the performance with such effect that the full impact of Hero's disgrace is felt by the audience.

While these central roles seemed to render distinction between actor and character irrelevant, at other times this distinction provided some delightful juxtapositions. One such was when the skinheaded Conan Sweeney, a fearsome fellow who would throw me into a panic if I met him down an alley on a dark night, transformed into the giggling and gossipy maid-servant Ursula; another, when Frankie McCafferty's maid-servant Margaret is required to dance.

The house was full on the night I saw the show and the performance was greeted rapturously. O'Riordain had clearly invited her cast to bother less with striving for any kind of received pronunciation than to make sense of the words as a means by which the characters did things to each other. I still wonder, however, what it says when all male casts are so currently in vogue, while many of our most talented female performers are either 'resting' or gnashing their teeth in frustration. Anyone heard of Charabanc?

Tom Maguire lectures in drama at the University of Ulster. His book Making Theatre in Northern Ireland has recently been published by UEP.

THIS IS A PLAY

by Daniel MacIvor

Placid Productions

Directed by Simon Manahan

Lighting: Mark Rooney & Franco Bistoni

Set: Peadar Lamb

Original Music by Alexis Nealon

With Marcus Lamb, Aidan O'Mahony,

Geraldine Plunkett, Judith Ryan

17 April -12 May 2007. Reviewed 11 May

BY IAN R. WALSH

FLUFFY WHITE CLOUDS IN A BRIGHT blue sky painted on hanging drapes shape the stage space of Placid Productions' *This is a Play*, written by Canadian playwright Daniel MacIvor. This set design by Peadar Lamb cleverly reflects and comments on what is presented. Clouds deceive and play with us: they appear to have a form and depth but are discovered to be changeable and vacuous. So too does MacIvor play with his audience in this clever short piece, which presents us with the interior life of three actors that are starring in an absurd 'experimental' drama. We are not quite given the play that is promised in the title but instead three highly amusing and solipsistic accounts of what it is like to perform it.

The Male Actor (Marcus Lamb) tells us how he wishes to enter the stage always with conviction and how he visualises himself as Robert De Niro when delivering his lines, most of which he can't understand or

remember. The Female Actor (Judith Ryan) wants the audience to drink her in and, believing her character should do everything 'tentatively', she hops around the stage like a deranged kangaroo. Both try to upstage each other by robbing each other's light, lines, and stage space. The Older Female Actress (Geraldine Plunkett) has no tolerance for her younger co-stars or the inferior wig the director has made her wear but is confident that she is the star of the show as she gets the last line of the play.

A dull voiceover (Aidan O'Mahony) also adds to the hilarity, interrupting the actors' thoughts to explain how the play is working and how it was conceived. This was as irritating as it was presumably meant to be.

All of the cast's performances were strong; Geraldine Plunkett was suitably sour and spiteful while Judith Ryan was contrastingly mischievous and anarchic. Marcus Lamb was strident and abrasive as his character demanded but his booming voice was at times so arresting as to make more than one member of the lunchtime audience almost choke on their vegetable soup. Simon Manahan's direction was subtle and uncomplicated, avoiding any distraction from a complicated script, as too was the lighting design by Mark Rooney and Franco Bistoni.

This is a Play is described in the

Geraldine Plunkett, Judith Ryan and Marcus Lamb in *This Is A Play*



programme note as a 'postmodern romp'. This description of the play would seem to be as elusive as the play itself.

Although highly enjoyable as a playful metatheatrical joke,

MacIvor's play with its concentration on form and surface left this reviewer with little to think about after the curtain fell. It resists examination.

The closer we get to the text, the more insubstantial it becomes.

All Singing, All Dancing

Since the success of Rough Magic's *Improbable Frequency* almost three years ago, we've had new musicals at the Gate, on Broadway and elsewhere. So is this a new era for the Irish musical and for musical theatre? Our critics tune in.

THE PIRATE QUEEN

by Alain Boublil and

Claude-Michel Schönberg

Produced by Moya Doherty and John McColgan

Hilton Theatre, New York

Directed by Frank Galati

Set: Eugene Lee

Lighting: Kenneth Posner

With Stephanie J. Block, Hadley Fraser,

Linda Balgord and Marcus Chait

Opened on 6 March 2007. Reviewed 31 March

BY BELINDA McKEON

JOHN MCCOLGAN AND MOYA DOHERTY, the husband and wife producer team behind *Riverdance* and *The Shaughraun*, can hardly be blamed for reckoning that there was a formidable piece of theatre to be had from the story of a female chieftain who lived a long and audacious life in Sixteenth

Century Ireland. But *The Pirate Queen*, based on the Morgan Llywelyn novel *Grania: She King of The Irish Seas*, is not that piece of theatre.

Confused and confusing, overlong and over-wrought, emotionally underwhelming and intellectually – yes, intellectually – enraging, *The Pirate Queen* is cynical, calculated commercialism itself, all lit up in neon with nowhere to go. Created by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, the writers of *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon* who arguably know Broadway musical success better than anyone else, and emblazoned with the *Riverdance* brand, the show arrived on Broadway from Chicago, where a six-week trial run earned such poor reviews that McColgan and Doherty called in the musical

medics. A new book, new lyrics and an overhauled staging resulted.

Faced with the revised production's dreary score, its murk of plot-line and its tangle of climaxes, its shallow characterisation and its terrible, tart tang of panic, all reeking downward from the stage, the New York critics had one question: how much worse could this ever have been?

No, perhaps that's not fair. It's not fair on the cast members, who are talented and battling with this turgid material harder than Gráinne Mhaol ever battled the Munster clans, or the English, or the Turks. As Gráinne – sorry, Grania – the feisty daughter who wins a place, through her bravery, on her father's pirate ship, who loves one man but marries another, who gets her way with weaponry and with words, Stephanie J. Block is as good as is possible, and the same can be said of Hadley Fraser, who plays her lover Tiernan, and of Marcus Chait, as her husband Donal. They are as good as is possible because neither the story nor the staging allow them to be anything more.

The Pirate Queen trawls agonisingly through waters stocked with red herrings. The stage is entirely rigged out as a ship, but barely used as such, while a serious political situation that would have been far more suitable as background is instead mixed in with the jigging and the reeling and the

bombastic numbers and the slapstick chauvinism. This serves only to highlight the uni-dimensionality of the characters – Donal, with his codpiece and his excruciatingly contrived stag-night scene, or Lord Bingham, with his snooty snark – and the craven shallowness of the plot.

It's only in the moments when it willingly embraces its own lightness that *The Pirate Queen* begins to pull itself out of the quicksand. It is most alive, for example, during the Irish dancing scenes, of which there are surprisingly few. This reviewer was disturbed to find herself wishing for more such scenes (choreographed by *Riverdance*'s Carol Leavy Joyce), although perhaps only because they put off the dreadfully earnest lyrics for another while.

It's hardly as though a musical can't grapple, not just earnestly, but intelligently, with themes of political struggle. Musicals like *Rent* and *Wicked* may not be George C. Kaufman-esque political showdowns, but they take on tough subjects stridently and strikingly. They show more guts than *The Pirate Queen* seems to have. When it becomes clear, late in the second act, that there is to be a confrontation between Grania and Elizabeth, in which the two queens meet to thrash out the conditions of their nations' accord, a sense of dramatic tension, of excitement, and of interest, finally settles over the poor, dis-



Stephanie J. Block and Marcus Chaite in *The Pirate Queen*

combobulated Hilton Theatre. Elizabeth, after all, has been played with perhaps the only real spark of the entire production by Linda Balgord, and in this scene, unlike any before it, something seems to be genuinely at stake.

But the crucial meeting, in which the two women sit down to discuss their differences, takes place behind a screen. Just like the earlier sword-fights, so safely choreographed as to be laughable, just like the Grania/Tiernan love story, so lacking in passion as to look like a lavender bond, just like the death scene of Grania's father, so flat that it was unclear whether Dubhdara (Jeff McCarthy) had actually died

at its climax or just nodded back off to sleep, this closing scene shrugs off the demand for decisive action and emotional punch. No amount of blatant vocal throwbacks to *Les Mis* – and there are so many of them that Grania seems to travel to the English Court by way of Nineteenth-Century Paris – can fill such absence.

Instead it caves in to a cosy ending, a witheringly patronising vision of harmony between England and Ireland to which McColgan and Doherity should have been ashamed to put their names. Even for the two queens, this was far from the end of the story, never mind for the two countries. Then again, if it brings an end to this

farce, perhaps a glaring piece of historical skullduggery is not such a bad thing.

Belinda McKeon is a critic and journalist based in New York where she teaches writing at Columbia University.

THE CAVALCADERS

by **Billy Roche**

Abbey Theatre

Directed by Robin Lefèvre

Set: Alan Farquharson

Lighting: Mick Hughes

Costumes: Sinéad Cuthbert

Music Direction: Pat Fitzpatrick

Choreography: Muirne Bloomer

With Stephen Brennan, Ingrid Craigie,

David Ganly, John Kavanagh, Simone Kirby,

Garrett Lombard

14 April – 19 May 2007. Reviewed 28 April

BY TANYA DEAN

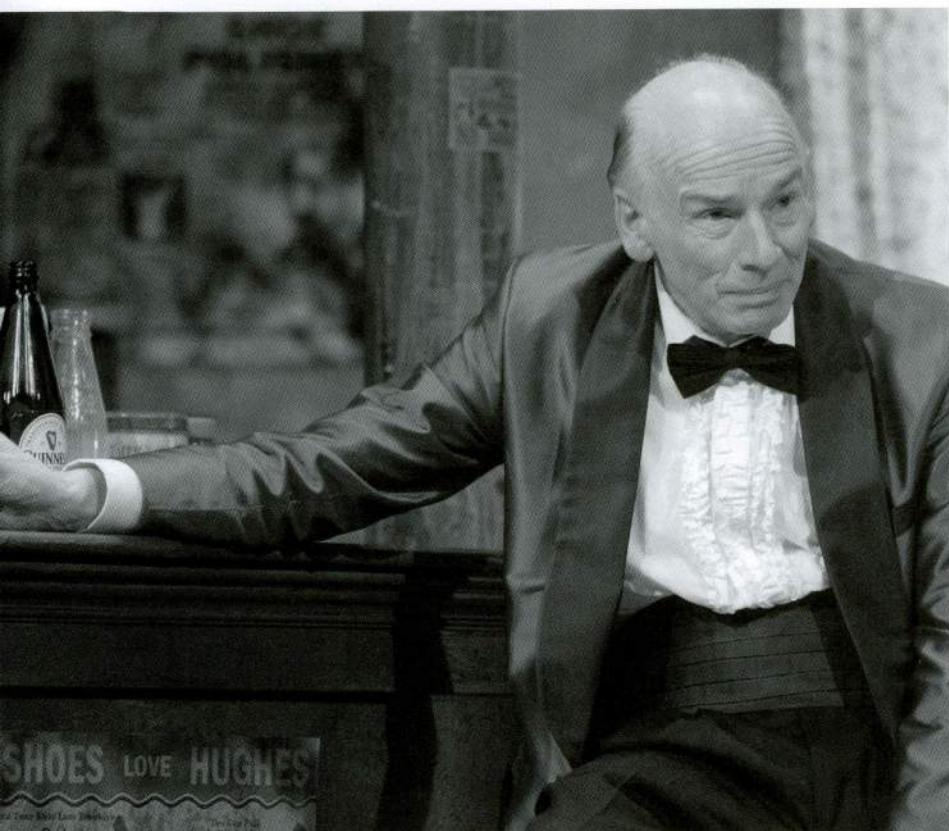
BILLY TOCHE'S *THE CAVALCADERS* was first performed on the Peacock stage in 1993, where it was also directed by Robin Lefèvre, and its 'graduation' to the main stage of the National Theatre marks the inauguration of the newly refurbished Abbey stage, with its improved acoustics, sightlines, and seating arrangement. As the old stage was ushered out with the epic *Julius Caesar*, this comfortable old favourite is an unusual choice for the maiden voyage of the new stage: though perhaps the play's themes of re-investi-

gating the past seem an apt way of welcoming in the new.

As Terry (Stephen Brennan) stands morosely in the shell of his small town shoe-shop, half-listening to his friend Rory's (Garrett Lombard) cheerful witterings, the present begins to dovetail with his memories of the past. Yet for Terry, the ghosts that he walks amongst are not insubstantial wisps, but solid flesh-and-bone, and painfully real. LP Hartley is endlessly quoted as saying, 'the past is a foreign country,' but for Terry, the past is familiar, well-trodden territory. It is the present that seems unconquerably alien.

The eponymous Cavalcaders are cobblers in a small town, who spend their days in merry banter, and their nights performing as a much-beloved barbershop quartet. The four-part harmony and small-town gossip that run throughout this production are charmingly old-fashioned. Pat Fitzpatrick's musical direction and Muirne Bloomer's choreography (as well as the harmonious talents of the four Cavalcaders, Stephen Brennan, Garrett Lombard, John Kavanagh and David Hanly) mean that the delightfully quaint barbershop performances make for enjoyable musical interludes as well as plot devices. John Kavanagh particularly impresses as the amiable Josie, creating a likeable, empathetic individual out of a role that at first glance could easily





John Kavanagh in *The Cavalcaders*

be reduced to gently comic sidekick.

Yet Lefèvre's direction never satisfactorily engages with the vein of darkness that runs throughout *Cavalcaders*. The Abbey promotional material described it as 'Loves, Lives and Songs', yet this cheerily simplistic tagline belies a back-story of festering old wounds, broodingly nursed. Infidelity as a dramaturgical device is almost tragic in its repetition, as Terry tries to bury an old guilt (sleeping

with his beloved uncle's wife), dwell upon an old betrayal (his wife leaving him for his best friend) and impotently witness a new perfidy as Ted (David Ganly) conducts an affair with Rory's wife.

An ugly misogyny permeates *The Cavalcaders*. Simone Kirby turns in a particularly powerful performance as the emotionally fragile Nuala, who is conducting a clandestine affair with Terry. Dark hints at her mental insta-

bility and previous institutionalisation makes her clinging, nigh-on hysterical love for Terry seem all the more desperate, and foreshadow her eventual suicide. Another suitor for Terry's hand is the warm, maternal Breda (Ingrid Craigie). Both are attractive, intelligent women in their own right, so their infatuation with the emotionally impotent Terry is frankly incomprehensible. Terry's indifference and occasional cruelty (especially to Nuala, who is considerably younger than he) is unpleasant to watch, and one cannot help but hope for nemesis to strike him some suitable vicious retributive blow.

Yet if karma does punish, it is an indifferent punishment. Standing in the present, Terry seems but a grey shadow of himself, particularly against Rory's cheerful plans for the future. Against the odds, Terry seems to have acquired a 'happy' ending: he has a kind woman who loves him, he has not been accused of culpability in the suicide of his mistress, and he is casting off the cares of the business world. Yet he has been left frustrated and emotionally impotent by past betrayals that he cannot forgive, and past cruelties that he does not deserve forgiveness for. Starkly contrasted against young Rory's bright ability to forgive and forget, and to enjoy the present whilst planning for the future, Terry is a cautionary tale of the corrosive effects of looking too much to the past.

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON**BARBER OF FLEET STREET**

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim,

book by Christopher Bond

Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Selina Cartmell

Designed by David Farley

Musical director: Cathal Synott.

With Lisa Lambe, Barry McGovern,

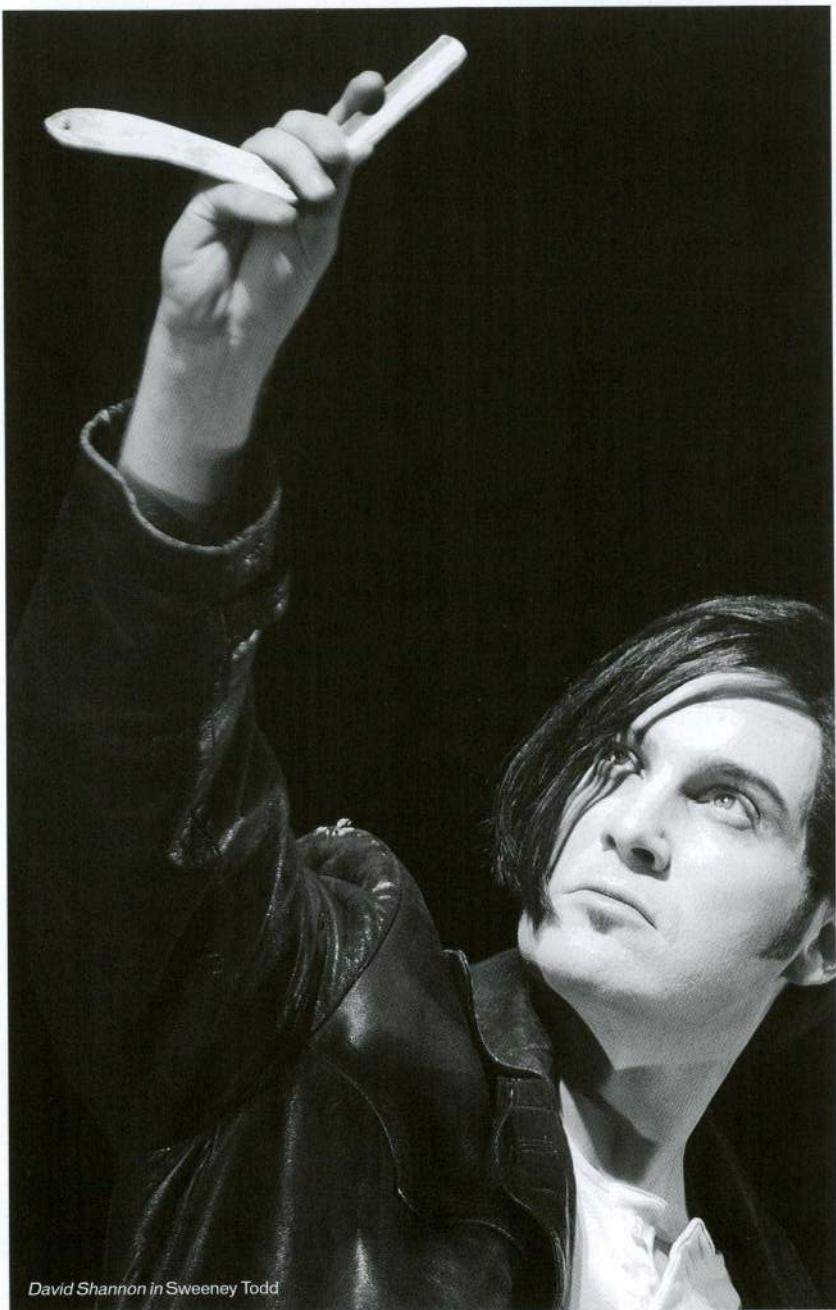
Mark O'Regan, Camille O'Sullivan,

Anita Reeves, David Shannon

24 April – 20 June. Reviewed 24 April

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THE GATE THEATRE'S VERY STEEP rake and yet minuscule stage is transformed in *Sweeney Todd* by director Selina Cartmell and set designer David Farley into a seemingly monstrous and cavernous London, providing multiple locales which are often presented simultaneously. Tucked into the set underneath a raised section is Cathal Synott's band of six musicians performing Stephen Sondheim's score. Rather than being in a traditional pit at the front of the stage, their location makes the production (music and direction) into an organic whole, giving a sonorous and almost anthropomorphic quality to the mean streets of London. Keeping in this vein, Todd himself emerges from a trapdoor, with only his head visible as if he has been decapitated, disembarking from a ship in London's docklands. Here he re-



turns to seek revenge for his wrongful conviction and deportation to Australia, losing in the process his wife and daughter.

The *Sweeney Todd* myth has permeated British culture for more than two centuries. He turns up in various melodramas in the nineteenth century and was made popular in a series of 'penny dreadfuls' (serialised weekly horror fiction akin to today's Sunday tabloids). Though many have attempted to determine who the real Sweeney Todd was, his name and his supposed actions remain the stuff of myth, largely caricatured as a serial killer with no conscience. Christopher Bond's 1970s' theatrical version of the myth, which is the source of Sondheim's musical adaptation, constructs a psychological motivation for the killer, namely a revenge mission for injustices meted out to him. This version thus presents Todd as a tragic hero, at the outset more sinned against, and yet leaving in his revenge wake more dead bodies than Hamlet.

Cartmell finds a contemporary resonance for the Hamlet-figure that Bond constructs, dressing actor David Shannon with a wig and white make-up as a New Romantic figure with just a hint of a Gothic death-wish about him. But she does this as a very conscious and unmistakable construction. All of the characters wear wigs of one form or another

and at the end of the musical they all take them off, revealing that this story is a myth pure and simple. Similarly for all the murders, the act of killing is signified by a puff of white flour as the body in stylised manner turns to ashes, and the actor simply walks off stage.

Cartmell also has Lighting Designer, Rick Fisher bring the house lights up imperceptibly at specific moments, notably for the duet between Todd and Mrs Lovett (his pie-making accomplice) lighting up the audience as we laugh with the murdering duo and implicating us in our salacious desire for horror.

Mrs Lovett, played by Anita Reeves, is the comic counterpoint to Todd's New Romantic melancholia. In almost pantomime fashion she engages the audience by singing directly at us, and in one glorious moment on the opening night inserted a hilarious ad lib as one of her sweets rolled into the first row of seats and she invited a spectator to eat it. Similarly Mark O'Regan delighted the audience with his sham Italian trickster character Pirelli, again performing his solo songs in a direct address to the audience. Both, though using the musical acting techniques of pantomime, avoided stepping completely into caricature and restored themselves firmly back in the genre of horror.

Barry McGovern playing the vil-

lainous Judge Turpin who had exiled Todd to Australia in the first place, evoked traces of Nineteenth-Century melodrama in his performance with his sonorous voice and leering looks. His attraction to Todd's daughter Joanna was laughable given the disparity of the ages of the two people involved, yet McGovern layered his performance with more than a hint that Turpin's desire for the young girl was paedophilic.

Backed by a strong chorus of only five strong singers and actors, Cartmell's ensemble attacked the musical with a confident ferocity. They permitted us to stand back from true horror through comedic moments and stylised death rituals. Instead, the emphasis seemed to be on the implication that we are salacious gossip-mongers still seduced by villainy if it's kept at arms-length through stylisation.

Cartmell's signature direction (this being her third production ? at the Gate) is emerging in her ability to create coherence among her acting companies and an extremely filmic set of stage pictures that she sources from contemporary cultures, not all from the theatre. This was a rare piece of musical theatre that had horror and comedy sewn together with directorial integrity.

Brian Singleton in Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

WHO BY FIRE

by John MacKenna

Watertown Theatre Company

Directed by John McKenna

Costumes: Caitriona Ni Fhlaithearta

Lighting: Brian Murray

With Neill Fleming, Charlie Hughes, Alwyn Lyes,

Sarah Maher, Margaret McBride,

Bonnie McCormick, Declan McGauran,

Adrian Sullivan

On tour. Reviewed 14 March

at the Civic theatre, Tallaght

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

I HAVE VISITED THE HOLOCAUST MUSEUM in Washington DC. It is an immersive experience that takes the visitor on a journey into the all too human reality of mass extermination. On arrival, you are presented with a kind of passport, a document charting the true story of one internee in one of the many concentration camps. As you pass through each section of the museum, you are following the timeline, seeing and hearing sights and sounds representing the process by which people were first ghettoised, then categorised, then processed through the camps, mostly eventually for execution. As you progress, you turn the pages of your passport when prompted to do so by wall markings. Your sense of personal connection with the journey increases significantly this way. Mine was the story of a child, a young boy, who actually survived the camps, but on

my way around I came across a discarded passport featuring the story of a woman who did not.

I found the experience of this museum immensely moving, chastening, frightening, and very real. It did not seem an abstraction, or a mere representation, it strove for and genuinely achieved emotional immersion.

John MacKenna's *Who by Fire* promises the same type of experience. Pre-show publicity prompts the audience to expect to be part of the Auschwitz camp on arrival, and, sure enough, costumed SS guards patrol the lobby and randomly stare down various tittering patrons awaiting seating. As you enter the theatre, your hand is stamped by a polite usher dressed also in an SS costume you tells you 'you're in the concentration camp now.' Inside more ushers inform you 'Women anywhere at the front: men at the back' and the 'immersion' continues. Guards patrol inside as well, armed with weapons, again staring down the audience when anyone makes eye contact, but, you know, it doesn't feel right. I'm not scared. I feel more like I'm at a pantomime.

As I sit I see the stage has been sparsely decorated with, among other things, a pile of shoes. The image resonates with me as a teacher of film. I screen *Night & Fog* every year and I watch it with my students,

every time feeling the pain and the chagrin. But here, in the Civic Theatre, two actors are sitting in front of the shoes, both wearing the same not particularly realistic SS costumes. One is sitting behind an electric piano draped with a Nazi flag. It doesn't sit right with me. It looks like comedy. I wonder where this is going.

Meanwhile, the illusion of segregation breaks down. As more people enter, women start to sit in the male section. A row of students behind me start giggling and talk about infiltrating the women's section. As the lights go down, a final punter hurries in, her pink scarf fluttering behind her as she jogs past the stern faced guards commanding everyone to turn off their mobile phones. I see where they're going with this, but I'm not immersed. When the play begins with a film image of a candle flickering in the wind I start thinking of *Schindler's List*, and how Spielberg began with the image of the candle being lit to a sombre Jewish prayer in song. Enter the cast of *Who by Fire* singing the first of ten Leonard Cohen songs that form the structural backbone of this theatrical experience. I'm starting to feel very uneasy now. It all seems more than faintly silly, and you can't laugh at the Holocaust, not unless Mel Brooks is involved anyway, and I see no trace of his vulgar energy or keen irony here. No. This is meant to be serious, only



Charlie Hughes and Bonnie McCormick in 'Who By Fire'

it's not working. I'm worried.

The play which follows continues to appal me. The amateur dramatics on stage telling a more than slightly ridiculous story of a love triangle allegedly 'an amalgam of event and imagination' feel all wrong. The camp Commandant not only bursts into song several times, he carries a riding crop that he strokes suggestively, and his right hand woman, an SS doctor with hair only slightly to the left of Princess Leia, spouts the following line of dialogue in all seriousness, interrupted only by what are supposed to be chilling laughs: 'your time will come, when you least expect it, and when it does, you'll

know it: in the meantime, wait.' Another character, a Communist prisoner, at one point screams passionately 'Dream? What dream? This is a fucking nightmare.'

I'm not laughing. It's not funny. This is dialogue so horrendously clichéd as to belong the realm of a long forgotten barnstormer melodrama, and it is impossible to get past it to the hard reality it attempts to illuminate.

It gets steadily worse. The attempt an immersion continues throughout, with the cast running up the stairs into the audience. At one stage, two embarrassed latecomers desperately avoid eye contact with the actor por-

traying the young girl whose story this is meant to be. She's trying to invite them to her home, they're trying to get to their seats. Later on, the cackling SS doctor charges up to the row behind me to tell the giggling students to shut up. Again I am overwhelmed by the sheer artificiality of it, and not in a Brechtian way. When the cast break into Cohen's 'Hallelujah' I can't help but cringe and think of *Shrek*. Is my imagination so jaded that I can't hear those lyrics, feel what the actors are trying to convey and give myself over to an empathetic response to the representation of the Holocaust?

But I remain unmoved. I am able to think only of *Night & Fog*, and of KZ, a recent documentary depicting tourists visiting Mauthausen: another chastening, chilling experience questioning our response to history by depicting not the past, but the experience of the past in the present as tourists fall into horrified silence in the face of tour guides calmly recounting the events of more than sixty years ago. I know that moved me. I know I felt duly humbled and frightened. Why am I not getting *Who by Fire*?

By coincidence, I recall the last play I saw in the Civic Theatre was also a Holocaust drama, Juan Mayorga's *Way to Heaven*, and I didn't really like that either. I begin to think of Adorno, and his proclamation that after Auschwitz, there could be no

more poetry. Perhaps theatre cannot address the Holocaust. Or maybe it's just me.

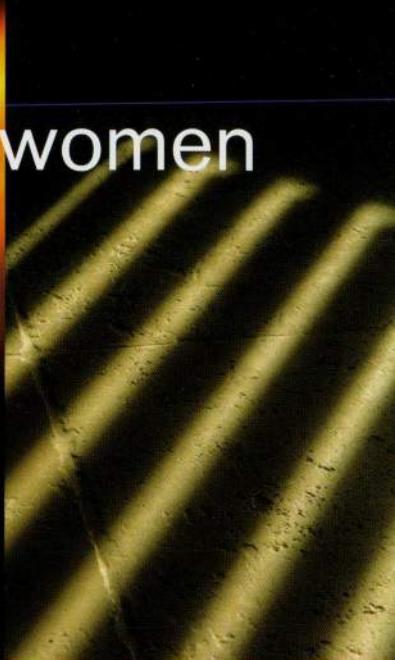
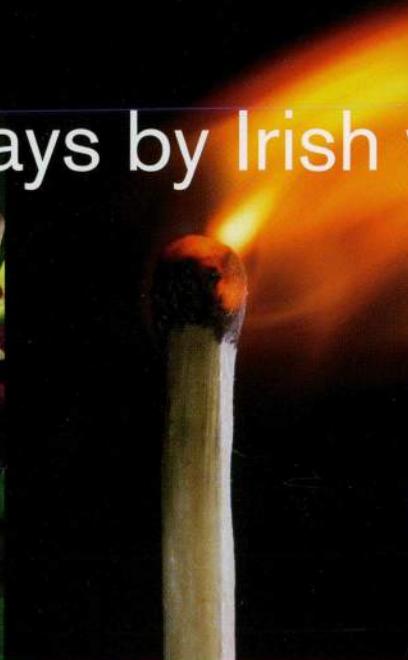
By the time the play reaches its resolution, I am trying to understand why John MacKenna thought he could do this. I am trying to acknowledge the moral rightness of the enterprise and the good intentions behind it. But I am also seeing something that leaves me unmoved, and doubting for the first time that the Holocaust can speak to contemporary experience. I wonder if the events were more current, say, set in Guantanamo Bay, would I be more moved, more chastened, more able to connect with the play's message, or even with the emotions at its core? But here, now, in the Civic Theatre, I am lost.

In the freezing wind in the car park outside the theatre I am re-united with my companion (female, hence separated from me as we entered). She has been moved. German by birth, a Cohen fan by inclination, this play has resonated with her and made her feel claustrophobic, immersed, and disturbed. And now I feel truly lost. How do I respond to this? Is it my critical distance that has left me so unable to connect with this play? I return home, I take out my laptop, and I begin to write. 

Dr. Harvey O'Brien lectures in Film Studies at UCD and reviews theatre for culturevulture.net.

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