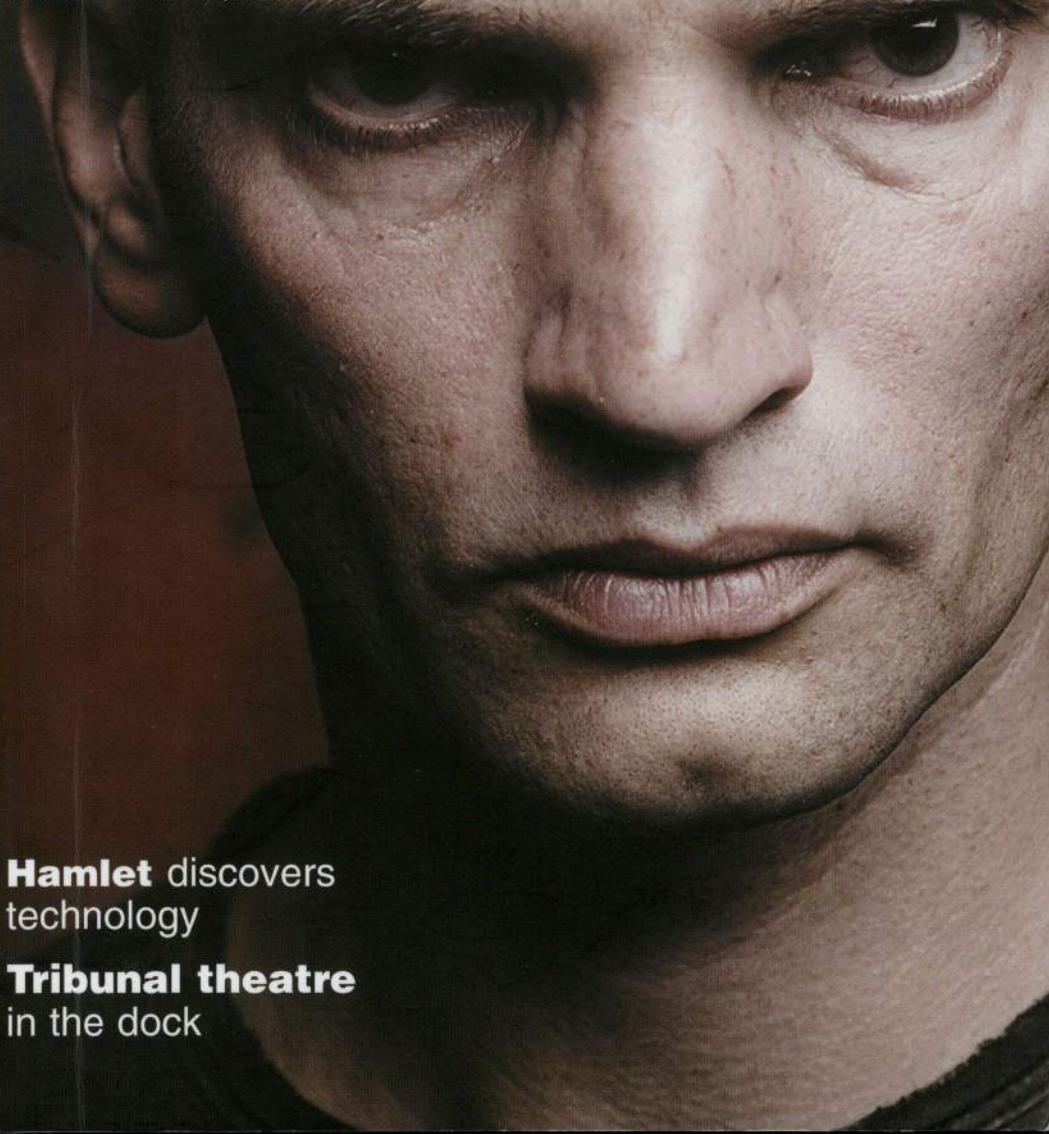


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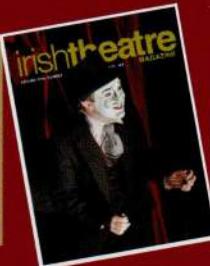
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Prize winners will be announced in February 2006



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ON THE COVER: Patrick O'Kane in *Hamlet*. Photo: Ros Kavanagh



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Post-festival reflections

NO, TIME ISN'T ACCELERATING, BUT we are dropping through your letterboxes a little sooner than usual with our winter issue. Since we're mainly concentrating on the recent festival season in Dublin, we wanted to go to print while discussions of festival shows are still in the air. As Patrick Lonergan anticipated in our summer issue, few shows in the Dublin Theatre Festival generated as much debate as the Tricycle Theatre's production of *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*.

Judging by the numbers attending a public debate about it, co-hosted by Theatre Forum, The British Council (Ireland) and The Abbey, it attracted people into the theatre who don't usually darken the door. In our new opinion slot, David Barnett argues that the verbatim reproduction of the proceedings of a tribunal of inquiry - no matter how politically significant - constitutes a very limited form of theatre.

There's more discussion of the issues of accuracy, truth and objectivity raised by this production in an edited transcript of our annual International

The development
of new play
writing needs
time and money
and can't be
done to order

Critics' Forum held in Project Arts Centre last month - a co-production this year between ITM and the Dublin Theatre Festival. Critics based in Scotland, Romania and Ireland discussed a wide range of shows in the festival, the first under the directorship of Don Shipley. In a post-mortem in our

news section he talks to Peter Crawley about his programming decisions, especially the much noted paucity of new plays, Irish or otherwise. The DTF is not a producing company, of course, and the development of new writing needs time and money and can't

be done to order. However, the festival's success as a receiving event on the international circuit may be judged, in part, by increased box office receipts this year, as audiences seemed to respond to the programme's carefully balanced - and marketed - selection of 'something for everyone'.

In these pages you'll find our critics' verdicts; please continue to send your own suggestions and comments to editor@irishthemagazine.ie. All contributions are welcome. — Helen Meany

The festival and the playwrights

NOW THAT THE DUST HAS BEGUN TO SETTLE ON THIS YEAR'S Dublin Theatre Festival, and its director, Don Shipley, begins reconnaissance for next year's programme, *ITM* asked him to reflect on his inaugural year and to respond to those troublesome dust mites of abandoned shows and behind-the-scenes rumour. Rebranded the "Dublin Theatre Festival International", it featured no examples of new Irish playwriting. If this year's programme seemed skewed towards the European model of director-led theatre, Shipley maintains that this was not a conscious decision. "I didn't sit down and say, I'm going to do a director-driven theatre as opposed to a writer-driven theatre, because that would be really short-sighted," he says. "You just want good work. It doesn't matter where it comes from." Although he admits a slight bias, as a director himself, he adds, "I always think the best place to start is from the script."

However, it has emerged that a number of Irish scripts never got started with the Festival in preparations for 2005. "We had been hoping to produce a new play by Gina Moxley with the Dublin Theatre Festival," Philip Howard, the Artistic Director of Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre told *ITM*, "but the shameful lack of

resources devoted to the Festival meant that it was unable to go ahead this year."

ITM has also learned that productions of new plays by Thomas Kilroy and Frank McGuinness were proposed for inclusion in the Festival this year. Shipley discusses each project, aware that both limited finances and tough choices are the Festival director's lot.

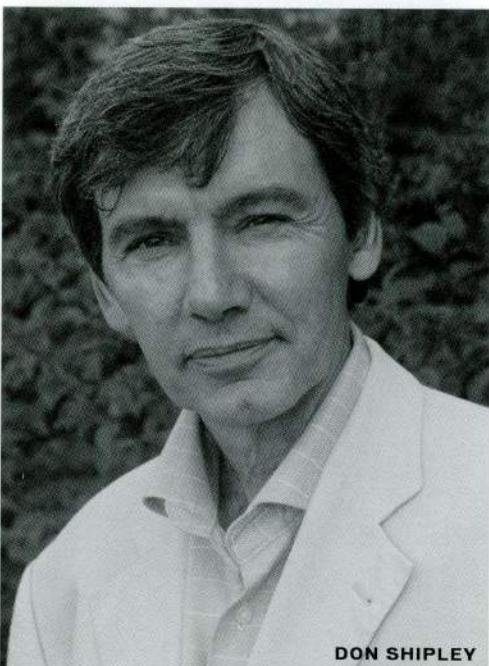
Gina Moxley's play was to have been a "three-way partnership" between the Dublin Theatre Festival, The Traverse and an unspecified Dublin performance venue, and was to be the first of three co-productions of Irish writers with The Traverse over successive years. Shipley explains that the Festival was unable to bear the brunt of the investment, while the two other partners "couldn't shoulder more than they were prepared to". The idea, however, is still on the table.

As for Thomas Kilroy's new play, *Henry*, Shipley wasn't acquainted with the track record of the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre who were producing it, and his suggestions that he might attend early workshops went without response. "I was curious," he says, "but not willing to bite without any kind of foundation, particularly on the director."

Another potential new play for the Festival, Frank McGuinness's adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's classic novel, *Rebecca*, directed by Patrick Mason, was considered too commercial. "It was a fine production," Shipley recalls, "but it was-

n't an original Frank McGuinness."

Next year, however, despite the fact that the Festival's funding makes it impossible for it to function as a producing company, Shipley is aiming to collaborate on co-productions with Druid, Rough Magic and Corn Exchange, if his



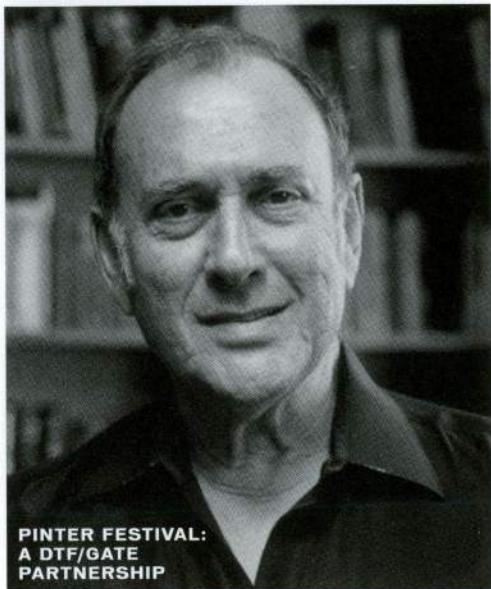
DON SHIPLEY

resources will stretch. Plans for the Festival's 50th anniversary in 2007 are more ambitious: to commission five new Irish productions, should money materialise from the Arts Council. "I would expect that in our anniversary year the equation would shift slightly to the right in terms of Irish content."

This may be as close as we get to the enjoyably groundless rumour that

what's news

Shipley had intended to stage a festival comprised wholly of Irish content in a later year. "I did initiate that comment," he laughs, "but only as an exploratory conversation."



PINTER FESTIVAL:
A DTF/GATE
PARTNERSHIP

Shipley makes no apologies for rebranding the Festival as "International" ("it defines its purpose: we were set up to be an international festival") nor does he believe he would be honouring his job by featuring new Irish writing before it is mature enough for the stage. (He still cannot say whether Mark O'Rowe's long-gestating play will be ready for 2006.)

"The reason I've been appointed," says Shipley "is that I have some curatorial sensibilities to make that call. And what a disservice you do, for the sake of meeting a quota, by throwing in things that simply aren't ready - at this stage."

He was particularly satisfied with the satellite events included under the umbrella of the "Theatre Olympics" this year, and struck by the articulacy and vigour of the Young Critics' Forum (chaired by *ITM*'s former editor, Karen Fricker). Shipley was also proud to partner The Gate Theatre with its Pinter celebrations. "That wasn't to the exclusion of anything else," he adds.

He can also point to a 7.5% increase in the box office from last year, making this the most successful turnover for the Festival in any year.

Of course this may be of little comfort to those who would trade the bewildering visuals of Lies Pauwels' *White Star* for the latest Thomas Kilroy play any day. But they may take heart from a note that reached *ITM* as we went to press:

"If taste is swinging towards the visual, the eurhythmic, dance and camera-work, that's only cyclical and it wouldn't worry me in the least. We've seen it before and it's really no threat to good writing, quite the contrary."

It was signed Thomas Kilroy.

NEWS JUST IN: ARTISTS ARE NOT RICH

Jane Brennan admitted she was "shocked but not surprised". The actor and founding member of Associated Theatre Artists was among the first to see a report on conditions for theatre practitioners in Ireland – the first such survey undertaken in Ireland – and her response was widely shared.

The report creates a dispiriting picture of the straitened circumstances for the estimated 900 theatre practitioners in the country – including performing artists, production artists and technical and managerial staff – more than 80% of whom work on a freelance basis. The average income for theatre practitioners from their chosen profession amounts to just €7,200. The average weekly wage tallies at €513, although in the case of performers this average falls to €456.

With the attendant problems of a freelance working culture – together with the difficulty in generating work – theatre artists are likely to experience eight weeks of unemployment a year. The survey also reveals an unsympathetic Social Welfare system which had asked nearly a quarter of respondents to retrain or apply for alternative jobs during such periods.

Although little of this will strike the theatre sector as news, the report, commissioned by the Arts Council, aims to dispel any public misconception that performing artists “enjoy celebrity, wealth and privilege” (a line that drew hollow laughter from theatre practitioners at the document’s launch). The document will provide a benchmark for further study and, more importantly, will prompt the Arts Council to shape its forthcoming Arts Strategy to address the vagaries of employment in the theatre, rates of pay and the uncomprehending relationship between theatre practitioners and Social Welfare or the Revenue Commissioners.

The report also comes at a time when

The shortest short list

Fishamble Theatre Company is running its New Play Competition “for a site-specific, very short play” once again this year. The selected winning plays will be produced in locations around Dublin’s Temple Bar area, as part of Temple Bar Properties’ Diversions 2006 summer programme. Closing date for entries is Friday 16 December. Further information from Gavin Kostick at 01-6704018 and on www.fishamble.com

the Council is lobbying the Department of Finance to retain the tax exemption scheme for artists. “We want this report in the public domain,” said the Arts Council Director Mary Cloake, “so there can be no doubt about the financial struggle that working in the arts means for so many.”

BEATING THE JANUARY BLUES?

Part of that struggle, however, may soon be of the Arts Council’s own making. As reported in the last issue of *ITM*, grant decisions for 2006 will be announced late in January, making production plans difficult for smaller theatre companies. Aware of the problems, Cloake told *ITM* that companies who may experience problems with cash flow owing to the late decision date should make contact with the Council before Christmas “so we can make arrangements that the work isn’t delayed or compromised”.

This interim support is available to companies that are funded on a year-to-

what's news

year basis and would effectively take the form of an advance on the company's 2006 budget. However, this would neither guarantee a certain level of funding nor provide the equivalent of a production budget. "It's simply to keep people ticking over with their activities and formal commitments," said Cloake.

AND NOW, THE STRATEGY ...

Due to learn of its own budget from Government as *ITM* went to press, the Council's activities will be directed towards publishing the long-awaited Arts Strategy in the first half of December; a document which so far has been high on aspiration and low on specific policy. Cloake stresses that the Strategy will be "very practical" and will be implemented quickly and effectively. "Once we know our budget, we'll be able to publish the Strategy, confident that we can deliver on it. It's a Strategy about action. Action needs resources."

With the cold light of a report on socio-economic conditions and the

scant resources available to the freelance workers of the sector, this is a critical time for awareness and action.

CLASSICAL RE-MIX

If you don't associate a two-and-a-half-thousand year-old play with global-political urgency, you're probably not Conall Morrison. Following the director's multi-media spin on *Hamlet* and his all-male production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* comes *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, written and directed by Morrison as his next production for the Abbey.

"It's Euripides," he says matter-of-factly, "but it's set squarely in the Green Zone in Baghdad in the present day." This isn't the first time Morrison has adapted a Greek tragedy for a contemporary political context. When this take on the conflict between civil society and religious extremism opens next March, it will have been three years since Morrison's version of *Antigone* employed Sophocles to interpret the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

"I love the potency of the Greek classics and their remarkable theatrical energy," Morrison told *ITM*. "I think they are unparalleled in their concise presentation of the epic problems facing human kind – the various warring impulses like intransigence and revenge and extreme fundamentalism – things we need to crack as a species. I find that these plays are great crucibles for that kind of moral or political or theistic debate."



Carr to hold Court

Marina Carr's latest play, *Woman and Scarecrow*, will premiere at London's Royal Court Theatre next year. Described as "a passionate threnody" in which a woman faces her death, it will be staged in June. Before

that, Royal Court stages another premiere from an Irish playwright, Stella Feehily. *O Go My Man* is her second play to be set in contemporary Dublin (after *Duck*) and will be directed by Max Stafford-Clark, in a co-production between the Royal Court and Out of Joint, opening in January.



CONALL MORRISON:
RADICAL CLASSICIST

As it is informed by his reading of the press coverage of contemporary Iraq, particularly the reports of Robert Fisk and John Pilger, it would be easy to expect Morrison's play to be politically slanted. But recognising political and religious fundamentalism on both sides as lethal forces, Morrison is more concerned with what happens when these forces clash. "The entire world - not just the city of Thebes - is going to fall into war if the two fundamentalist positions in terms of religion and politics don't find a way to live with each other," he offers. "The moral of the tale is, I think, the William Blake line, 'The truth always lies between two extremes'."

OPERATIC DÉBUT

Next on Morrison's slate is another transposed classic: he has accepted an invitation from the English National Opera to direct *La Traviata* at the Coliseum, London, next year. Asked by ENO Director, Seán Doran, if he could envisage Verdi's opera in an Irish setting, Morrison was initially reluctant, until he envisaged that the context of Ireland in the 1880s could imbue the piece with a greater sense of religious and social tension. Due to open late next year, this version transposes the opera's social roles and casts the courtesan Violetta as a member of the

what's news



CONOR MCPHERSON

Protestant ruling class, who crosses religious and socio-political boundaries in her ill-fated relationship with a Catholic poet. Morrison's team includes choreographer David Bolger, set designer Frances O'Connor, costume designer Joan O'Cleary and librettist Stephen Clark.

With the latest in a long run of familiar texts reinterpreted, does this make Morrison the country's busiest radical classicist?

MORE TALK ABOUT MONEY

The financial life of Conor McPherson, the new Writer-in-Association with the Abbey Theatre, has been much discussed recently. Shortly after receiving the award of €11,000, sponsored by Anglo Irish Bank, the playwright lent

his support to the Arts Council's campaign to retain the artists' tax exemption scheme, currently under review by Government. "I don't think many artists who write music or literature are doing it for the money," McPherson said at the launch of the campaign. "I might spend two years writing a play and get seven or eight thousand for it."

The bursary for the Writer-in-Association award seems even more generous, then, since it comes with no obligation to produce a play for the Abbey, but simply affords time and space to the writer.

It may also come as some solace to McPherson, following the late cancellation of a planned Broadway run of his most recent play, *Shining City*, produced by The Gate Theatre last year. Scheduled to have opened in San Francisco in October, before transferring to New York's Schoenfeld Theater, the production was cancelled in August. *Variety* quoted a statement from the show's American producers, who explained: "Certain critical production schedule issues could not be resolved in time to meet the current schedule."

We don't know what that means either.

Surely the Broadway producers couldn't be as strapped for cash as their counterparts in Ireland? The Gate Theatre was unable to comment. 

Oooey Oooey Ooo, dum die dee
Oooey Oooey Ooo, dee di day
Oooey Oooey Ooo la la la laaaa
Oooey Oooey Ooo na-na naaa

Dah-Dah Dee Dah Dum
OOOMPah hah hah hah

Dah-Dah Dee Di Do
OOOMPah hah hah hah

Dah Die Dee Di DumDee di dum
HEY yeah

Oooey Oooey Ooo na na naaa..
Oooey Oooey Ooo dum die dum
Oooey Oooey Ooo dee di day
Oooey Oooey Ooo la la la laaaa

**ENIO MORRICONE'S THEME FROM
'THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY'**

As heard on RTÉ lyric fm and performed by Janice Doyle, aged 32, sitting on a train
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opening nights

NEW IRISH PRODUCTIONS coming up

in the next four months – mark your diaries!



SECOND AGE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS JENNIFER JOHNSTON'S *HOW MANY MILES TO BABYLON* (ABOVE) ADAPTED BY ALAN STANFORD AND DIRECTED BY DAVID PARNELL. OPENING AT THE HELIX, DUBLIN, 14-25 NOVEMBER, THEN TOURING TO GALWAY, CLARE AND MONAGHAN UNTIL 9 DECEMBER.

Hatch Theatre Company (formerly ARClight) presents the Irish premiere of **BLOOD** by Lars Noren at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, from 16 NOVEMBER - 3 DECEMBER.

Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray, Co Wicklow, will present the Irish premiere of **AN OAK TREE** by Tim Crouch from 16-19 NOVEMBER.

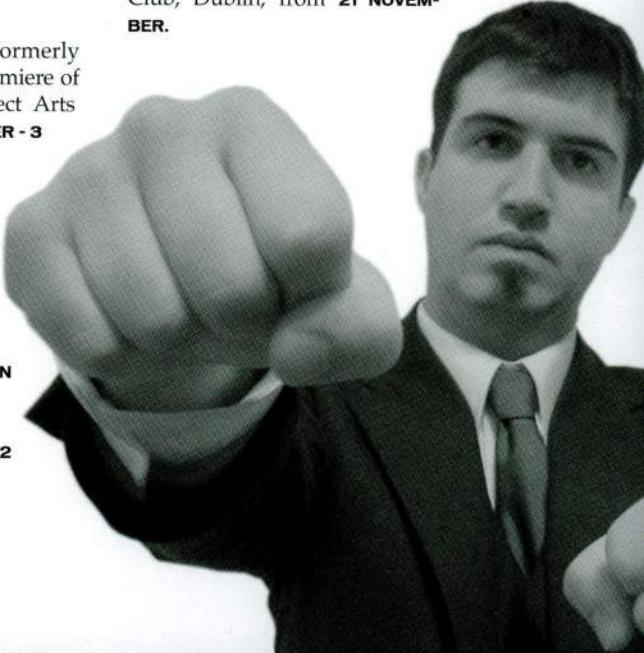
EVERYMAN PALACE THEATRE IN CORK PRESENTS THE IRISH PREMIERE OF **WRECKS**, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY NEIL LABUTE, FROM 22 NOVEMBER UNTIL 3 DECEMBER.

Crooked House presents an adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's **THE SNOW QUEEN** in the Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge from **16-20 DECEMBER**.

Opera Ireland's winter season runs at the Gaiety, Dublin, from **19-27 NOVEMBER** with Verdi's **LA TRAVIATA**. David Bolger directs Handel's **IMENEUS** on alternating nights.

THE CHRISTMAS CAROL runs at The Gate, Dublin, from **29 NOVEMBER** until **28 JANUARY**. **THE FAITH HEALER** will open in February – dates to be announced.

Bang Out of Order Theatre Company presents **I PRETEND** at the Teachers' Club, Dublin, from **21 NOVEMBER**.



The Theatre Royal, Waterford presents Brian Friel's ***TRANSLATIONS*** from **22 NOVEMBER**.

Sole Purpose Productions presents ***DON'T SAY A WORD***, from **25 NOVEMBER**, St Eugene's Hall, Donegal and tours until **11 FEBRUARY**.

Blue Raincoat's production of Ionesco's ***THE BALD SOPRANO*** will tour nationwide during **NOVEMBER**.

RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRKILLKILLKILL
... TO INFINITY (MAKE IT LOOK REAL) IS
IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE'S NEW
SHOW, WHICH COMES TO PROJECT ARTS
CENTRE ON 6 DECEMBER. (PICTURED)

Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, Dublin, presents ***THE RED HOT RUNAWAYS*** by Mary Elizabeth-Burke Kennedy, by Storytellers Theatre Company and The Civic Theatre, from **29 NOVEMBER**, and Barnstorm Theatre Company's ***TOWN HOUSE, COUNTRY MOUSE*** by Medb Lambert from **1 DECEMBER**.

Siren Productions brings Shakespeare's ***TITUS ANDRONICUS*** to Project Arts Centre from **1-10 DECEMBER**.

A reworked version of Rosaleen McDonagh's ***JOHN AND JOSIE*** takes place at Project Arts Centre on **4 DECEMBER** as part of Traveller Focus Week.

The Ark, Temple Bar, Dublin, presents ***ANNABEL'S STAR*** for 4-6 year olds from **7 DECEMBER - 6 JANUARY**

HOMELAND, written and directed by Paul Mercier, opens on **18 JANUARY** at the Abbey Theatre.

READCO's production of ***A PLAY ABOUT MY DAD*** opens in Project Cube on **31 JANUARY**, and runs until **18 FEBRUARY**.

Prime Cut Productions in Association with Belfast Waterfront Hall will present ***ENDGAME*** from **2 FEBRUARY**.

Big Telly Theatre Company's production of ***THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*** opens on **3 FEBRUARY** at the Ardhowen Theatre.

Cahoots NI brings its new production, ***HALL OF FUN***, to Belfast City Hall from **8-11 FEBRUARY**.

THE GROWN UPS by Nicholas Kelly, directed by Gerard Stembridge, opens at The Peacock on **14 FEBRUARY**.

Opera Theatre Company presents Mozart's ***APOLLO AND HYACINTHUS*** at the O'Reilly Theatre, Dublin on **10-11 FEBRUARY**, then tours to Sligo, Mullingar, Dundalk, Armagh, Galway, Limerick and Skibbereen, until **25 FEBRUARY**.

THE BACCHAE OF BAGHDAD, written and directed by Conall Morrison (after Euripides) runs from **7 MARCH** at The Abbey Theatre.

Storytellers' Theatre Company and The Civic Theatre, in association with St Patrick's Festival, presents James Stephens' ***THE CROCK OF GOLD*** at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, on **15 MARCH**.

entrances & exits

LAYLA O'MARA notes the movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre

AIDEEN HOWARD, formerly Artistic Director of the Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray, has been appointed Literary Director of The Abbey. She takes up her position in January 2006... The General Manager of Tinderbox, **DEARBHOLA MURPHY**, has left the company and has been replaced by **KERRY WOODS**, previously their administrator... **CIARA**

FLYNN has left her position as General Manager of Fishamble. She is succeeded by **ORLA FLANAGAN**, who has just left the Literary Department of the Abbey Theatre.

There have been two new appointments at Draiocht, Blanchardstown: **AIDAN GATELY** has taken over as Box Office Assistant, replacing **JANE SHUTTLEWORTH**, and **SARAH MARTIN** takes up the position of Marketing Assistant/Corporate Hires Co-ordinator, replacing **DARRAN HEANEY**, who has gone to The Helix as Conference and Events Manager...

ELISABETTA BISARO has stepped down from her position as Administrator with Irish Modern Dance Theatre. **ROSS O'CORRAIN**, who previously worked with Opera Theatre Company, has taken up the position.

DONNACADH O'BRIAIN has recently been appointed Assistant Director with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London.



AIDEEN HOWARD

He has previously directed shows at the Dublin and Edinburgh Fringe and has worked as an Assistant Director at the Gate Theatre...

After nine years as Productions Manager and Theatre Liaison for the Courthouse Arts Centre in Tinahely, Co Wicklow, **MAGGIE GALLAGHER** has left to go travelling. She is replaced by **SHELLEY HAYES**. Dance Theatre of Ireland has recently appointed the following new staff: **KATY FITZPATRICK** as Centre & Out-reach Coordinator; **JESSICA PEEL-YATES** as Tour & Productions Co-ordinator and **DEBORAH MOON** (formerly Director of the Tallaght Community Arts Centre) as General Manager... **SIOBHÁN COLGAN** has been appointed Press and Publicity Manager at the Abbey Theatre.

SITUATIONS VACANT

GEMMA DUKES, Marketing Assistant with the Dublin Theatre Festival, is leaving Dublin to travel for a year. The Festival will be advertising for a replacement.

After two years with Blue Raincoat Theatre Company as Development Manager, **JAIMIE CARSWELL** has left to study at Ecole Lecoq in Paris. The position has not yet been filled.

WES WILKIE, the Executive Producer of CREATE, is leaving. The position will be advertised in the near future.

PHOTO CREDIT



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The poverty of verbatim theatre

In the Tricycle Theatre's production of *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, staged at The Abbey during this year's Dublin Theatre Festival, theatre is reduced to being merely a conduit for information, argues **DAVID BARNETT**.

N THE WEST GERMANY OF THE 1960S, A GROUP OF PLAYS that came to be known under the umbrella term "documentary drama" emerged as a challenge to the political quietism of the "economic miracle" of the 1950s. The plays, such as Rolf Hochhuth's *The Representative*, which dealt with the inaction of the Pope in the second World War, forced Germany to confront its recent past through the means of documentary evidence.

Archives, newspapers and protocols were scoured for material that was to be dramatised and staged. Today we find a similar move in British theatre in the form of "verbatim theatre", in which edited historical records are performed word-for-word. Dublin and

Belfast have recently had the chance to experience one particularly pertinent example, *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, which condenses 434 days of testimony into something under two and-a-half hours of performance.



THE INVESTIGATION, BERLIN 1965

Verbatim theatre, like its German predecessor, is driven by a need to locate tendentious themes within authentic material that resists the claim that the dramatist has distorted facts through fiction. A perennial problem is, however, the editing of the documents

— how is one to be "fair" when cutting potentially millions of recorded words down to a few thousand? In *Bloody Sunday*, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor, we appear to be getting a good selection of witnesses but ultimately we can never be sure that some central element hasn't been omitted.

The same issue troubled the German documentarist Heinar Kipphardt, whose plays *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* and *Brother Eichmann* are both dramatisations of protocols, like *Bloody Sunday*. Kipphardt's first version of *Oppenheimer*, premiered in 1964, is remarkably similar to *Bloody Sunday* in several crucial ways. Both plays are keen to defend their documentary integrity by providing evidence of their own source's immaculate credentials and by discrediting

other lesser documents as corrupt. Both plays feature a stenographer so that we know that the record of the proceedings we are viewing is accurate. Elsewhere, examples of "bad" documents are presented for the sake of contrast — in *Bloody Sunday*, Bernadette McAliskey's testimo-

think tank

ny points to the manipulation of words attributed to her by the media; Soldier S talks of how he was coerced by the Royal Military Police to sign up to their version of the story for the first, flawed, Bloody Sunday report by Lord Widgery. The play is busy establishing its own credibility for the audience, as Kipphardt's had some forty years earlier.

YE T KIPPHARDT BEGAN TO SUSPECT his own methods and by the time he wrote a fully revised version of *Brother Eichmann* in 1982, his play was alive with critiques of documentary sources that implicated his own work. The spectator was encouraged to question just how accurate Kipphardt's version of events was by the very play they were watching. The documentary dramatist had turned his attention to questions of reliability, something on which London's Tricycle Theatre, the main producer of much verbatim theatre, remains stubbornly silent.

But this is not the end of *Bloody Sunday's* problems. The question of how one portrays the verbatim characters on stage will clearly colour our response to them. Soldier F, who is shown to have murdered at least four of the protesters, is seemingly unrepentant, hiding behind his blanket line that he can't recollect what happened on 30 January 1972. But what if this soldier has different reasons, that the selective amnesia is a mask for guilt, or political pressure, rather than for his own craven efforts to avoid punishment?

The focus on individual blame, in the form of our interest in the British officers, their soldiers and indeed the IRA man who admits that there was shoot-

ing from his side, too, turns the play into an essentially moral and not, as seems to be the common perception, political work of art. While the wider frame of the political is hinted at in *Bloody Sunday*, it is difficult to reach it when the audience is presented with a group of individuals who display both heroism and cowardice, brutality and humanity. The political sinks in the welter of emotions and responsibilities, in "human interest", because the contexts are little more than footnotes.

This was not the case in Peter Weiss's documentary drama, *The Investigation*, based on the protocols of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of the mid-1960s. As a playwright rather than as an editor, Weiss conflated the mass of material into the testimony of nine unnamed witnesses. Any single witness would encompass a broad range of experiences without pretending to be an individual. The eighteen Nazi defendants, all named, acted in curiously similar fashions, creating another collective. The issue of guilt was thus taken as a given. The real questions raised were how a society as cultured as it was could produce something as barbaric as Auschwitz. This was a political play, concerned with social structures and the mindsets and abominations they produced.

Bloody Sunday, alas, refuses to question or go beyond its strict and narrow documentary aesthetic, repeating but not addressing issues raised by a documentary theatre that is over forty years old. And the director uses the theatre as if it were the natural extension of the text, as opposed to an open space in which speeches can be queried and interrogated. The wonderful riches of

imaginative theatre production are rejected, or perhaps simply ignored, in the name of reproducing "the truth". The theatre is used as nothing more than a conduit for information; it simulates the experience of being in a court room and nothing more.

Bloody Sunday tells us what we already know: that British soldiers massacred unarmed Catholic civil rights demonstrators. To pore over individual guilt or reliability is a red herring that obscures far more interesting political questions. In whose interests is the inquiry working? Why did the first inquiry fail? How were amnesties, immunities and anonymi-

ties established and on what terms? What is the nature of the complex web of governmental, historical and social forces working upon the witnesses? But no, in the name of slavishly adhering to the document, *Bloody Sunday* shrinks, like the Tricycle Theatre's other verbatim pieces, before the larger questions.

The insistence on the document and its supposed truth is the dogmatic rock on which this type of verbatim theatre will inevitably founder. 

David Barnett is a lecturer in Drama Studies at UCD. He specialises in German drama, political and post-dramatic theatre.



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Waterford City Council



Waterford Youth Committee



CONVERSATIONS & CROSS-CURRENTS

The
sixth
annual IRISH
THEATRE MAGAZINE
CRITICS' FORUM was held
on 11 October 2005 at Project
Arts Centre, Dublin. Four critics, two
from Ireland and two from abroad, presented
their views on a wide range of productions
from this year's Dublin Theatre Festival.
Here's an edited transcript of the discussion.

CONVERSATIONS AND CROSS CURRENTS

BRIAN SINGLETON (*Chair of panel; Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin*):

We're going to kick off with a show that has divided critics and audiences alike: Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's *The Story of the Bull*, produced in association with the Dublin Theatre Festival and BITE 07 at the Barbican, London. This is the latest in a series of dance theatre productions by Fabulous Beast that takes us to contemporary rural Irish society, cutting through the underbelly of Irish life, through Michael Keegan Dolan's choreography.

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So, Mark Fisher, *The Story of the Bull*, is this the new *Riverdance*?

MARK FISHER (*journalist and critic, based in Scotland*):

This is a controversial question, because *The Bull* sets itself up as being the opposite of *Riverdance* because it seems to critique the whole facile nature of a show that tours around selling Irish culture to the world. But I think, in a way, it is the new *Riverdance*. There's a little 10-minute interview outside on a television screen, an interview with Peter Brook, where he talks about his career trajectory from his early days which he describes as being interested in the theatricality of what he was doing. He says that as time has gone on, he's become more and more interested in meaning. He likes to watch other people being theatrical, but what he's personally engaged with is exploring meaning in greater depth.

And it struck me that what Michael Keegan Dolan was doing is theatricality - the show looks fantastic, there are lots of ideas all the way through it. I don't suppose I was actually laughing as much as a lot of people in the audience were laughing, but it's lively in its wit and there's certainly a great level of ideas across the whole performance.

But to me it seemed to be a totally superficial experience; it's based on the ancient Ulster legend and so the story runs through the performance very coherently, but there's no extra level of meaning to the story. The story is just *the story*, it doesn't have any metaphorical level. And as a result it never gets to any greater depth, it looks flashy, it looks entertaining, the audience stands on its feet at the end because they think they've had a good time, presumably. They did seem to have a good time, but actually I didn't feel that there was any great weight in the performance and in that sense I think it links to the superficiality of *Riverdance*.

KAREN FRICKER (*critic with The Guardian; post-doctoral research fellow, Trinity College Dublin*): I think there was an enormous



THE STORY OF THE BULL

amount of expectation, particularly from those of us who live in Ireland and watch Irish theatre and Irish dance closely, because Michael Keegan Dolan's *Giselle*, two years ago, was such a breakthrough work. I still remember it fondly as one of the most exciting times in the theatre I've had in my adult life. That cannot have been easy for Michael Keegan Dolan and his company to be responding to and to be recovering from.

So I was quite disappointed by *The Bull* and I'm worried that I'm being too hard on it. I agree it was superficial, but I think it was attempting to make a critique of, or satirise, the greed of contemporary Ireland, to talk about the difference between the rural and the urban, and satirise *Riverdance*, but to me all of these things have been done before, often, on our stages, and more pointedly.

I used the wonderful resource of Irishplayography.com this afternoon just to refresh myself. I found that rural Ireland had 101 entries, urban Ireland: 85 entries, capitalism: about 20 entries. Declan Hughes, Arthur Riordan, Hilary Fannin, Gerry Stembridge and David Parnell are among the many authors

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recently who have specifically taken on the changes to Ireland during the Celtic Tiger period and what they have done to our values - I'd heard this before.

I also had a problem with the fact that - and I feel like I'm categorising Michael Keegan Dolan - but I think he's such a brilliant choreographer and there were so many wonderful dancers up there, and the show almost never danced. The only time that they did dance was the *Riverdance* parody. Many of the dancers proved themselves to be good actors, but I was just waiting for the dance to happen - even though when you first walk in you see a huge expanse of dirt, you think where the hell are they going to dance. I think that was what the audience was responding to at the end, in the last 10 minutes, where movement was used to communicate this anger, this stomping on the ground, this huge horrible, negative sentiment that Michael Keegan Dolan seems to have towards contemporary Ireland - it was actually being expressed viscerally. And the rain coming down - I wasn't sure why there was rain - but it created this spectacular thing and the response was so cathartic, but to me that came late in the day for a production that, up to that point, had been quite violent in its use of language, with repeated profanity. I don't usually have a problem with language, but I had a problem with language in this.

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HELEN MEANY (*journalist and critic; editor of ITM*): I think the problem with the language was that it was repeated so much and was not particularly witty. Here in Ireland we can use "bad language", as we call it, quite cleverly and creatively and link it into something humorous, but it was just repeated and it was relentless, which raises another problem about the object of the satire. How was Michael Keegan Dolan going to present people behaving badly, incredibly badly, but also give us some kind of perspective on their behaviour? Instead, we just got the behaviour, unmediated. I thought it was very underdeveloped and raw; we were given raw material that needed a lot more work.

But admire his attempt to branch out. I think the piece was actually rooted in dance, but that it became quite sprawling and unwieldy. I thought there was a much better work in there that needed some help, some dramaturgical assistance, to get out. And the actual object of the satire needed to be more sharply focused. Was he satirising the attempts at sophistication that hide our bestial nature - as a particularly Irish problem? Was he satirising the couple, Maeve and Allen, with their *nouveau riche* aspirations and their vulgarity? Was he satirising rural Ireland wholesale - the whole Cullen family, every single



THE STORY OF THE BULL

one of them was worse than the next, they were extremely brutal, they were very violent, they were sexually completely screwed up ... we got the whole thing, it was overloaded and a bit heavy handed.

Unfortunately the subtlety and the black humour that was in *Giselle* in its treatment of dysfunctionality was not there to the same extent; this was a cruder piece of work. I thought there were wonderful elements in it but it needed a bit of help from an editor or dramaturg.

ALICE GHEORGESCU (*leading critic in Bucharest, Romania and recently appointed literary advisor at the Romanian National Theatre*): Maybe your expectations were too high. I didn't expect anything from the show, I just went to see it. I didn't know anything about the company or the artists, and I simply enjoyed it very much because I found it was so vivid, so real, it was funny and it was cruel, and it was sad and it was poetic and all of these together. I found the series of clichés on Irish culture, the dance and so on, very interesting. All the world

knows the famous dancers, and the fact that they didn't dance in this show seemed to me a little strange but it meant something. I think they simply didn't want to dance, they didn't want to fit this cliché and at the end I found it thrilling and very touching because the ending was not only - I'm sorry for my English, it's far from being perfect - a release of energy. I understood that there was not only anger but also a kind of love in this ending - very, very vigorous and full of force, that was my impression.

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BS: That's a very interesting view from an outsider's perspective. I think it's very true that our expectations have been so high after *Giselle*. It's always difficult to make the second album. But was the problem, Karen, that the carnality was just expressed verbally rather than physically? You don't have a problem with the carnality of what's being represented, just the way it was expressed?

KF: The point was made over and over again, like Helen said, the repeating of the same point in the same very strong language, and thus it dulls you, stops you from being able to listen and appreciate where it was coming from, because you were being pounded. I left feeling like I'd just been beaten up by the words and the angry critique, and that it was only coming through in one way. Maybe if there had been more varied language, but also different forms of expression, it might have been more effective for me.

BS: Did anyone feel uplifted at the end, because I certainly did. I was sitting in the front row and when all those dancers came out – just like in *Riverdance* - with the dance line and this huge burst of stomping and the musical energy, you just wanted to rise up.

HM: It was a release as well, because it was a long time coming. With so much exposition and extensive narrative links you're thinking, 'we're building up to something and it's going to happen', but it took an awfully long time. I thought it was exhilarating, but we had earned it.

MF: I don't think the show had ended, that was the problem. I was irritated by the ending because I didn't feel it had been justified, or linked in to anything. It was fantastic but it had the same level of superficiality as the rest of the performance. Also there's a tendency throughout the show to go for the joke rather than to go for the emotional truth, and that helped to undermine it all the way through.

HAMLET The Peacock Theatre

BS: We'll stay in Ireland and move on to the Peacock Theatre at the Abbey., to *Hamlet*. It's the first time that the Abbey has co-produced with the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. Now I counted up today, I've seen seventeen productions of *Hamlet* in my lifetime! I'm going to turn to you Alice: you've also seen many productions of *Hamlet*, and I'd like you to tell us why this one is different, or how it is different.

AG: Well, it wasn't basically different from other productions I've seen in Romania. I think it was different in terms of means of expression. For instance, for the first time I saw the Ghost coming on stage on a screen. Also, the scene with the Players performing 'The Mousetrap': it was the first time I saw it made in such a way, with actors impersonating doctors, or was it surgery? And being quite frank, I didn't understand why, I didn't understand the meaning, for me that scene was a little obscure.

BS: And what about the lead actor's performance, Patrick O'Kane?

AG: Oh I liked him very much. I thought it was very modern and it fitted the style of the film projection. I wouldn't say the same thing about all of the actors, but I enjoyed his performance.

BS: One of the most interesting things about the production for me was the accents used, Northern Irish accents, I think it was very interesting, I listened to the play more. That's not just because I'm from the North, but I just think Shakespeare's language and Northern accents should go together more often.

KF: I thought it was very welcome to hear it spoken in Northern accents, and for me that didn't have a political meaning, it just happened to be that the actors were Northern Irish, and speaking - I thought, across the board, quite beautifully - Shakespeare's words in Northern accents. I was struck, surprised a little bit, depressed, by the fact that it was received by at least one British critic as being about Northern Irish politics - apparently because people were speaking in northern Irish accents, because I could find no other element of the interpretation that was saying this was about the political situation. I think it's welcome that the Abbey and the Lyric are working together, that the show is going to go to Belfast and that so

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many wonderful Northern actors are being able to work on both sides of the border.

I agree that Patrick O'Kane was incredibly convincing and strong, I find him an actor who is sometimes actually hard to watch on stage because he has so much energy and so much intensity. Unless he is working very closely with the director, who is really working to control and to use that energy. But here I thought that there was amazing synergy between himself and the director, Conall Morrison. I thought that the thing that was getting in their way was the play itself, and I wondered if they had been pushed a little bit more they might have gone in the direction of Robert Lepage or Robert Wilson in completely breaking down the play, not being so faithful to the text, going on an exploration.

The idea to me, the way that I understood the show, was that Hamlet is an artist who is using his camcorder and he's observing everything on stage, recording everything. In the beginning you see him playing with his notebooks, he is using surveillance against the society that he understands to be watching him. Because *Hamlet* is about surveillance, and thus I understood 'the play within the play' as his performance art, his kind of avant-garde theatrical experiment. That kind of worked in the context of the play, as well as having a political message.

AG: I felt a little frustrated because the scene with Hamlet and the Players was cut out.

HM: Yes, where we hear Hamlet actually instructing the actors and being a theatre director.

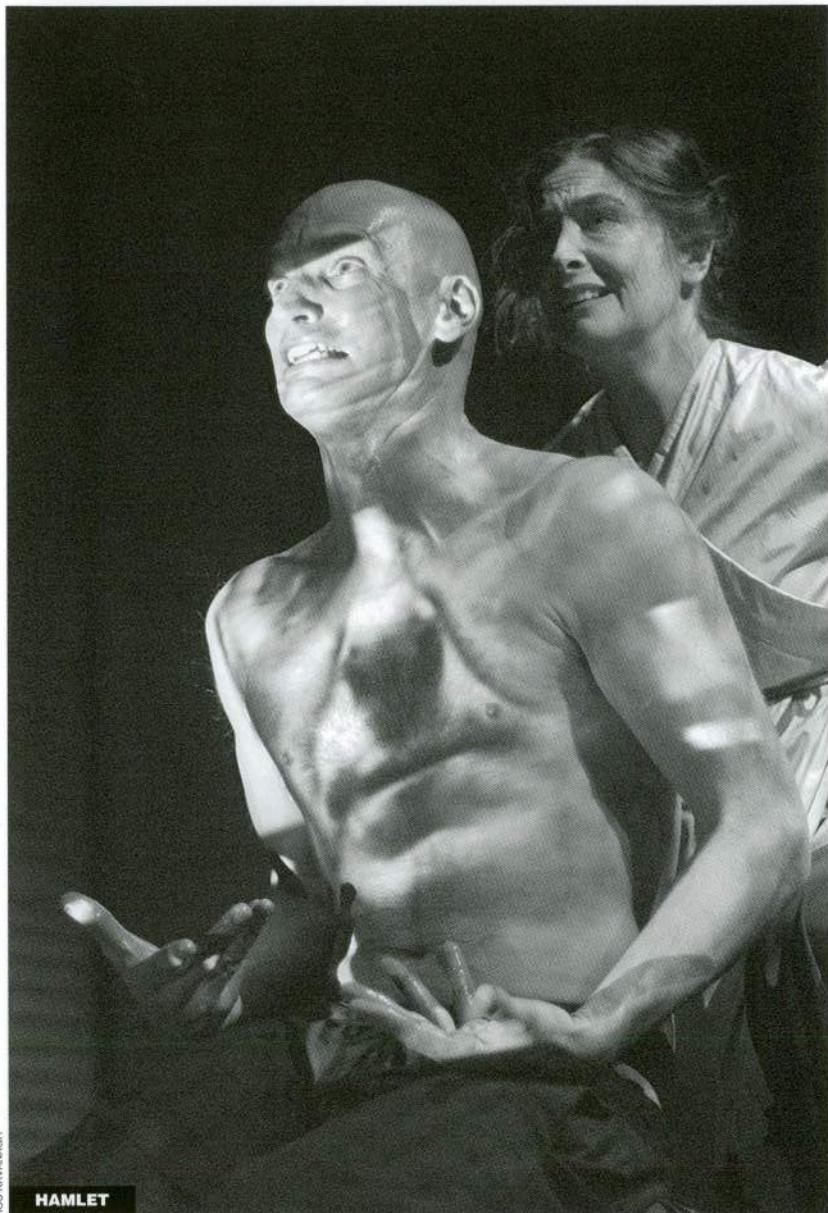
AG: I think it's important. From the point of view of Hamlet being an artist, we wonder what his relationship is with the artists in the play.

HM: Yes, it was very heavily cut. This was certainly one of the darkest *Hamlets* I've ever seen. I thought maybe the reason that one of the London critics thought that it was about Northern Ireland was that Patrick O'Kane's performance was menacing, threatening and violent, and he was a scary presence. He was the most unsympathetic Hamlet I've ever watched. I thought it was a brilliant performance but he was deeply unsympathetic. Normally you'd feel empathy for Hamlet, or you find his more philosophical musings interesting or moving, but this was just splenetic rage. I thought that this was extremely well conceived by the director - the idea of Hamlet as a violent and

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ROSE KATANAGH

HAMLET

slightly nerdy teenager, obsessed with his technical toys and all that, worked really well.

I thought it was a very, very interior piece, it was as if you were right inside his mind. Rather than the Hamlet who observes the court and the politics and relationships with the outside world, we were right inside his own obsessive, very one-dimensional mind. I thought it was risky to make him so unsympathetic - risky and quite courageous, and I thought a lot about it afterwards.

That reading gave rise to a brilliant mad scene with Ophelia, where she becomes a performance artist-cum DJ and sound artist, giving a beautiful performance of her own disintegration. It was very visual and inventive - and very moving

BS: Well, one of the things we don't know about Hamlet is whether he's mad or whether he's playing at being mad. He says he's playing at being mad, but in this production there's a definite sense that this guy wasn't playing at it, he was serious.

HM: Oh yes, he was, and the scene with Ophelia was particularly disturbing. It was so loud, it was shocking - she would have been traumatised by that alone, even if nothing else had happened to her. She was completely bullied by him and that was reinforced brilliantly by the appearance of Claudius and Polonius. They didn't even go over to her, she was there, broken, on the ground and they were only concerned with spying on Hamlet and just let her sit there.

And I thought that that reading gave rise to a brilliant mad scene with Ophelia, where she becomes a kind of performance artist, a singer-cum DJ and sound artist, giving a beautiful performance of her own disintegration. Having been bullied and silenced, this scene gave her back her voice in a strange way. I thought it was very visual and inventive and actually very moving.

BS: But her voice was mediated through a machine.

HM: Yes, which is consistent with this production's reading of the play. I thought it was very effective.

BS: The visuals were very strong also. John Comiskey designed the set, lights and the video all at once, it was quite extraordinary what he was able to do. I mean there's a kind of a mix between the video used as the supernatural and also as the surveillance of the court, one was turned against the other. But did Patrick O'Kane need to take his shirt off for such a long time?

KF: Well, his chest becomes a projection area for his father's ghost, which I thought was the pay off of the use of video. It was a very ingenious way to solve the problem of how you rep-

resent a ghost on stage. I think your reading was interesting Helen, I hadn't thought about it that way, but that very claustrophobic, boxed-off area that is the stage area is actually Hamlet's mind and so the images projected on the walls are his own thoughts.

HM: Bouncing around inside his feverish brain - that's how I read it. But there is a problem with it, which is Act Five, where he famously comes back to Denmark and is somewhat different, changed. He knows, he's got the proof now, that Claudius is the baddie that he always thought he was. He's in a more reflective, philosophical frame of mind, but we didn't get that in Patrick O'Kane's performance - he was still ranting, still so intense. I suppose he'd got into such a state of hyped up, pent up anger that we didn't have any of that falling away towards the end, which I missed.

BS: I would have expected Gordon Brown to come in at the end with another video camera and just survey the whole scene.

THE WINTER'S TALE The Abbey Theatre

Staying with the national theatre, we move up to the main stage and another version of Shakespeare last week, *The Winter's Tale* by Propeller from the UK. It's a play rarely seen in Ireland, I certainly haven't seen it performed here, and it is quite interesting that two main stage productions running on the Abbey stage back to back were cross dressed, with men playing women. Did it work Helen, men playing women?

HM: I didn't think it worked at all.

BS: Did they play women?

HM: No they didn't, they just put on women's costumes, but for me it was a real mistake and I haven't actually heard or read the director, Edward Hall, giving any explanation of why he thought it was a good idea. Now, it is an all male company and therefore that's what they do, that's the answer. But the question then is why choose *The Winter's Tale*?

First of all, it's a really problematic play I think, very, very difficult to stage now. The switch in the action from the court in Sicily to Bohemia is a huge leap and also, more seriously, what happens to Hermione, Leontes' wife. So given that it's about this man's treatment of his wife, it was very hard to watch Hermione being played by a man. The other crucial female role,

which is Paulina, who is an advisor to him and an instrument of his recovery or repentance or reconciliation, is played by a man. She has a lot of lines about the nature of female wisdom and the role of women as temporisers and healers, which really are made a complete nonsense by being spoken by a man.

BS: So it did nothing for the politics of gender?

If you're going to have men dressed up as women, that is a tremendously theatrical idea. I would like to have seen that theatricality spread across the production as a whole - and it didn't. The tendency was towards domestic naturalism

MF: Generally I agree with that, but I disagree slightly. The fact that the men were playing women wasn't as awkward and confrontational as I thought it would be, and there were certain lines that just did make a different sort of sense and presumably would have made a particular sense when Shakespeare wrote these plays and they would be boys performing them. There was one line where they say something like, oh you're thinking too much like a woman, and it gets a bit of a laugh because it puts in that juxtaposition. I think there was a certain machismo or something that the male actors would bring to these female parts, a sort of muscularity that you could argue you might not see women do.

But I don't think any of those things was sufficient to justify the whole, the number of women actors who weren't being employed. And just one other point which is to do with the cross dressing: it strikes me that if you're going to have men dressed up as women, that is a tremendously theatrical idea, and although it was a fairly lively sort of production, the general tendency was to go towards domestic naturalism in the way that people would relate to each other on stage. I would have liked to have seen that theatricality spread across the production as a whole - and it didn't.

KF: I feel that the pay-off came very late, after a very long first act, which I found quite flat and then after the interval, you're in the fourth act of the play, which is where the play changes and moves to Bohemia. Then we had a great time and it was all of this bumptious bucolic energy that's supposed to come with Bohemia – and the actors got to play sheep. There were all kinds of fun things going on, and the pay-off was the fact that the dead son, Mamillius, became the lost daughter, Perdita. That moment where you see the actor change before your eyes on stage, there was a gasp at the beauty of it because then you think, well, there is something being done here about transformation - maybe there is a rebirth, there is life coming back. Because it is a play about rebirth, it's about Hermione coming back to life, and that's presaged at that moment where Mamillius becomes Perdita.



THE WINTER'S TALE

And, to its enormous credit, the production dealt with the problem of the ending brilliantly. I find it impossible in our contemporary times to accept the fact that two of the characters are paired off, that Paulina and Camilo are paired off and that Hermione is meant to forgive the husband. In this production she doesn't, and when everybody walks away from him it was a stunning moment - but again you were three hours down.

MF: That moment affects the whole of the play that you've just seen, but it affects it too late.

BS: I found Leontes too harsh, I thought he was incredibly harsh at the beginning, to the point where he wasn't terribly credible.

KF: The point is that I believed he'd changed, believed in his transformation. That's what jealousy is. There was a light change and all of a sudden he just says "too hot, too hot". The play presents the problem and he performed the problem,

which is that all of a sudden he decided there was something going on between his wife and his brother. And I found it credible because there is no reason for jealousy, jealousy is not logical.

MF: I think maybe there would have been more logic if there was a greater sense of fable about the whole production - maybe there wasn't enough of that.

I AM MY OWN WIFE The Gaiety Theatre

I was very affected and blown away by Jefferson Mays' performance. It's an extraordinary vehicle for this actor. He has complete control

over the instrument and has a full pallet here, to play not only Charlotte, but a number of other characters

BS: But a great ensemble, I think we all agree. We'll stick with the theme of cross-dressing and move on to the first of two plays inspired by the life of the German transvestite, Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf. The first is *I Am My Own Wife* by Pulitzer prizewinner Doug Wright, directed by another famous author, Moises Kaufman, and performed by Tony Award-winning actor, Jefferson Mays. There was great hype about this production in advance, because it was a Broadway hit and because of all the awards it's won. Certainly, the author is very present in this show, is he not Karen?

KF: This was a show that came with a lot of expectation built around it because it won pretty much every award going in America in the past couple of years. It started off-Broadway, went to Broadway, won the Tony, won the Pulitzer and now - it would be overly harsh to say we're in its 'off West End' try out - but it's being performed in Dublin and then going into London's West End soon afterwards.

I was very affected and blown away by Jefferson Mays' performance. It's an extraordinary vehicle for this actor. He is someone who has complete control over the instrument and he has a full pallet here to play not only Charlotte the transvestite, but also a number of other characters. To me the problematic aspect of the play and the production is that he performs the voice of the author himself, struggling with the difficulty of writing the play that we are now seeing.

He's saying, I so admire Charlotte, I've met this amazing woman, she's an old transvestite in Berlin, she lived through the Nazi's, she lived through the Stasi, she collects beautiful furniture and then you find out that she had a gay club in her basement, that she's become this iconic figure of survival and of tolerance.

That's a fantastic story but yet it's mediated through the eyes of a somewhat flamboyant and clichéd neurotic New Yorker, who is saying I don't know how to write the play. At one stage he says, 'I had to sell my car in order to write this play', and I



I AM MY OWN WIFE

just thought: I don't care. There's a slight problem about this struggle somehow having to do with, or being paralleled with Charlotte's struggle: I don't know if that was intentional, but the mediator factor got in the way of the story he was trying to tell - it felt a little bit like a writing exercise.

BS: So should the title be *I Am My Own Author?*

KF: It's physically beautifully produced, the set is tremendous, every aspect of the production is beautifully thought through. I just had a problem with the writing, the play writing. I think the simple dramatic problem of the play is, was Charlotte really a hero, or did she inform? That dramatic conflict to me was not central, it was not made central, it got a bit lost in the many struggles that were presented and I thought that is actually a huge question of our time.

HM: It is, and I think that he copped out of that question actu-

ally, when he realised the possibility that Charlotte might have informed the Stazi. He's saying, Oh my God, you know she's my hero, how do I feel about this, how am I going to deal with this, and he went through all his scruples, but then he didn't actually take any position on it. I thought he just threw his hands up in the air, and backed away. He used the TV chat show device, where she was actually asked directly whether she'd been an informer. She avoided the question, and we were left going, well, is she a hero or is she not?

I was very interested in the performance of Jefferson Mays and I found him wonderful, really wonderful, doing so many things so brilliantly. But the play - which is not quite a play in my opinion - was of little interest to me, as a theatre text.

BS: We don't have enough information.

HM: No we don't, and so we're very ill equipped to really be able to respond to this extraordinary character. We don't get inside her at all because of all this stuff, the documentary stuff. I'm frankly surprised it won so many awards.

AG: For me it was rather difficult to follow, and the end just disappointed, I'm afraid. I was very interested in the performance of the actor and I found him wonderful, really wonderful, doing so many things and so brilliantly. But the play - which is not quite a play in my opinion - was of little interest for me, as a text, as a theatre text. And the problem of the author being on the stage, well, I think it wasn't a good idea on his part.

BS: There's one line, I don't remember it exactly, but he made a comparison between Charlotte living through Nazism and a gay man growing up in the US, and I just don't think that's sustainable as a comparison: the National Socialist Party gassed people!

So there's really a consensus on the fact that the author has a kind of meta-theatrical subconscious approach to the subject.

KF: I would be loath to cast any larger aspersions on American playwriting, but I do think that there is a sense that what seemed to work in the US has broken down here. I'm curious about that, curious about why.

BS: But I think we're all agreed that it's a superb performance.

HM: And also, as Karen mentioned, the physical production was really stunning, even down to the precision of the lighting, highlighting the clocks and gramophones on the wall behind him. When he goes down the stairs behind the transparent screen and the space opens up and we realise it's an old warehouse full of these things, it was absolutely marvellous.

WHITE STAR Samuel Beckett Theatre

BS: Well, Charlotte lived on in *White Star*, a less obvious representation of her, but it was certainly inspired by her biography. This was dance theatre directed by Lies Pauwels, from Ghent, from the Flemish company, Victoria. Charlotte wasn't represented, but numerous other victims seeking greater victimisation were presented - was that how you saw it, Helen?

HM: I think we were shown victims and victimisers, victimhood as an identity. I thought the piece was concerned with questions of identity, which included transvestism, sexual orientation, what your nationality was, your class, what language you spoke, all of the armour that we put on to present ourselves to the world. I resisted this work in the beginning, but I did find myself thinking a lot about it after; it really stayed with me. It was an absolutely un-intellectual piece and I think that's what was hard about it - there was nothing to hold on to.

It was extremely slippery and fluid, everybody was changing - were they disabled, were they not, where were we, were we in a church, was it a café, was it an ice rink, a cabaret, was it some kind of dreamland where people tried out different guises or ways of being, and ways of performing the self? It was extremely intuitive, very emotional and it was refreshing from that point of view in the middle of the festival. It seemed, at first glance, to bypass the analytical mind.

It was, I think, a classic festival piece, in that if you had seen this on its own on a winter's night on a Wednesday in Project you'd think, oh it doesn't stand up, but as a complement of sorts to *I Am My Own Wife*, most obviously, but to a lot of other shows in the festival also that were concerned with metamorphoses, I thought it was very, very moving. The scene with the blood, where one of them pours blood over herself and then is just writhing on the floor, I found very powerful.

In the beginning I had thought, it's just about themselves and their own preoccupations, that's what I didn't like. I thought: they're talking to themselves, it's a workshop, it's really hermetic, it's not communicating to me - but it did communicate to me in the end, it got under my skin.

BS: At the end of it they all put on wigs, they all became someone else, they all had a unique vision of what the other is.

HM: Yes, it was about being an outsider and yet trying to find a way of being in the world - which is a very philosophical quest.

CONVERSATIONS AND CROSS CURRENTS

MF: I didn't see it in Dublin, but in Glasgow, when it wasn't in the middle of a festival and I thought it stood out tremendously. I've got two competing ideas trying to express themselves at the same time. One is that you're always reading press releases and programmes from theatres saying that a piece of work is challenging; people like the word challenging, they like the feeling that they're going to get something exciting. I thought this was as close to something being genuinely challenging as I've seen. I agree with Helen that there was this odd mix of appearing not to be intellectual, but then you thought more about it afterwards.

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I was very grateful to have to write a review of it, because it made me really sit down and think, well, what was that remarkable experience about. I did think it was a remarkable experience. In the moment, I thought: this is fantastic, I've got no idea what's going on, but this is just tremendous. There was no predictability about what was going to happen. And because it wasn't built up around a conventional narrative, there was a slight feeling of lack of coherence. But it presented two ideas, one was about oppression of minorities and expression of disability or homosexuality or religion and so on, and that was combined with the idea that this has got something to do with the selfish society we're living in, where everybody wants to get fame and self expression.

Those two ideas link in a challenging way, in a way that I can't even resolve in my head. But there's a connection that they were wrestling with, maybe inarticulately, but in a way that means you'll be thinking about it for a long time afterwards. Those ideas are boiling quite significantly there, they have something to say.

BS: I was struggling as a spectator between very uncomfortable moments and images - particularly when they were all victimising the Down Syndrome man - and then extraordinary moments of lyrical beauty with the dancers

HM: And the music was very emotive, very heart-tugging.

KF: I found it almost impossible to watch, and that was a very personal response, and another case of having a particular expectation. I thought I was going to see a dance show, so I was at another dance show that didn't dance! There was even a dance floor and nobody danced on it. But I have got enormous rewards out of mulling over it afterwards, and I learned a lot from reading Mark [Fisher's] review in *The Guardian*.

I was interested in looking at the practice of a company from



WHITE STAR

The subject here was horrifying and terrible and the actors were very good and text was poetic and powerful, but it was not enough. I demand more from the theatre than to tell me a story, even if it is a wonderful story or a horrid story.

Belgium who seem to be coming from a completely different place, aesthetically, than we are. I think that you could say they're quite advanced. They're exploring form, and they're unapologetic about it being a hermetic world. But it's talking about some of the most potent problems we have in the world, like prejudice, bias, with a dark skinned man coming out and talking about why it's important to hate black people - that's really challenging stuff. The presence on the stage of a child I found disturbing, a lot of stuff going on around him was upsetting for adults. The presence on stage of a developmentally disabled person - these kinds of things were really pushing at issues that we face in Ireland today, issues of how we deal with difference. I thought about it a lot afterwards but I felt quite, frankly, repelled by it when I saw it.

MF: It would be interesting to go and see it again, wouldn't it, having mulled over it.

HM: Yes, there was a very strong audience reaction too, people were very split. Lots of people on opening night absolutely loathed it, they didn't want to speak about it afterwards.

TSHEPANG Samuel Beckett Theatre

BS: Well, I wasn't one of them, I thought it was the best thing I saw in the festival.

We'll move on to *Tshepang*, which is running at the Samuel Becket Theatre at the moment. A very difficult subject - this is about a child rape, which was probably the most gruesome and horrific thing I've ever heard of. Is this a subject for a play Alice?

AG: Anything can be a subject for a play. The subject here was horrifying and terrible and the actors were very good and the text was poetic and very powerful, but it was not enough. I'm afraid that it can be a little too easy to take such a subject and put it on stage, performed by a good actor, and gather sympathy from the audience. I'm afraid what I'm saying might sound a little cynical, but I demand more from the theatre than to tell me a story, even if it is a wonderful story or a horrid story.

BS: What do you want the theatre to do?

AG: It's difficult to say. I think theatre doesn't mean that I tell you that I'm sad or I'm glad and so on, but maybe that you and I are acting in such a way that the audience can see I am sad or glad. I'm sorry I can't be more specific - it's difficult for me to



TSHEPANG

speak in a foreign language - but that's what I think. And I'm afraid that *Tshepang* wasn't theatre, it was an experience, it was narrative performed by a good actor, and it was touching.

BS: But it was also testimony.

KF: The word that comes to mind is atonement and today is the Jewish day of atonement - an important day to think about that. This play describes a world that is completely screwed up, horribly, horribly corrupted in its soul, so much so that normal sexual behaviour, normal work behaviour, every value of a society is completely decrepit, it doesn't exist. And it is out of that society that this horrible act is done and we're being told about it. At one point the actor says, our society is fucked, we were fucked a long time ago - and that was the politics in this

show. It was about apartheid, it was about the fact that South Africa was fucked. Sorry for the violent language, but that was the word used, that was the spirit, that was the passion of it. The show turns into a storytelling exercise, and I know that there's a lot of work being done in South African theatre at the moment in terms of truth and reconciliation, with theatre being used as a way for society to bring up questions of justice - I think that was an interesting theme that emerged.

These stories are being circulated around the world at festivals and what are we supposed to do with them, what function is theatre trying to have here? What responsibility have we, what are we being made to think about South Africa?

But whether or not this storytelling form was the right way to address the huge political context, I was struck by the strangeness that we are here at an entertainment festival and that a South African company has been brought to Dublin to tell us the story of the most hideous act you can imagine. These stories are being circulated around the world at festivals and what are we supposed to do with them, what function is theatre trying to have here? What responsibility have we, what are we being made to think about, as people living in Ireland, about South Africa? I don't think it solves the problem at all but I think it raises that problem.

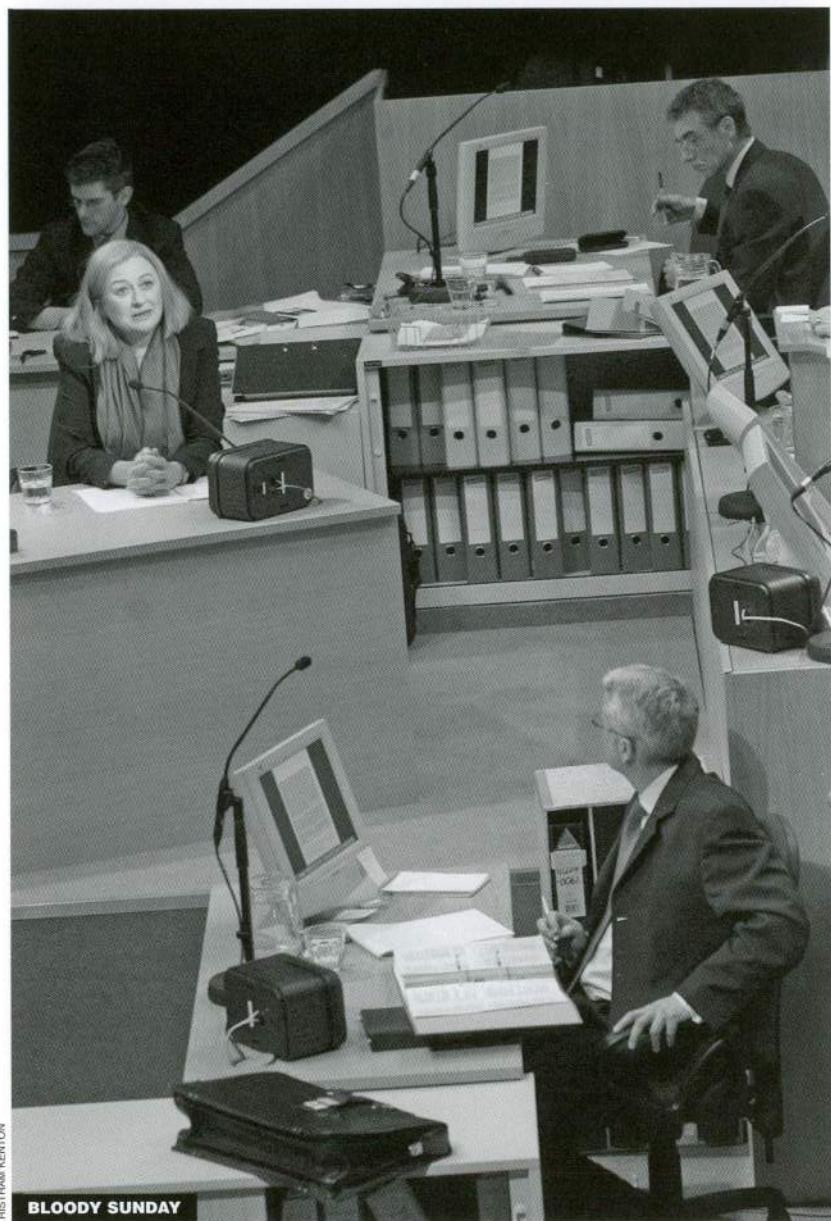
BLOODY SUNDAY The Abbey Theatre

BS: Those are very big questions Karen, we may get to them in the question and answer session, but I want to move on to the final show in the debate today. That's *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, edited from transcripts by Richard Norton Taylor and produced by the Tricycle Theatre, in Kilburn, London. It has been on tour to Belfast and Derry and now Dublin and is an example of 'verbatim theatre', word for word theatre, which the Tricycle has done quite extensively, with all sorts of inquiries in Britain - the Hutton Inquiry, the Steven Lawrence Inquiry. It's also used throughout the world for testimonies - testimonies about horrific, horrible actions that have affected wider society and that cannot be dramatised. However, the events of Bloody Sunday have been dramatised twice in the recent past.

Verbatim theatre - is it theatre, Mark?

MF: I think it can be theatre, but I wonder whether it really is in this particular case.

I'm hope I'm not just exposing my own bias here, but it strikes me that in the case of Bloody Sunday, the story is so obviously weighted in the favour of the innocent people - the thirteen innocent people who were shot - and against the soldiers who were shooting them, that to me there's no dramatic tension there. So to spend two and-a-half hours in the theatre where that is just



TRISTRAM KENTON

BLOODY SUNDAY

being repeated in rather a lot of detail doesn't strike me as being particularly interesting. As Susannah Clapp in *The Observer* wrote about a different piece of verbatim theatre: hands up who is in favour of thirteen people being shot in Derry, or Londonderry? It didn't strike me as telling me anything new.

BS: So what holds our interest?

To say that it is verbatim theatre, well, it's not. It's verbatim theatre of an extremely edited transcript of the Saville Inquiry, which sat for 434 days. This is a deeply subjective account of what happened at the Inquiry; editing is the form of creation here.

MF: Well, if you go into any court in Dublin, you'll see that watching court cases is interesting because you've got the prosecution and the defence – but I didn't find this that interesting.

BS: This isn't really a court room, because we never get a proper crossfire, we never get crossfire and we never get a result.

MF: I suppose what holds your interest, if your interest is held, is the characterisation of the people giving these testimonies, going to great lengths to get it accurate. And so you start getting little insights into people's personalities and the humanity of the individual in a big global situation. But where the drama is for me in that story would be to get into the head of one of the soldiers who is wrestling with, or in denial about, this thing that happened to him in the past. I think it can be very interesting when it's looking at people, the psychologies of people in power, the psychologies of the guy behind the gun. And you want to know how they did the thing in the first place, and how they've lived with it since, but you get such a fleeting impression of that.

BS: I suppose the real drama is yet to come, whenever the results are published and seeing whether there will there be prosecutions.

KF: To say that it is verbatim theatre, well, it's not, it's verbatim theatre of an extremely edited transcript of the Saville Inquiry, which sat for 434 days. This is a deeply subjective account of what happened at the Saville Inquiry: editing is the form of creation here.

This is a form of public education. But I would hope that there are other forms of public education available and that people would be reinforcing what they're learning here by reading more and learning more, because this is inevitably a subjective account. To see these witnesses brought back in front of an inquiry thirty years later and asked very detailed questions about what happened on the day – this is what strikes us. We see those responsible for the incidents say: I don't remember or I'm not sure, and there's the inhumanity of the fact that

it's taken thirty years for this tribunal to be reconvened - I think that political point is very clearly made.

The show has a clear political agenda: Bloody Sunday was a horrific event, the army killed their own citizens, justice has not been done, it's time that justice be done. Why then is there this appearance of just representing the court? What is achieved by that, what has been achieved by turning a tribunal into theatre?

BS: Maybe it's because of the way the tribunal was presented, we cannot get to the truth, we cannot get to see or hear what's going on. It wasn't televised, but we got documentary reports at the end of the day or in the newspapers the next day, already mediated for us.

HM: I think the intention here is to give us the truth unmediated, but of course that's not what we're getting. Yes, if we had a fictional drama based on the events of Bloody Sunday there would be the inevitable accusation of bias, of stereotyping, of a political agenda, of every kind of twisting of the facts. And so we're presented with what is actually a *performance* of verisimilitude that assures us: this is as near to the truth as we can get, by cutting, by editing, by showing you some things and not others, by giving you the real words that were spoken. But as a piece of theatre it is completely hamstrung by this literal attempt to be faithful to the facts, because being faithful to the facts is not the same as being faithful to the truth.

It remains an airless piece, which was interesting, of course - who could not be fascinated by the subject matter if you're from this country? - and it functioned as a piece of public information, but as a theatrical work I thought it was very, very limited.

AG: I come from a country [Romania] where such events happened. Fifteen years have passed and we're still all demanding to know who was shooting that day - I would like to see such a play staged there. Well, is it a play or isn't it a play, I'm not sure, but it is, as the others said, public education. I think a society needs such events, such forms of public education.

BS: One of the witnesses actually adopted the body position of the man who went out in front of the troops, and for me the physical embodiment of it spoke volumes, more so than the actual transcript itself.

HM: That was one of the rare moments of gesture and expressiveness that did move it beyond the confines of the testimony. 



On the Fringe

Once more into the breach: our tireless reviewers pack their notebooks and sandwiches, looking for the gems among the new Irish productions

Patrick Lonergan monitors the growth of Rough Magic's Seedlings

ROUGH MAGIC'S FIRST SEEDS PROJECT WAS AN unqualified success, nurturing the development of six young writers, and bringing two of their works to full productions. It's a sign of the company's energy that they aren't merely repeating this project, but expanding it too: in addition to developing more new writing, Seeds II also aims to redress the lack of training opportunities for directors in Ireland. The first outcome of the process is a Rough Magic showcase of the work of three young Irish directors: Tom Creed, Darragh McKeon, and Matt Torney.

The benefits of this approach are fairly evident: there is an obvious need for better directors' training in this country, and it's also important to provide young directors with opportunities to learn not only from established practitioners, but also from each other.

That said, there are also a few potential problems with this approach. How do you showcase direction? With some excep-

tions, the best direction is invisible: if an audience is aware of the director's role during a performance, that's probably not a good thing. The showcase model might therefore create a temptation for directors to draw attention to their own skills and talents – which might work against the basic need to draw the audience into the performance. And is it helpful for these directors to have their work performed under a Rough Magic banner? Mightn't this create an expectation in audiences that they'll see work with production values equivalent to, say, *Improbable Frequency* – when in fact these three works are decidedly low-budget, and feature actors who are for the most part as inexperienced as the directors themselves?

An apprentice playwright can be made to look very good by being produced with conviction by a well-resourced company of

skilled actors – but the very best plays can be made to look mediocre if the direction isn't right. And does staging three new productions simultaneously invite comparisons and therefore rivalry between the directors? Finally, a training programme should encourage directors to experiment and push themselves – but if their works are appearing in public, they also need to get the basics right. How do you create a balance between conservatism and excessive ambition?

None of these questions is intended to criticise Seeds II, but rather to draw out some of the complexities involved in a project of this kind. I also raise them because there's evi-

dence of some of these problems in each of the three productions.

I loved the ambition and occasional fearlessness of the three directors, but wondered if their choice of plays could have been better. McKeon gives us Ferenc Molnar's *Liliom*, an early twentieth century Hungarian play which inspired the musical *Carousel*. Torney presents Buchner's *Woyzeck*, performed in a vaguely Hibernicised version of Weimar Republic cabaret. And Creed tackles Sarah Kane's most formless and troubling play, *4.48 Psychosis*. Three fine plays, these – but they're also extremely difficult, even for experienced directors.

Liliom is a fable about a carnival worker who blows his chance to be forgiven for his mistreatment of his wife. The moral tone of the script is neutral, and the issues it raises – especially about violence towards women – are presented without authorial comment. So it's a play that needs to be allowed to speak for itself: the director's input should be as neutral as the author's.

In contrast, *Woyzeck* is a monster of a play – unfinished, often

ROUGH MAGIC SEEDS II:

Woyzeck
by Georg Buchner
(directed by Matt Torney)

4.48 Psychosis
by Sarah Kane
(directed by Tom Creed)

Liliom by Ferenc Molnar
(directed by
Darragh McKeon)

incoherent, a tragedy that offers no prospect of catharsis. It has appeared at least three times in Ireland since 2000, most famously in Robert Wilson's collaboration with Tom Waits, which featured at the 2001 Dublin Theatre Festival – a production that also used cabaret, presented in the spirit of Brecht and Weil.

Sarah Kane's plays have also appeared very frequently in this country, but usually in productions that seem decidedly adolescent. Mostly, this is because they're produced by student groups or recent graduates, who relate to the anger and despair of Kane's



WOYZECK

works, but miss altogether the ways in which her writing is rooted in severe depression which is, to say the least, somewhat different to teenage angst. Even when more experienced practitioners take on her work, they do so from a desire to shock without having to work very hard at it, which again seems adolescent. The overriding impression created by these Irish productions is that Kane's plays are most appealing to those practitioners who are least qualified to stage them.

So it's not surprising that at times it feels like these directors have bitten off more than they can chew.

Torney's *Woyzeck* is delightfully bad-mannered and unsentimental: accompanied by a live score, the actors perform *Woyzeck's*

The architecture of the script - which represents the experience of depression by moving from structure to formlessness - is conveyed by the use of chairs. The use of the stage space to convey meaning here is extremely impressive.

gradual collapse with a malevolent gusto. But there are some basic errors too: for example, the conclusion of the play is performed at the front of the stage, with the characters anointing the bodies of Marie and Woyzeck, who lie on the ground. Because of the layout of the theatre, this scene is invisible to any member of the audience not seated in the front row. And although the performance is often great fun, the actual theme of the play – how a man is destroyed by the society around him – gets lost in the racket. In fairness to Torney, this is precisely the problem that Robert Wilson encountered – and failed to solve – in his production of the play. I admire the fact that this didn't stop Torney from giving it a go, but perhaps he could have tried something a little more straightforward.

Tom Creed is regarded as one of the most imaginative young directors currently on the scene, and there are flashes of genuine originality and real potential in his contribution to the showcase. But this 4.48 *Psychosis* just didn't work for me. Creed follows the lead of the original London production of the play, dividing Kane's script among a cast of three. The architecture of the script – which represents the experience of depression by moving from structure to formlessness – is conveyed by the use of chairs, which are lined up in a row against the wall in one scene, piled over each other later on, and used as a barrier between actors and audience near the end. The use of the stage space to convey meaning here is extremely impressive.

But I was unconvinced and at times a little offended by the presentation of depression and mental illness, which displayed no evidence of research or sensitivity. Particularly misjudged in this context was the decision to interrupt the script half-way through with an eight-minute mime to music, which was intended to represent the themes of the play. The song in question – if I'm not mistaken, taken from a Sigur Ros album that was released two weeks before this production opened – blasted over the PA system, all intense shrieks, power chords, descending scales, and minor keys. As the music played, the actors moved chairs around the stage and looked very, very cross indeed. The use of the aesthetics of MTV to represent depression might work for *Dawson's Creek* but I thought it was unforgivably superficial here: if mental illness has a soundtrack, you won't find it in the alternative rock section of your nearest music store. But even without this scene, I felt that all involved had fundamentally misunderstood depression: the rushed delivery of lines in high-pitched voices, the teariness, the mild crankiness, the listlessness – these seemed more like symptoms of a bad hangover than mental illness to me. I left this production convinced of Creed's talent. But I wish he'd chosen a different play.

I was a bit sceptical about *Liliom* in advance, perhaps due to the news that it ran for two hours without an interval (quite a

commitment at Fringe time). But I found it extremely satisfying, due mainly to McKeon's willingness to have fun with the material. He doesn't appear to take things too seriously, instead dedicating his attention to theatrical effect. The carnivalesque tone of the play is brought out by the use of magic lantern imagery, live music, and puppetry. We're entirely aware throughout that what we're watching is theatre – the lighting is on some occasions pointing directly at the audience, for example. And it all works very well.

However, I was never quite sure how the style of production relates to the theme of the play. This is a work about a man who beats his wife and, enjoyable as the cutesy puppeteering is, it's fair to say that there is a bit of a disjunction between form and content here. Even so, I admired the wistful mood created by McKeon and his cast, and the use of every theatrical trick in the book was mostly enjoyable, if occasionally a little unoriginal. *Liliom* also featured the best performance in the entire showcase – from Rory Nolan as Liliom. There was also nice work by Elaine Fox in *Woyzeck* and in general the standard of acting was high in all productions, despite the inexperience of most of the actors (and the fact that none of these plays calls for a naturalistic performance).

In a project such as Seeds II, directors and writers alike should feel free to fail, to learn from their mistakes. None of these three productions comes anywhere near failing, even if they aren't always successful either. Was the showcase worthwhile? Definitely: this was far more than an opportunity for three directors to learn on the job – it was also a chance to see three of the better productions in this year's Fringe. What I'd really like to see next is how this trio copes with simpler material. If Creed, McKeon and Torney have gained the confidence to let plays speak for themselves, then this project will certainly have been worthwhile.

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Susan Conley ponders questions of time and space

T'S A GAUGE THAT PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT PART IN CRITICS' REVIEWS, under the guise of adjectives like "ambitious" or "spare" or "majestic". Scale is the criterion that dare not speak its name, it seems, and certainly not one that often takes centre-stage. In a Fringe festival, though, size really does matter, and in three productions, scale presented itself as a unifying notion with which to discuss ambition, sparseness ... but not majesty, unfortunately.

ON THE FRINGE



ADRENALIN

Beehive Theatre Company, visiting from Dingle Town with audience favourites from its annual Festival of New Writing, showcased quintessential small-scale producing. The three plays, each clocking in at fifteen minutes, required few-to-no props, few-to-one cast member and the lowest of low-tech multimedia components, a slide projector. The three plays just about register on the critical scale, each so innocent of the rigour that fully fledged professional theatre must apply to itself, that the best that can be said is that they fulfilled their remit with little fuss. It is heartening to think that the effort that goes into Beehive's project has been going strong since 1993, and within the stratum in which they found themselves—alongside some smaller projects such as Clean Canvas's *The Artist Needs a Wife* and *Troubadour* by Salim Gouse, whose reach exceeded their grasp—they showed up fairly well.

Bedrock appeared to have drawn the short straw venue-wise in their location of SS Michael & John in Temple Bar. Three years into its use as a Fringe venue, the building continues to be unwieldy, poorly soundproofed, and draughty. Paul O'Mahony's set design for *Urban Ghosts* therefore came as a stunning surprise, as it rendered the space, well, wieldy: narrowing our focus through the use of purpose built walls and a beautiful wooden stage, he reduced our immediate sense of space and then opened it up, gradually, revealing a deeper playing area, guiding our eyes back using a series of squared off arches and mirrors, simply but effectively attaining an utter transformation of the cavernous room.

Upon this set played out two productions that differed drastically in scale of ideas.

Pale Angel, a piece devised under the aegis of artistic director Jimmy Fay, which took the work of American photographer Francesca Woodman as its jumping off point, contrasted sharply with the forceful *Self Assertion* by Austrian playwright Peter Handke. Performers Amanda Coogan and Alex Johnston entered a bare stage authoritatively, ripped open their playscripts, set them on pre-set music stands, and proceeded to enact existence through a series of declarative sentences that began as simple conjugation of verbs, then expanding into full blown moral dilemmas. Simple, fierce, and thought-provoking, the players added a layer of difference by their demeanours: Johnston generally ramrod straight, Coogan often bursting into movement, as if her body were gasping to express the text as well.

Comparatively, *Pale Angel* was, at best, a series of snapshots, of still lives, of beautiful images that stimulate our visual attention. In many ways it struggled to achieve a conceptual complexity that

Spiked Butterfly Fairy Bookworms Beehive Theatre Company
Urban Ghosts Bedrock
Adrenalin Semper Fi

Handke's piece effortlessly accomplished. While it points to a direction in which we may assume that Bedrock wish to move, *Pale Angel* felt like early process work in an investigation that is only just begun.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the notion of scale was Semper Fi's *Adrenalin*. One had perhaps too much time to muse upon the bijoux perfection that had been *Ladies and Gents* in 2002 while squirming on hard plastic seats in a cavernous warehouse somewhere in the Docklands. The intimacy of that past experience began to take on an even rosier glow under the circumstances of Fringe 2005: as coachload after coachload of punters trickled into the space, as we were treated once more to the opening sally from the chick in the shiny PVC, as frustration and boredom began to stem even the vaguest surge of anticipatory buzz, the company's past work began to shine even brighter in retrospect.

As a company grows, it's only natural to take on bigger ideas, bigger projects, bigger spaces. Semper Fi are somewhere mid-quantum leap, stranded by a text that did not live up to its surroundings. A cascade of cliché, *Adrenalin* didn't deliver—and that's not saying that clichés are necessarily bad. Take Tarantino—and frankly, given the material, you don't have much of a choice. His oeuvre - which has single-handedly reframed the caper/heist narrative into an iconoclastic dramady peopled by charming psychopaths set to a kitschy 1970s soundtrack - is clearly a major influence here, and the company at least make no bones about it. Here, Paul Walker could only produce a pale likeness, an afterimage, as a cast done up as clowns recite a series of predictable threats and insults, follow the dots as their uneasy alliance begins to break down, and ends with a girl in her knickers and bra clutching a gun. The body count becomes less a means to measure the horror of a robbery gone out of control than a way to gauge when it might be time to bum rush the busses back to town.

In the vast concrete belly of the warehouse, all dramatic tension drifted into the ether like smoke, jokes fell flat, and the kind of physicality that director Karl Shiels drew upon—threatening moments involving guns and knives, bouts of martial arts—looks much better when it's edited on film, and the scenes entirely overwhelmed by square footage. The notion being put forth, that of being held hostage, was utterly compromised, and again one longed for the intimacy of the Stephen's Green toilets (in a purely theatrical sense, of course). Semper Fi inspires much good will in the theatrical community, and the large-scale disappointment in this piece was commensurate with the esteem in which many hold the company.

Susan Conley is a writer and critic, and lectures in theatre at Trinity College, Dublin.

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Louise LePage goes in search of the spirit of the Fringe

THE STOMACH BOX COMPANY MAKES AN EXPERIMENTAL, intellectually probing and obviously passionate attempt to create challenging theatre in *A Season in Hell*, contesting what is often safe and sometimes dull in its grown-up sibling: mainstream contemporary theatre. For me, this is the spirit of the Fringe and I find such an ethos encouraging, exciting, and brave. I want to heap bucketfuls of praise upon it. But I cannot. This production did not work on many levels. Its ambitions were grand and sweeping; its production conceptions were, I believe, faulty.

Before the show I found myself intrigued; *A Season in Hell* presented itself as an operetta of Rimbaud's poem that serves as "an allegorical protest" (so says director Dylan Tighe) against the plastic nature of society. As the performance proceeded, however, my response turned from open, excited, and thoughtful enquiry to anger, boredom, and even mocking derision. Post show, unexpectedly, I find myself returning to my starting point: I find myself intrigued once more. Why did it provoke such a surfeit of contradictory responses in me? Though it failed as a piece of theatre to deliver on its promises, why did it fail? The answer, I believe, paradoxically lies in the production's lack of inventiveness.

Its opening was really promising, as it layered contradictions to surprise and provoke, on both visceral and intellectual levels. Rather than words, disturbing visual and aural images serve as the initial performance vocabulary: the audience, deposited in a rundown space, is greeted by staccato sounds and dark rumblings; a Hell sign flickers; sounds of a baby crying; a figure dressed in mysterious black eastern coverings that, once removed, reveal the pristine dinner jacket tails of the pianist and performer (Will O'Connell); and an image of the singer/pianist at the piano juxtaposed with a camera projection of his face magnified arrestingly onto the back wall. Unfortunately, after such a promising start, tedium steadily set in. Cabaret-style, Rimbaud's verse was intoned or sung out to the audience with little variation in style, pace, or tone. Further, it sometimes found itself battling most uncomfortably and gratingly with the music. And though the musical counterpoint was purposefully effective in its assault of the audience's senses, the score sometimes descended into repetitive and unmelodious noise. Ultimately, what this production would have benefited from is more sensitive attention paid to pacing, and a more creative and

A Season in Hell (After Rimbaud)

The Stomach Box

Room Rage

Crooked House
Theatre Company

Womb

The Attic Studio

Stop the Tempo!

Focus Theatre

varied presentation of the poetry in terms of style of delivery and in the performance and production techniques employed. Only in mood - dark, strange, and melancholic - was this production uniformly successful due, in no small measure, to a coherent design approach and really committed performances.

Room Rage, meanwhile, by Crooked House Theatre Company, offers us a stylish production that, though less daring, nicely serves the spirit of the Fringe by bringing forward several exciting young performers. The play is an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy, *Hippolytus*. The idea of love sits at its centre, but this is love of a messy, unwelcome, and unruly kind, a matter of sufferance. In a kingdom bereft of its ruler (Theseus), the abandoned subjects wreak havoc, watched over and manipulated by the calculating goddess Aphrodite. Hippolytus, worshipper of Artemis (goddess of chastity), scorns the love of all women, naming them "false, weak, and dangerous". Meanwhile, Phaedra, Theseus' wife, is in love with her step-son and in being so, confirms Hippolytus' misogynistic convictions as she mortifies every moral code. Betrayal and violent tragedy ensue.

What is striking about this production is its style: coldly austere yet moody. Director Peter Hussey has articulated a piece that is forceful and measured. Its stylized choreography conveys the isolating condition of being and a darkly bestial aspect of love while providing some dramatic and compelling visual imagery; the creation of a consistently foreboding atmosphere (supported, crucially, by a gorgeously evocative soundscape - sound design and composition by Philip Morris); and its performances which, from a largely young cast, are controlled, committed, and persuasive, particularly from Rachel Lally as Aphrodite, Bonnie Mc Cormick as Finika, Keith Burke as Hippolytus, and Nick Devlin as Theseus.

However, *Room Rage* is not without its shortcomings. Love, a complex, intense, and sometimes all-consuming thing, was beyond the emotional range of some of its young performers, with the consequence that while we, the audience, observed the characters' tribulations, we could not empathise with them. Choreography, too, though coherent and performed with impressive commitment, was occasionally awkward, even becoming an obstacle to the convincing expression of relationships. Taken in the abstract, this was a coldly beautiful production but one that generally disallowed any emotional connection.

Womb is a new play and, written by a woman (rare enough), Rachel Rogers, is welcome to the Fringe. The play centres around three pregnant women - two drug addicts and a spoilt middle class Frenchwoman, and features an abusive drug-dealer boyfriend as well as an African ex-doctor who works as a security guard. This unlikely assortment of dramatis personae is deposited together in a

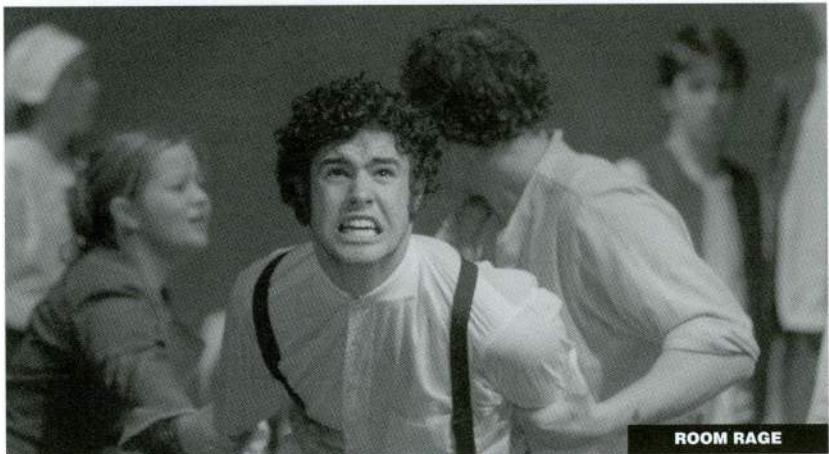
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public maternity hospital in Dublin. Though I enjoyed *Womb* and sincerely wished for its success, I remain disappointed and perplexed by it, uncertain of what it is really all about. It is a play that tries to do too much, I think, taking on issues such as the effects of environment on the individual, drug addiction, domestic violence, childbirth, relationships, multi-culturalism, the treatment and place of women, as well as personal responsibility. What's more, its unlikely set of circumstances descends, at times, into the absolutely-never-going-to-happen category, with the result that the play loses its sense of truth.

But it is not just the play that loses its way. In production terms, *Womb* suffers from an unnecessary jumble of contrary styles and



performance techniques, and under Shaun Elebert's direction, slides precariously between the realism of the social drama and the caricature of comedy. Design elements, too, are inconsistent (sound effects issue apparently haphazardly) with lighting, though nicely ambient at moments, failing to convey a sense of time of day or place. Finally, performances occasionally lack truth and subtlety although the two women junkies, Josie (Sinead Monaghan) and Sharon (Ciara McGuinness), generally manage some powerfully affective scenes with sensitivity and conviction.

Finally, we turn to *Stop the Tempo!*, by Gianna Carbunariu, translated by Paul Meade, a play that is ostensibly set in Bucharest (but translatable to any city) and that brings two women and three men, disenchanted by the apparent meaninglessness of modern life, together in clubland. From here they have mindless sex, crash a car, and commence a spree of anarchy by cutting the lights of the

Simon Toal's one-man show,

The Friends of Jack Kairo, was an undoubted festival highlight - a tribute to the film noir genre.

Despite its filmic origins, the play's originality and inventiveness were its greatest assets.

city's clubs and entertainment venues and by so doing, incite panic and chaos for others and a sense of precarious excitement for themselves. That's it. This thematically thin play could have worked, however, had the production more ingeniously and muscularly created an atmosphere of panic, anger, danger, or desperation. Instead, its willing but sometimes unconvincing characterisations and performances, some peculiar choreographic sequences, generally sloppily executed physicality, and a number of rather weak and ineffectual design choices and production effects (such as the extended use of torches), show this production as one in need of more probing, creative and coherent direction.

Louise LePage has recently graduated from the M.A. in Theatre and Performance Studies, University College Dublin.

Sara Keating puts new play scripts under the spotlight

EVEN GOOD WRITERS NEED EDITORS. OUT OF SIX NEW Irish productions at this year's Fringe Festival - five of which featured entirely new plays, the sixth an Irish premiere - five needed a critical editorial eye, some merely for a little fine tuning, but others to be sent back for a re-drafting.

Sandwich, produced by Roadshow Theatre, and *The Artist Needs a Wife*, produced by Clean Canvas Theatre Company and Enda Welthorpe Productions, took their characters and their dramatic encounters from a televisual world. *Sandwich* seemed to attempt to capitalise on the phenomenal success of *Desperate Housewives*, but with a repetitive script that offered no depth of plot or characterisation, proved to lack both the sauce and sexiness of its small screen inspiration. Despite various visual assets, including a striking set that lent the Bewley's Café Theatre stage a surreal sense of space and some nicely constructed physical tableaux, there was no subtlety or depth in the script to complement such attention to detail.

Written and directed by Jesse Weaver, *The Artist Needs a Wife*, meanwhile, seemed to have been inspired in part by several characters from sitcoms (Jerry and Mike from *Seinfeld*, Peter from *Family Guy*, Matt Lucas' Vicky from *Little Britain*, and various characters that might have been derived from *South Park* all make an appearance). With cheap caricatures, puerile gags and adolescent leaps towards existential profundity, watching the play unfold was like watching a group of stoned teenagers when you're stone cold sober. Inviting an audience along seemed an exercise in self-flagellation for this Irish Student Drama award-winning group from UCD.



SANDWICH

Driven by an interest in exterior political concerns, *Master Shuttlefate, I Have Before Me . . .* and *The Masterpiece*, made nobler attempts towards theatrical conviction. *Master Shuttlefate*, devised by Angel Exit, directed itself towards exploring the isolation of political refugees. While its purposes were admirable, the work was less so, seeming more like the first stage of a devising workshop than a finished project. Cumbersome props and an unnecessarily large cast undermined the script's allegorical aspirations, with the intended phantasmagoria steadily becoming a confusing nightmare for the audience to unravel.

Sonja Linden's internationally successful play, *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady* from was given its Irish premiere by Calypso Productions and shaped similar issues into a more coherent narrative. Despite the production's strengths - largely the honest and vulnerable performances by Madeline Appiah and Michael James Ford - the sentimental set pieces and indulgent lurches in the narrative distracted somewhat from the power of its politics, which are not merely personal but historical and contemporary as well.

Juxtaposed against the opening documentary sequence in which the statistical horrors of the Rwandan genocide are

revealed, the obstinacies and sympathies of human relationships seem inconsequential, and inadequate to achieving the cathartic arc that powerful political drama demands.

In *The Masterpiece*, meanwhile, the balance between the personal and the political was achieved guilelessly by an extra-textual effect created by the circumstances of the play's creation and enactment. Produced by MAD productions at Mountjoy Prison, performed entirely by inmates from various prisons around the country, and co-written by its fine leading actor, Stephen

MacNamara, the parallels between the historical prison in the play and the actors' own realities lent a compelling double level. With a little bit of pruning, this amateur prison production would easily pull its weight on the professional stage.

Simon Toal had no supporting cast to worry about in his one-man show, *The Friends of Jack Cairo*, produced by Spacecraft and Flipside, which was undoubtedly a festival highlight. A tribute to the *film noir* genre, Toal's script and performance adhered to a popular formula so familiar that it couldn't fail, while the premise of the play's contemporary plot generated the necessary absurdity to offset accusations of unoriginality. In fact despite its filmic origins, the play's originality and inventiveness were its greatest assets.

From an entrance that evokes a cartoon character slipping off a movie screen, to his disappearance in the final scene, Toal was a commanding presence, segueing seamlessly in and out of memorable characterisations as diverse as an informing flea who comes to an unfortunate end and an unrequited love, Elizabeth, who sashays in and out of the storyline. Satires of contemporary political figures and

situations ran the danger of destroying the watertight illusion of Toal's witty farce, but they were never stretched far enough for Toal to lose the tight rein on the ridiculous which he effortlessly wields.

With a running time of only 70 minutes, this did not indulge in an excessively lengthy display of the writer's verbal skill and sharp wit, demonstrating the strength of this play over both the vagaries and the serious intents of other Fringe shows; for, while a good writer's chances for success will always be improved by a keen editor's eye, it's a mark of something more than an editor's skill when a play finds such a naturally polished end.



Sara Keating is working on a PhD at the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin, and reviews theatre and visual arts for various publications.

Sandwich Roadshow Theatre
The Artist Needs A Wife Clean Canvas & Enda Welthorpe
Master Shuttlefate Angel Exit
I Have Before Me A Remarkable Document Given To Me By A Young Lady From Rwanda Calypso Productions
The Masterpiece MAD Productions
The Friends of Jack Cairo Spacecraft & Flipside

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Fringe Benefits

Here are reviews
of four more

Dublin Fringe
Festival shows,
which were first
published on our
website, irishtheatremagazine.ie

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

Making Strange Theatre Company

"Welcome to the first night of my unlimited Dublin run!" trills Miss Hedwig. Oh, if only. Revived from an original stint in the Focus Theatre and let loose, for just one night, in the appropriately glittering surrounds of the Spiegeltent, it's hard to imagine how a smaller venue could ever have contained Making Strange theatre company's magnificently brash cabaret-cum-rock-opera.

As Hedwig Schmidt, an East-German rock-singer whose first lover and a botched sex-change operation have left her stranded between genders and lost in America, Joe Roch is as acidulous as a drag-act, as confident as a rock-star and as quick-witted as a stand-up.

Inspired by the romance of Plato's *Symposium* and fascinated by the metaphorical potential of the collapsed Berlin Wall, John Cameron Mitchell's hyper-witty script goes far beyond your typical one-transsexual show. When Megan Riordan's perfectly sclerotic (and beautifully voiced) roadie, Yitzhak, is revealed to have formerly been a Jewish drag queen called 'Crystal Nacht', for instance, the scars of history meet the balm of high camp.

For all the show's daring, however, its rock score - performed live by The Angry Inch band - is outdated, clichéd and, consequently, ridiculously enjoyable. Matching such humour and intelligence with deft direction, Erin Murray electrifies this business we call show with the power of transformation and the inarguable politics of sheer fabulousness. PETER CRAWLEY

GETTING ATTENTION

Tardy Lasso

TOXIC SPRAY PAINT, HERBAL CIGARETTE SMOKE AND QUENCHED candle fumes combine to create the tense, claustrophobic atmosphere of Tardy Lasso's *Getting Attention*.

Martin Crimp's script disturbs as it examines the isolation that can envelope society's most vulnerable individuals. Crimp draws the audience into an empathetic relationship with the victim - the child we never see. *Getting Attention* does not patronise or delineate clear lines of good and evil. It exposes the weakness in all the characters involved, exploring the astonishing capacity we have to delude ourselves, and the strange desire to please one person at the physical cost of another.

Directed by Catherine McFadden, this is a strong piece, although occasionally unnecessarily cluttered. Overall, the play could work more powerfully if it were transposed completely to Ireland, avoiding the use of English accents, which tended to distract.

The warped relationship between Carol (Sharon Sexton) and lover Nick (David Ryan) is convincingly performed, and Sexton credibly portrays Carol's weak, complicit nature, as she chooses to keep her boyfriend happy rather than defend her daughter. However, the greatest tension is evoked when the child's bedroom light is sporadically switched on, a reminder of the lonely prisoner locked inside, and the biting irony of Crimp's title. **SORCHA CARROLL**

MIND YOUR FINGERS

Giddy Productions

YOU FILTHY, FILTHY GIRLS. I CONSIDER MYSELF FAIRLY unshockable, but the titular gag in Simone Kirby and Oonagh McLaughlin's sketch show had me shielding my eyes and chortling like a nervous pigeon. But there is a strong political point to this edgy physical comedy: by literally giving voice to the most private part of a woman's anatomy, Kirby and McLaughlin critique decades of male stand-ups who derive alleged humour from objectifying female bodies: The Pudenda Strikes Back.

Several of the show's other good bits (har har) also take the woman's body as a central theme: a well-produced video sequence points up, via strong parody, the extent to which the American reality TV series *The Swan* extends female self-hatred, and a very post-*Sex and the City* vignette involves folk-singing ovaries.

Most of the other scenes lightly send up various aspects of contemporary Irish life, including a combat scene between

FRINGE BENEFITS

drunken bridesmaids whose chop-socky action puts *Adrenalin's* to shame. The show is well-paced under Alan King's direction, and doesn't overstay its welcome. I didn't quite get the joke about the snail, though. **KAREN FRICKER**

KNOTS

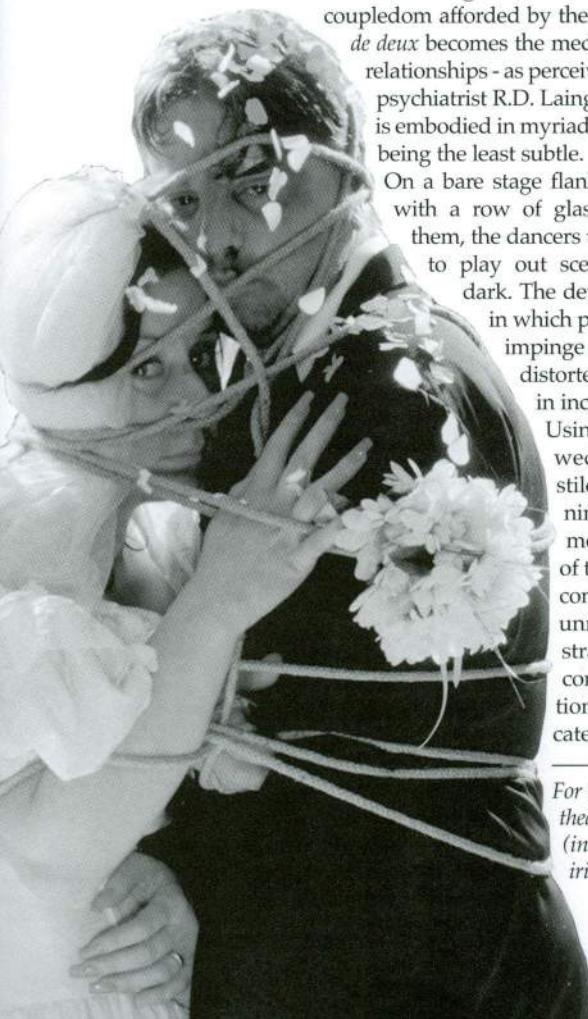
CoisCéim Dance Theatre

A dance-theatre piece derived from a cult 1970s psychological text? Why not? Guest choreographer Liam Steel (of DV8 fame) thinks laterally and has pushed the CoisCéim company into new territory, physically and emotionally. Three men and three women in white wedding outfits wittily explore the endless variations of coupledom afforded by the conventions of dance: here the *pas de deux* becomes the medium for exposing the pathology of relationships - as perceived by the famously radical Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing. The metaphor of "tying the knot" is embodied in myriad inventive ways, a pair of handcuffs being the least subtle.

On a bare stage flanked by two psychiatrists' couches, with a row of glass, white-curtained booths behind them, the dancers use staccato movements and words to play out scenarios that become progressively dark. The devised sequences illustrate the ways in which people's self-image and expectations impinge on their significant others, creating distorted patterns of behaviour that recur in increasingly destructive forms.

Using potent visual images - white wedding dresses, vertiginous red stilettos, confession boxes - and beginning and ending with a nuptial ceremony, this is an ambitious treatment of the ways in which we can inhibit or control another person. While some unravelling occurs when the piece strays from its central theme, it is a confident response to the vexed question of whether dance can communicate ideas. **HELEN MEANY**

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Are you talking to me?

Pan Pan Theatre's ambitious project, **ONE - HEALING WITH THEATRE**, comprised a documentary film, a large-format photographic book and a theatre piece involving 100 actors. In 100 small rooms, each actor gave a private performance in a specially constructed space inside Dublin's Digital Hub warehouse. Since each audience member had an entirely different experience of the show, we asked three reviewers to give their highly personal responses.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROS KAVANAGH

WHY DO YOU THINK YOU BECAME AN ACTOR? – this question was the springboard for the entire project. Each of the 100 actors attempted to respond and were interviewed, filmed and photographed by Gavin Quinn. In the live performance, each actor explains to one audience member how their life in theatre began, and finishes by performing their first audition piece.

In addition to exploring the conventions of performance and its psychotherapeutic resonances, this deceptively simple idea becomes a form of testimony to how people find out who they are, and what they perceive their life's purpose, their vocation, to be. Its metaphorical reach went way beyond the specifics of theatre to illuminate some fundamental aspects of being human: the need to tell our story to another person, the need to be seen and acknowledged, and the inevitable fact that we can't partake in what's happening in the booth next door; we can only have the experience we are currently offered. Alternatives exclude.

Yes, you could go back again and try out other possibilities - 99 of them - but I had derived enough food for thought from one.

HELEN MEANY





ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

LISA MAHONY discovers that her one-to-one encounter becomes part of a larger discordant symphony

In the waiting room, everything is soft, reassuring and strangely hypnotic. Yet, despite the calming, soporific qualities of the space, a slight sense of apprehension seems to pervade the room.

INSIDE THE HABITUALLY COLD, WHITE AND IMPERSONAL VOID of the Digital Hub's industrial sized space sits an immense and curiously engaging temporary structure comprised of one hundred identical small rooms. Within this softly lit ephemeral construction, designed by Andrew Clancy, each individual space-within-a-space seems enigmatic and yet inviting. This intricate architectural sculpture is the setting for the live element of Pan Pan Theatre Company's epic *One – Healing with Theatre* project, and for just ten performances a theatrical therapy centre of sorts has been installed on Dublin's Thomas Street. In each of these one hundred rooms, complete with their reclining couches and other props and trappings of psychoanalysis, one actor will briefly meet with one member of the public and recount the story of how they came to their chosen profession, before performing their first or favourite audition piece for their own singular spectator.

Each performance of *One* will be composed of one hundred separate and purposefully unique encounters that appear to interrogate the subjectivity of theatre and performance while inverting the conventions of therapy and turning the stereotype of the "talking cure" on its head. With all these medical metaphors abounding it is perhaps a little unclear who will be healed, or how, or indeed why this will occur. Yet the sheer scale of spectacle achieved by multiplying these deceptively simple staged encounters to such an ambitious degree points to the possibility that something transformative, and perhaps inexplicably therapeutic, is about to occur.

Outside in the waiting room we, the audience of one hundred audients, await our separate performances. Here too, with its low lighting and deep, comfortable, red and white couches, everything is soft, reassuring and strangely hypnotic. Beguiling young nurses dispense water, sweets and prescriptions – telling us which actor we are about to be "seen" by. Yet despite the calming, soporific qualities of the space, a slight sense of apprehension seems to pervade the room. Like a waiting room full of new patients, people smile nervously, shuffle their feet and speak to one another in quiet murmurs, perhaps focused on the intimate and slightly unnatural encounter to come.

My slip of paper tells me that I will be meeting with Stewart Roche and I am oddly relieved to be encountering a stranger rather than somebody I know - a prospect I can't help but feel would seem, within this setting, particularly bizarre. However by the time the nurses finally announce that "our" actors are ready to see us, even with the familiar spectator's comfort of relative anonymity on my side, I find myself trying to suppress all kinds of superfi-



THE WAITING ROOM

cial anxieties. Will I be a good audient? Will I have to make conversation? Will I laugh in all the right (or indeed the wrong) places?

On entering the main space, the complex scale of the total performance becomes apparent. The rooms appear beautiful, impressive and mysterious - as though one hundred stages have been set for one hundred simultaneous events of ultimately unknowable significance - and I find myself wanting to go into them all, wanting to somehow experience the entire event. But if *One* is taking the individuality of the actors' stories as a starting point, it is equally playing on the subjectivity of spectatorship; I am aware, as indeed this inevitably personal account should attest, that I can at best hope to appreciate just a tiny fraction of this whole work.

In Room 15 Stewart Roche is disarming as he tells me the ordinary details of how he became an actor and yet, initially at least, this proximity to a performance of sorts is unnerving. Subjected to the unfamiliar gaze of an actor and stripped of the safety of numbers, the dynamics of spectatorship become heightened, as I try to maintain eye contact, not to fidget, to make the appropriate responses (whatever they might be). I become aware of the essential strangeness of trying to appear to be appearing natural while an actor a few feet away is effectively pretending to be himself. Oddly enough when Stewart performs his audition piece I feel as though I am on more familiar territory, able to appreciate the craft in this demarcated "real" pretending, as I watch an actor totally transformed at close range.

ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

The "colour therapy" with which the encounter ends is the least explicable and in some ways most enjoyable part of the process, as I am invited to stare into a green lamp (to aid liver function, apparently?) for several minutes, during which some music is played quietly beside me. Lost in this momentary trance I become gradually aware of the discordant symphony of ninety-nine other conversations, snatches of music and sounds of footsteps drifting through the air, and of the indistinct silhouettes of other audience members drifting past the door.

I became gradually aware of the discordant symphony of ninety-nine other conversations, snatches of music and sounds of footsteps drifting through the air, and of the indistinct silhouettes of other audience members drifting past.

The one hundred individual spaces and times into which this extraordinary performance has been divided recombine and with my personal therapy session over I am invited to the "bar", where the bottles of beer are lined up like medicine - an witty antidote perhaps, whether to the previous treatment or to theatre in general. A rapturous curtain call for all the actors completes the performance, emphasising once more the remarkable scale of this event, before the harsh overhead fluorescents snap on and we are ejected through the back door to make room for the next round of patients.

Lisa Mahony graduated in Drama and Theatre Studies at Trinity College Dublin. She works as a stage manager at Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

SUSAN CONLEY'S journey into *One* begins long before she arrives at the Digital Hub.

OUT FOR THE EVENING?" AS PER HIS REMIT, THE TAXI DRIVER made inquiries into my personal life as we sped down Thomas Street.

"Uh, no, uh, I'm going to a—to a theatre show." It was an inadequate explanation; I fiddled helplessly with the strap of my handbag.

"A play, like?"

"Well, not really—sort of—uh, it's this thing where there's a hundred actors, and a hundred audience members, and you pick a number, and you, um, go into a little room with the one actor and they perform for you. By yourself."

"Jesus!" The taxi man braked for a red light and looked over at me in disbelief. "That sounds fucking dreadful!"

No kidding—only as in "full of dread". The sorts of things that one doesn't often worry about in preparation for a night at the theatre—is what I want to wear comfortable, should I have waited to eat until afterwards, am I going to get the hiccups from indigestion because I ate beforehand, will I be corralled into a room with an actor who has been lobbing Molotov cocktails at my likeness because I didn't like them very much in a play they were in four years ago?—superseded any of the typical prepa-



THE ENCOUNTER BEGINS

rations a responsible critic undertakes before a gig.

In Pan Pan's latest offering, we normally anonymous audience members are treated to the kind of exposure that, had we wanted to genuinely feel it, would have put us on the other side of the footlights. What seems a simple enough idea is by turns incredibly aggressive, surprisingly illuminating, a challenge to one's body language and ultimately full of... well, whatever it is that is the opposite of dread.

The ante-room of the Digital Hub warehouse, scattered with couches and potted plants, immediately communicated a soothingly hip vibe, like the lobby of a posh and trendy hotel (we all have our own sources of comfort). Two video projectors played the trailer for the fourteen hours of film that Quinn shot, in tandem with photographing the actors in their homes, on opposite walls. Everything seemed normal, until I noticed the nurses.

Male and female, they circulated around the furniture like lobotomized piranhas, bringing people water, offering sweets, and above all making serene and unflinching eye contact with each and every spectator. I rejected the water and the sweets, but succumbed to the nurses' general usefulness when I realized, after yet another internal debate, that I really had better go to the loo before the main event.

A male nurse led me tranquilly to the toilet.

Relief was compounded by the fact that upon selecting my random number from a bowl, the identity of the occupant of Room 72, Eamonn Hunt, was immediately made known to me. Eamonn

ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

Hunt, Eamonn Hunt—okay, right, he seems safe. The immediate revelation of “my” actor was an enormously liberating. (Had it been anyone about whom I had the slightest reservation, at that stage I would have bartered indiscriminately with strangers.)

The vast space of the warehouse was not so much converted as subverted by a labyrinthian series of walls with doors—subverted in that a set designer, unused to such enormity of space, might be giddy in his or her use of emptiness and air; here, Andrew Clancy’s design necessarily submits to the remit of the show, but does so in such a way as to exacerbate its largeness by making it small. Once in the roofless cubicle, with one’s performer in full flow, the sounds and reverberations of one hundred actor’s voices filled the place, evoking train stations, airports, hospitals—

Okay, maybe it was all those nurses pacing the hallway, their progress visible through the corrugated plastic doors, that evoked that last mental image. Maybe it was the posture that was imposed upon me once Mr Hunt saw me safely seated—slightly reclined upon a half-couch, my legs straight out in front of me (I shouldn’t have worn sandals! Do my feet smell?) that evoked the therapist’s couch. The situation did in fact evoke the therapeutic environment, but subverted that as well, demanding that I, while in the therapist’s position, sustain the therapist’s Freudian distance while also trying to emit Rodgers-esque waves of warmth and acceptance.

Have I ever cared, as an audience member, what I was communicating to an actor? As Mr Hunt authoritatively began to tell me the history of his life as an actor, of his early influences and successes, his side trips and his formative experiences, I was so busy worrying about the look on my face that I barely took in a word he said. My face hurt. I wished I’d had a pedicure. Do I need to respond? All this eye contact—it’s making me crazy!

Relaxation commenced when it became necessary and appropriate—and allowed by Mr Hunt—for me to make some sort of response, an elicited nod, a murmur of awareness, and the situation immediately transformed, and I stopped thinking about myself, and was able to receive the monologue Mr Hunt chose to perform, from Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (when have I ever called an actor ‘Mr’ in a review?) This, I knew how to do, I knew how to receive this part, and as he quite effortlessly slid into the speech, and into his character, our personal connection was rent, and I was actually able to watch.

Any sense of equilibrium was immediately destroyed by the “healing moment”, in which Mr Hunt gently explained that he was going to turn off one light, turn on some music, and turn on another light, gelled in red, the effect of which, among other things was meant to stimulate my libido. The sheer stress of maintaining eye contact was replaced by vulnerability when I was

I was so
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word Eamonn
Hunt said.
My face hurt.
I wished I’d had
a pedicure.
Do I need to
respond? All this
eye contact—
it’s making
me crazy!



ONE AMONG MANY

instructed to close my eyes. Close my eyes? In the dark? With a stranger? In this little room?

The ultimate feeling of the experience was one of enforced intimacy, of the entrapment of eye contact (which is a psychologically intimate involvement), and of forced communication. It certainly pointed up the bliss of darkness, the luxury of distance; here, the watcher was equally the watched, an unnerving experience perhaps abetted by my role as a theatre critic, one that may not have been as heightened for the average punter.

One has to wonder why it was easier to have a chat with a strange taxi man in a space no bigger than the one in which I encountered Mr Hunt—presumably because I never had the opportunity to criticise his driving. It's possible that the lack of dilemma was due to the fact that the taxi man and I were interacting within a known social script, whereas the script of *One* was entirely unknown and potentially threatening. Once released, Mr Hunt and I had as engaging a moment chatting over plastic cups of sparkling water as I had shared with my driver, connected not only from our immediate experience, but also from a connection, however tangential on my part, to the theatre. He elucidated the notion of the communication between the audience and the performer, sharing his theory that "an audience", on any given night, essentialises itself into one personality; from his perspective, there was nothing ominous or disturbing about *One*—it was, in the best sense, all in a day's work.

HT

reviews

OUR REVIEWERS reflect on the most recent theatre productions around the country

ART

By Yasmina Reza

Translated by Christopher Hampton
Everyman Palace Productions,
Everyman Theatre, Cork.
4 – 27 Aug; Reviewed 23 Aug
BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

ART HAS HAD SUCCESSFUL RUNS IN Paris, London, New York, and numerous other cities, before arriving in the European Capital of Culture for a summer season. Like many before me, I was surprised to discover that *Art* is not about contemporary art at all: a piece of art is the catalyst, but it is in fact a social comedy about a friendship between three very different men, Marc, Serge and Yvan.

With one set, a cast of three, and a running time of one hour and 25 minutes, *Art* is both economical to produce, and ideal "theatre-lite" for lazy summer evenings. You leave feeling as if you had enjoyed a tasty but insubstantial appetiser, rather than grappling with a challenging main course.

With the now-familiar trinity of The Everyman's Artistic Director Patrick Talbot, set designer Patrick Murray, and lighting designer Paul Denby, a technically accomplished production was to be expected, and duly delivered. Murray's set, which had to represent three different Parisian apartments, was a masterpiece of understatement, framed by a pair of

receding right-angled arches. The plain walls changed from yellow ochre to terracotta, depending on the lighting, and there was a pale wooden floor. Décor was reduced to pine benches, cylindrical white speakers, and two quietly tasteful arrangements of long grass and stones. The presence or absence of a painting on the rear wall (sentimental sunflowers for Yvan, a traditional landscape for Marc, an empty space for Serge) was enough to indicate whose apartment we were in.

Serge (Mark O'Regan), a dermatologist, precipitates the drama by buying a painting for €60,000 – a large canvas, painted white, with a series of fine white diagonal scars. Serge boasts of its resale value, and the high reputation of the artist, Antrois. But he still craves the approval of his friends. Marc (Dan Mullane) is not impressed: "You spent €60,000 on this shit?". Yvan (Kieran Aherne) gives a quick, gleeful rubbing together of the palms of his hands just before he is shown the painting, a typical comic touch. This was followed by a hilarious sequence between Yvan and Serge in which no words were spoken, but volumes were implied by the tone of their alternate outbursts of laughter, as the full extent of Yvan's recklessness in spending €60,000 on a painting is wordlessly acknowledged.

While Marc continues to dismiss the painting as of no significance, Yvan sees it



*Kieran Ahern, Dan Mullane
and Mark O'Regan in Art*

as "a stage on a journey". "I felt a resonance," he says, in one of several monologues addressed directly to the audience by each of the characters. These sequences were clearly signalled by Paul Denby's lighting, in which the rest of the stage receded in darkness, while the soloist was top lit by one spot.

The three friends are further characterised by their costumes (by Sinead Cuthbert) – Serge, the consultant, sports a summer suit and tie, with tan shoes. Yvan sports an unstructured, looser jacket, baggy chinos, and scuffed docksiders. Yvan's shoes, once jaunty but now sad and worn like their owner, radiated an ineffable sadness as the drama unfolded. Marc in contrast has the sports jacket and crisply tailored trousers of the fashionable intellectual.

The rift between the friends that Serge's purchase is causing reaches its climax on an evening when all three meet at Serge's place to go out for a movie. Yvan arrives forty-five minutes late, and launches into a comic monologue by way of explanation, about arrangements for his forthcoming wedding – delivered with wonderful verve by Ahern.

Things go from bad to worse among the three friends, until both Serge and Marc turn on Yvan, who leaves, and then returns. When he has recovered from his crying fit, he reveals the real crux of the play: "What's happened is that Serge has brought a work of art that makes Marc uncomfortable". Only when Marc has made the transgressive gesture of using a marker pen to draw a cartoon on the canvas can there be reconciliation. It turns out that the marker is washable, and in the final scene the friends are revealed restoring the painting to its original whiteness.

The only fault in this production was that perhaps, like Serge's painting, it was just a little too minimalist and subtle. Similarly, the characters of Marc and Serge seemed bland and unmemorable beside the sparkling Yvan, though maybe the fault lay with the insuperable blandness of the writing rather than the performances. And although I know it shouldn't matter, the Cork accents used by all three actors made it very hard to believe in the Parisian setting.

Alannah Hopkin is a writer and journalist. She has reviewed theatre for publications including the Sunday Times, the Irish Examiner and the Financial Times.

BAILEGANGAIRE

le Tom Murphy

Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

22 Lúnasa 2005

LE RÍONA NI FHRIGHIL

NUAIR A D'AISTRIGH GABRIEL ROSENSTOCK filiocht Seamus Heaney agus W.B. Yeats go Gaeilge b'fhaethas do go leor daoine gur cur amú ama a bhí ann. Nach raibh pobal na tire in inmhe an bunsaothar féin a léamh? Tuigeadh do dhaoine áirithe gur léiriú eile ar mheon coilínithe na nGael ab ea an sodar seo i ndiaidh mhorthfilí an Bhéarla. Mhaigh Rosenstock, áfach, go raibh taibhse na Gaeilge ag pórseáil thart sna dánta Béarla agus go bhféadfaí teagmháil a dhéanamh léi ach na dánta a aistriú go Gaeilge. Ba í an tuiscint chéanna ar chumas an aistriúcháin macallaí táb-hachtacha úrnua a bhaint as an bhuntéacs a thug ar an chompántas Aisling Ghéar dráma Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire*, a léiriú trí mheán na Gaeilge. Leoga, d'fhéadfaí a mhaíomh go



bhfóireann an dráma áirithe seo a tharraingíonn go láidir ar thraigisiún na seanchaiochta, do rún athfhréamhaithe an aistritheora.

Tá moladh ar leith ag dul don dearthoir seite a thug aghaidh ar eas na hamharclannaíochta agus a sheachain an radharc seanchaite den bhothán tuaithe ceann tui. Ba léiriú cliste caolchúiseach ar mhearrbhall na seannmhána na dathanna aeracha a bhí ar a leaba agus ar bhalla an tseomra. Ba chosúil le seomra páiste é, rud a d'fhóir do dhuine a bhí ag dul san aois leanbaí. Bhí an úsáid shiombalach a baineadh as an ghealach an-eífeachtach; más faoi sholas na gealaí a rinne an tseanbhean na giotaí éagsúla den scéal a aithris, is cinnte gur faoi thionchar na gealaí a bhí sí féin.

Ní raibh an tsamhláfocht chéanna ag roinnt leis an léiriú féin, áfach. Cé gur léir go ndeachaigh Máire Hastings i bpáirt

Máire Hastings and Norette Leahy in *Bailegangaire*

Mhamó i bhfeidhm ar an lucht féachana mar sheanbhean chantalach scaipthe, ní dheachaigh sí i bhfeidhm orthu mar sheanchaí. Ba chosúla le hinsint muinteora scoile ná le haithris seanchaí ná rámháillí seanmhána fiú amháin, iarracht Hastings. Mothaíodh go raibh rithimí nádúrtha na scéalaíochta in easnamh; gur ag diriú go comhfhiosach ari na línte seachas bheith faoi dhraíocht agus faoi stiúir ag an scéal féin, a bhí an t-aisteoir. Tháinig rian na hiarrachta seo salach ar an tuiscint a thaispeáin Hastings ar ghealtacht agus ar ghreann na seannmhána.

Bhí lochtanna follasacha ag roinnt leis an léiriú a rinneadh ar an charachтар Dolly. Is i dtreor na steiritipiciúlachta a chuathas agus í ag diúgadh vodka gan staonadh. Bhí an charachtracht féin chomh teoranta le mallachtaí Dolly agus gan d'fhreagra aici go minic ach 'Jesus'.

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Chaill an t-aistritheoir a dheis acmhainní na teanga a úsáid le pearsantacht Dolly a léiriú. Bhí an easpa léargas seo le sonrú ar an taispeántas a thug Bríd Ó Gallchóir uaiithi i bpáirt Dolly. Shílfeá nach raibh sí ar a compórd in radhar-canna áirithe agus an chuma ar an scéal nár tugadh treoracha cinnte státse di.

D'éirigh le Norette Leahy cráiteachta mná óige, Mary, a bhí i ngéibhinn sa scéal nár chríochnaigh a seamháthair riabhach, a áitearthach ar an lucht féachana. Bhí leochaileacht agus léargas ag roinnt lena taispeántas a chuaigh go mór chun sochair don léiriú.

Má tá taibhsí na Gaeilge le brath i mbunsaothar Murphy, is cinnte nár éirigh leis an léiriú seo trí Ghaeilge iad a dhíbirt ná guth a thabhairt dóibh. Cé

gur leasc liom dul i muinín nathafocht an chaillteanais agus cursaí aistriúcháin á bpclé, sa chás seo ní fhéadfá í a sheachaint. Is dóigh liom go bhfuil *Bailegangaire* le Tom Murphy ar cheann de na drámaí sin, dála Translations de chuid Brian Friel, a oibríonn ar an ábhar nach trí Ghaeilge a scríobhadh é gí go mbaineann sé go dlúth le cultúr agus teanga na Gaeilge.

Is mó an dúshlán a thugann a leithéid de dhrámaí aistritheoirí agus aisteoirí araon. B'fhasnas domh go raibh foireann Aisling Ghéar ró-ghar don ábhar ach achar ón sprioc.

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

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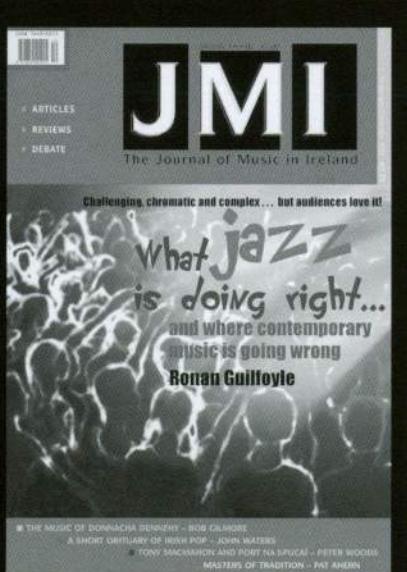
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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

by Oscar Wilde.

Abbey Theatre

23 July – 24 Sept; Reviewed 30 July

BY BRIAN SINGLETON.

WILDE'S MOST FAMOUS PLAY IS SO FULL of recognisable epigrams that it has often met with the accusation that he did not write characters but strung together a succession of witty lines. Director Conall Morrison's cross-dressed production acts as an exposure of artifice, exploring Wilde's characters' viability as psychological entities on the stage. Morrison's intention is clear from the outset in a ten-minute prologue of Wilde in a Paris café in the last year of his life, looking back to the triumph that was *Earnest*. The invented scene is based on the biography of Wilde by Frank Harris, and was set in a wonderfully ornate Art Nouveau café designed by Sabine D'Argent. An upstage door led to the street, from which Wilde's acolytes arrived, and through which they ultimately deserted him. On stage left, a spiral staircase led to a room for Wilde's sexual conquests. And, in between, Wilde (played wistfully and dejectedly by Alan Stanford) masqueraded under the pseudonym of Sebastian Melmoth, calling for more absinthe, desperate for money. He cut a tragic figure as he began to remember *Earnest* as the pinnacle of his success before his rapid descent into the courts and prison.

This prologue, performed irritatingly in bad French accents, was really only a mood-setter and did not have inherent dramatic qualities. Thus it felt tedious and cumbersome. But swiftly Wilde began to remember *Earnest*, and the patrons of the café changed into the costume drama of the play. Stanford recited

the servant Lane's first lines and later, in a spectacular moment of transformation, he whipped off a tablecloth, wrapped it around his waist and, fully clothed, turned into a larger-than-life pantomime dame that was Lady Bracknell.

The notoriously difficult opening scene between Algernon Moncrieff (played with great accomplishment by Alan Smyth as stand-in for Andrew Bennett) is troublesome because of its largely expository nature and also because of Algernon's now dated swipe at upper-class English customs and manners. The response by actors and director to the difficulty was to race through the text to get to the arrival of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolyn in drag. Tadhg Murphy, in moments of great hilarity, played up the double entendres of the text (like a young, sexually avaricious Dame Edna Everage). Neither he nor Stanford ever attempted to play female, but took some stereotyped gestures and movements to stand for the feminine. Similarly Patrick Moy as Cicely and Sean Kearns as Miss Prism played exaggerated versions of their female characters that brought the play into the realm of pantomime. Lady Bracknell's second entrance was marked by an even larger frock, worn over Wilde's suit. And this pushed the character to a height and width that was outrageously funny but totally unreal.

The effect of the pantomime prevented any interrogation of the "queer" politics that this form of cross-dressing could have thrown up. Instead of gender being presented as a fluid and unstable challenge to its heteronormative construction, this form of dressing up simply reinforced the normative values that Wilde sought so desperately to deconstruct. Nevertheless, pointing up the artifice in

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this way prevented audience identification with character, and exposed the cleverness of the taut dramaturgical construction and the very clever use of the epigram as weapon -when in more realistic productions, these epigrams often fall into the territory of the cliché.

Morrison's male characterisations came under unusual scrutiny, too. Jack Worthing was played by Darragh Kelly as completely hapless and Ned Dennehy's Reverend Chasuble was a cleric who looked hilariously as if he had emerged from a substance abuse clinic. But it was the character of Wilde, invented by Morrison, and to which this production eventually returned, that had the most potency. Stanford spoke the final line of the play (about the importance of being earnest) dressed as Lady Bracknell but in Wilde's voice. The effect was chilling as the tragic hero had fallen from grace and pointed up the irony of one of his lines in the prologue: 'I put all my genius into my life; I put only my talent into my work'. But as Stanford divested himself of the trappings of Wilde's "tal-



Alan Stanford in **The Importance of Being Earnest**

ent", his life had been divested of theatrical success, family, friends, and even his own identity. For all the missed opportunities for exploring the gender politics of Victorian society that cross-dressing might have brought about, this was a meta-theatrical production that made me "hear" the play for the first time and appreciate more deeply Wilde's theatrical talent.

Brian Singleton is Head of the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin.

ROS KAVANAGH

THE LONESOME WEST

by Martin McDonagh

Lyric Theatre, Belfast in association with An
Grianán, Letterkenny

16 Sept – 15 Oct at the Lyric and touring;
reviewed 29 Sept

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

SABINE D'ARGENT'S SET DESIGN FOR Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*, directed by Mikel Murfi, emphasises the issues of theatricality and authenticity that have accumulated around McDonagh's work. The play is set in the village of Leenane in Connemara, and is the third part of the Leenane Trilogy. Like the earlier *Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lonesome West* is a violent tale of suicide and murder that parodies the peasant play of the early Irish theatre. While the trilogy has proved popular with theatre audiences, it has also been criticised for its representation of rural Ireland. At the centre of this controversy is the drama's contested relationship to the real Ireland.

The cast, like that of the peasant play, includes the local priest and a family unit, brothers Valene and Coleman Connor. The language parodies the language of Synge's plays; the opening scene has the characters returning from a funeral, and the plot focuses on the conventional themes of inheritance and marriage. But in the world of Leenane, everything is topsy-turvy. The brothers fight constantly. Coleman, played by Lalor Roddy, is revealed to have murdered his father with a shot-gun, allowing Frank McCusker's Valene to blackmail him out of his share of the inheritance. The priest, Fr. Welsh-Walsh, played by Enda Kilroy, is treated with contempt by all his parishioners, who cannot even be bothered to

find out his proper name. Only the young woman, Girleen (Charlene Mc-Kenna) has sympathy with him and is in love with him.

Although Druid's iconic productions of McDonagh are only four years in the past, Murfi and his team have shown that they have something new to say. Rather than reproducing a traditional, naturalistic cottage set, D'Argent opts for a slice of a cottage, set at an angle, with bare stage exposed between the set and the wings. Inside the cottage, Valene's collection of plastic saints decorates the walls, which are painted pinkish-red and stained with damp, dark streaks and patches. The furniture is simple, and there are four doors, opening to the bedrooms and the outside. The costumes comment upon the characters: Coleman is dressed casually, suggesting an aging would-be playboy, while Valene's tightly-buttoned shirts and too-short sleeves and trousers give a visual expression to his meanness.

The design and performances play knowingly with stereotypes, as does the text itself. McDonagh exploits conventional signifiers of the Irish play, such as the rural cottage setting and the religious icons on the walls, and D'Argent's set design and costumes do likewise. The icons, for example, are marked "V" for Valene, and include an image of his dead dog. And by giving only a slice of the cottage, she reminds the audience that this is not verisimilar; we are very much in the world of theatricality and performance. Therefore, the absurd and grotesque violence – which sees the priest plunge his bare arms into molten plastic, three narrated murders and two suicides, and the brothers' interminable fighting over Tayto crisps and pennies – is made comic rather than tragic. Both the playwright and the



production distance the audience from the horrors of the stage action.

Nonetheless, Kilroy's and McKenna's performance of the stifled love between Fr. Welsh-Walsh and Girleen succeeds in quieting the laughter in the auditorium, and Girleen's distress after the priest's suicide, and her showing of the gold chain she bought for him, are genuinely touching. Likewise, Kilroy's performance of the priest's suicide note to the brothers, though reminiscent of clichéd, comic letters from abroad, is made moving by the character's isolation against Conleth White's *Sturm und Drang* lighting design. Isolated on the roof of the set, the character is spot-lit on the darkened stage. The backdrop, created with light-

Frank McCusker and Lalor Roddy in *The Lonesome West*

ing, shows the stormy landscape of his despair and emotional turmoil.

This is a solid production under the able direction of Murfi, with strong performances from all of the cast. White's lighting design only occasionally calls attention to itself, but when it does so, it is powerful and effective. Sabine D'Argent's set moves this production in a slightly new direction, which significantly suggests that the Irish theatre is absorbing these controversial works. This movement is away from naturalistic design and raw comedy, and towards a more thoughtful engagement with McDonagh's sense of the theatrical.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Ulster

MAKING HISTORY

by Brian Friel

Ouroboros Theatre Ireland Ltd.

Samuel Beckett Theatre

29 Aug – 10 Sept; Reviewed on 9 Sept

BY LOUISE LEPAGE

MAKING HISTORY'S OPENING IMAGE is of shadows and age, with a mood that is darkly expectant. The audience wonders whose ghosts of the past, in the dim half-light, will fill the conspicuously empty chairs and write upon the papers littering the table. The stage picture is evocative of the making of history itself, causing the audience to pause to wonder what, or who, conspired to characterise history's "great" men and

women in its pages of stories told, in a language heavy with the potential for duplicity and manipulation.

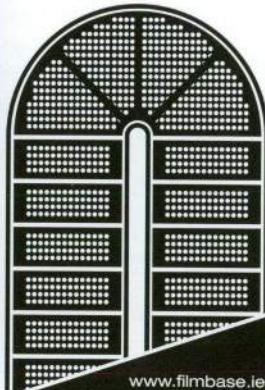
Hugh O'Neill (1550–1616), the central historical subject of *Making History*, is one such "great" man. He haunts the pages of Irish history, representing the old Gaelic world's final resistance against the onslaught of the Renaissance and modernity. By all accounts, he was a complex figure. O'Neill had four wives, one of whom, Mabel, was English and a surprising love match (and the only one of his wives to be figured in this play). He was wealthy and privileged and skilled in matters of politics. Also, crucially, he sought to traverse the worlds of modern English politics and the fiercely



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loyal Gaelic clans - a treacherous and ultimately impossible endeavour, as history, and the play, reveal. Ultimately, it was his hatred of the English treatment of his own people that led him to side with his Gaelic brothers and spearhead a disastrous campaign that culminated in the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. Six years later, O'Neill fled to Rome to avoid arrest. It was here, somewhat anti-climactically that O'Neill ended his life,



alone and embittered. As Sean Ó Faoláin writes, O'Neill had become, by his death, a man "habituated to melancholy and homelessness".

The fundamental question posed by Friel's play is how such a political failure (privately and publicly O'Neill was a man exiled, defeated, and disillusioned) came to be written into mythic stardom. Friel shows this transformation was the work of the Catholic archbishop Peter Lombard. It is dramatised here in arguments – between Lombard and O'Neill, and Mabel and her sister Mary. Ireland wars with England, politician battles

Tony Flynn, Conan Sweeney,
and Philip O'Sullivan in
Making History

with the man of God, husband argues with wife – thus articulating the problematic conflict between truth and interpretation, between reality and its representation. History supposedly presents objectivity and truth, but here it is presented by Friel in all its vainglorious underwear as the stuff of naked political manoeuvrings. Masterfully played in grand oratory style by Philip O'Sullivan (listening to the deep and thickly resonant tones of his voice is a real treat), Lombard argues that the creative handling of O'Neill's life is a necessary political tool that, though a lie, is ideologically necessary.

Ideas and drama, then, are critically intertwined yet perpetually at odds. Ouroboros's production handles such conflict by astutely taking words as its central premise – abstract and obtuse as they often are – to present O'Neill as a man rather than an historical icon. Complex, difficult, and believable, he is the product of language, its occasional master but, more frequently, its victim.

Some critics suggest that Lombard is the figure who sits somewhat hollowly at the centre of *Making History*: he is its expositional tool in this play of ideas. But Ouroboros's production does something more interesting and intelligent, subtly but vitally shifting its emphasis onto O'Neill, who is clearly the pivotal "hero" of this production. He is complexly and courageously characterised by Denis Conway, whose performance synthesis-

es the contradictions of this politician, friend, and lover. He is particularly impressive and important to this production in his intelligent articulation of a language that he reveals as slippery and contriving.

Words are rightly foregrounded in director Geoff Gould's complex and fine interpretation. However, although the quality of stillness that pervades the production stylistically focuses the language, it also occasionally detracts from the human drama, which is otherwise enlivened in some remarkable performances. Stunningly supported by the production's design elements (set design by Ferdia Murphy, costume by Sinéad Cuthbert, and sound by Simon MacHale, with some exquisite lighting effects by Lizzie Powell), there is a real sense, in this intelligent and sensitive production, of the past echoing into the present, of a vivid history retold from a certain perspective.

Louise LePage recently graduated from the MA in Drama and Performance Studies at University College Dublin.

MELODY

By Deirdre Kinahan

Tall Tales Theatre Company
The LAB At Temple Bar Information Centre,
8 – 20 Aug and on tour,
Reviewed 26 Aug, 2005.
BY LOUISE LEPAGE

WHEN OUR LIVES SOMETIMES SEEM little more than chaotic blurs of business and rush, rare moments of stillness are peculiarly distinct, like delicate brushstrokes in our mind and memory. And like my lunchtime visit to see Deirdre Kinahan's *Melody*, produced by



Maureen Collender in Melody

Tall Tales at The LAB: a gentle memory of stillness, sunlight, smiling faces, lollipops, and happy laughter.

Melody is a charming frolic through the agonising vicissitudes of the love of William and Kathleen, a lonely, unmarried, and middle-aged man and woman who meet over midday sandwiches in the park. Their blushing yet brave attempts to forge a connection frequently leave them looking and feeling quite ridiculous: Kathleen falls ungracefully off the bench in embarrassed discomposure

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when William first sits down; William holds Kathleen's hand for just that bit too long; and he desperately tries to hide his horror of her proffered "exotic" food, fearing to give offence. That William and Kathleen ever achieve a second date, let alone the promise of a relationship, is a miracle. But for the audience it is a heart-warming miracle that reminds us of our own desperate inadequacies and quests for love and acceptance.

This tenderly comic production is one that relies heavily on its performances. Lit only by natural daylight and located by a minimal set of a bench and temporary back wall that serve to denote the park and the characters' work places (designed by Marie Tierney), the world of the play is brought to life by the actors. In Maureen Collender's compelling presentation of Kathleen as a hybrid of the quixotic and the efficiently practical, we find a tightly corseted character enjoying a surprising submergence into her own unlikely romantic drama, which is evidently derived from her penchant for (bad) sentimental film sequences. Indeed, the use of background classical music, most memorably, Puccini's moving aria *Nessun Dorma* (brought to wider recognition by the 1990 World Cup) and *La Bohème*, proves an effective, if simple, device that affords titillating accompaniment to the enacted romantic hyperbole (sound design by Marion McEvoy).

Steve Blount's performance, meanwhile, as the bumbling and oafish William, is utterly charming and instantly recognisable. This man, childlike in his emotional immaturity and transparency, demands our affection rather than our

critical dismissal, however, as he over-spills with naughtiness and blundering goodwill.

That we care about these two individuals who number among society's "unfortunate" (they are unfashionable, unattractive, unlearned, and uncouth) is due to Veronica Coburn's sensitive yet lively direction, which finds poignancy in the pathetic. In a style reminiscent of the wordless and clownish mime of silent film, she leads us to laugh with sympathy at these fools who resound as wholly human in their vulnerability and pain. It is to her credit that this delightful comic interlude, heavily dependent on the imagination of her characters and her audience, is so evocatively and poignantly charmed into being.

TRANSLATIONS

by Brian Friel

Decadent Theatre Company

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

24 Aug – 3 Sept; reviewed 3 Sept

BY DIARMUID O' BRIEN

THERE WERE THOSE WHO SAID THAT Decadent's set designer, the hearteningly ambitious Owen MacCarthaigh, had gone too far this time. Nonsense, I retorted. We're going to the theatre, not a historical re-enactment. Furthermore this is *Translations*, in many ways, and happily, a Boucicault-besting melodrama, and there is nothing wrong with melodrama. The familiar hedge-school, ostensibly a disused byre, here fills the entire frame of the stage, its imposing lines and towering twin doors echoing a Greco-Roman temple. But it is reassuringly earthed by agrarian stone-work, a dirt floor, and the few humble effects of the hedge-school. This is a nice bit of



license that underscores the classical references, and even the cultural consequence, while never actually deviating from the text.

This set, complemented by vivid costumes and director Andrew Flynn's trademark eye for mise en scène renders each little tableau a painting (oil on canvas, naturally) grandly textured with colour, shadow, and depth. Once again a Decadent production reminds us that there is no reason why the more canonical Irish plays cannot be visually engaging.

This is a satisfying and damned entertaining telling of Friel's masterpiece, and also a celebratory one, as it marks twenty-five years since the play – *Field Day*'s début – was first performed. *Translations* not only benefits from Decadent's superior production values

*Diarmuid de Faoite and Rod
Goodall in Translations*

but also because it showcases younger talent, most of it drawn from the ranks of Galway Youth

Theatre (GYT), which enjoys a close relationship with Decadent. Indeed Flynn recently directed GYT's powerful production of *The Crucible* which won over audiences during the 2005 Galway Arts Festival.

Though the cast showed varying levels of experience and consistency, they succeeded in playing off each other's strengths. Michael Geoghegan and Eoin Geoghegan (no relation) are compellingly fraternal as the schoolmaster's two sons, with contrasting views on the erosion of local identity through Anglicisation, and the latter's subsequent doubts about his part in it are presented well. Matthew Ralli and

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Marie-Claire de Brún carry the matinee melodrama as the culturally and linguistically divided couple.

However, there is a patchily implemented policy on the accents. When it comes to most plays set in regional Ireland it is normally permissible to just aim for "generally culchie" as far as the accents are concerned, but this is Ballybeg after all. Unlike plays set in generic old places such as Ancient Greece, or lord save us, Verona, Friel's carefully inflected dialogue is unequivocally rooted in the borderlands of Donegal. Though Decadent claims fidelity to this most lyrically dynamic of Irish accents, in practice its simulation ranged from more than competent to less than, well, Irish. And it's not just the greener actors who falter here. Though he apparently underwent voice coaching, Rod Goodall's otherwise authoritative turn as Hugh, the classically educated headmaster, somehow sounds more English than the visiting officers.

Meanwhile Diarmuid de Faoite absolutely shines as the idiot savant, Jimmy Jack Cassie, for whom reciting heroic verse in Latin or Greek comes more naturally than uttering a pertinent sentence in his own tongue. His endearing ramblings, and nervous affectations were weighted with tragedy and innocence, especially in the final overwhelming scene with Hugh. And in a play so concerned with language and meaning, the character of the practically mute Sarah (Emer O'Toole) is, of course, a symbolically central commentary, and her poignantly placed use here is another feat, contributing to Decadent's latest success.

Diarmuid O'Brien is a writer based in Galway.

A SPLENDID MESS

**Locus Theatre Company in association
with Shadowbox Theatre Company**

Project Cube, Dublin
19-30 July; reviewed 30 July

BY PETER CRAWLEY

IF YOU STAND BACK AND LOOK AT IT the right way (or, perhaps, if you lean in and look at it the wrong way), modern life and all its attendant conveniences are really just a series of baffling ordeals. The French actor, physical comedian and film-maker, Jacques Tati together with his alter-ego Monsieur Hulot – for all practical purposes the Gallic Buster Keaton – saw modernity in precisely those terms and made his expressionless bewilderment the engine of meticulously orchestrated slapstick comedies. "He looks for problems where there are none," wrote his fan Jean-Luc Godard, "and finds them."

Inspired by Tati's *oeuvre*, Locus Theatre Company and Shadowbox have not had to look hard to find such invisible problems in the ephemera of a whimsically drawn Dublin. A zealous cleaning lady, whose mop and bucket elicit over-amplified "ker-splashes" from a restless, cartoonish sound design, is forced to take a high-pressured cleaning exam to win a job. A young man enters a tunnel of automation with the customer service line of his mobile phone, straining to remain calm through the options: "1...1...1...No...No...No..."

And on it goes, with five nebulously connected characters (played by Frieda Hand, Gemma Gallagher, Jim Roche, Gene Rooney and Russell Smith) fending off the intrusions of contemporary life, darting along Maxime Laroussi's bright thrust stage where both time and place become hard to identify. But if



*Jim Roche, Gemma Gallagher and Russell Smith in **A Splendid Mess***

Tati's work was essentially good-natured, Caroline McSweeney's production allows in the occasional sinister undertone, as when a woman is caught in an interminable phone survey, as invasive as it is apparently disinterested. "Have you ever had a relationship at work?" asks the caller. "It's just for marketing purposes," he continues, mechanically overriding her objections.

There is something quite charming in this devised work, about just how flap-pable each stumblebum remains, a mirror of our own absent-minded foolishness and impatience with the quotidian nuisances of life. But rarely is it funny. In part, that can't be helped: gentle slapstick is only deceptively knockabout. It always needed the obsessional drive of a Tati, who could take years to complete his comedies, to fine-hone even the most accidental gags. McSweeney has,

instead, an admirable lightness of touch, letting the action drift from the stage to the Project's lighting box, or drawing our attention to the fireworks and kites of an escapist video screen overhead. This may not prompt a belly laugh, but the depictions are inclined to raise a smile.

What little speech there is can feel superfluous, with most character utterances as deliberately indecipherable as the blubbering wreck of a perturbed Stan Laurel.

At times *A Splendid Mess* seems to grow dissatisfied with words altogether, far more entertained by the chaos of Paul Smith's sound design and Denis Clohessy's music score. This is an apt response to Tati, who prioritised the background noise of his world over the mundane possibilities of dialogue, and it seldom works better than when one female character is asked about a recent

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date, whereupon her description is drowned out by a tumult of sound and whirlpools of music. Her devastating enactment of Wagnerian dismay and bitter lament, together with the horrified reactions of her audience, says more than words could convey. And when the storm finally quells she can be heard innocently enquiring, "So should I ask him out again?" "Ah yeah," they answer.

It's moments like these where life, in all its messiness, can at least prove good for a laugh, while those at its mercy may slowly don raincoats and form an army of befuddled Hulots in their forgettable but diverting resistance.

Peter Crawley is news editor and web editor of Irish Theatre Magazine.

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

By Arthur Miller

Gate Theatre, Dublin,

2 Aug–7 Sept 2005; reviewed 12 Aug

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

READING THROUGH THE GATE'S excellent new online archive is an experience likely to induce vertigo, since it shows explicitly how the theatre has achieved success over the years by lurching dramatically from the brilliantly innovative to the maddeningly conservative, and back again – sometimes in a matter of weeks. One moment, we're listening to an account of a woman being raped by a dog in Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall*; the next, it's women in big frocks, in an adaptation of some novel by a Victorian spinster. One month, it's new work from McPherson or Friel or McGuinness; then it's yet another production of *A Christmas Carol*.

This production of Arthur Miller's *A*

View from the Bridge might seem to fall into the "big frock" category rather than the "rapist dog" one – but in fact combines the best elements of both approaches. It's a classic that also acts as a tribute to a great writer who died last year; that it stars TV's Christopher Meloni will certainly have helped to bring in a summertime audience. But it's also a play that examines issues of immigration, considering what people in a wealthy country owe to poorer parts of the world. It therefore places itself at the heart of contemporary Irish life, addressing themes that have dominated our theatre in 2005, in such plays as *The Sugar Wife*, *Enlightenment*, *The Cambria*, and indeed the Gate's own production of *The Home Place*.

Its relevance arises because Miller was one of the last writers to use the structures of Aristotelian tragedy to bring an audience into the heart of a universal dilemma. Eddie Carbone (Meloni) is a New York docker: he's not wealthy, but he's done fine for himself – married to Beatrice (Cathy Belton), and living in a pleasant home. The couple have never had children of their own, but they have raised Catherine (Laura Murphy), who's now on the cusp of adulthood, eager to experience the world, and feeling stifled by her adoptive parents' protectiveness. Eddie is obviously confused by her mild rebellion, his paternal feelings towards her being replaced by sexual desire.

Things are brought to a head when he opens his house to his relatives Marco and Rodolpho (Aidan Kelly and Paul Reid) – two illegal immigrants, working to feed their families back in Italy. Catherine and Rodolpho start to form a relationship, forcing Eddie into a choice between two extremes: he can give up his desire for

Laura Murphy and Cathy Belton in A View From the Bridge



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Catherine, allowing her to marry Rodolpho, or he can betray his relatives to the immigration authorities. John Kavanagh acts as a hawk-like chorus to these events, which, of course, are going to end badly for all concerned.

The set is beautifully designed by Mark Wendland, with the Carbones' living room occupying centre-stage, but surrounded on the left and right by stairwells – with a large raised platform behind it. We always have a sense of the intimacy of the Carbones' life, but the use of the spaces around it makes clear that the family is one part of a large, interconnected and potentially hostile community. Direction by Mark Brokaw achieves a similar bal-

ance: individual performances are impressively nuanced and detailed, but they are presented against the backdrop of a lively bigger picture.

Meloni's performance deservedly received much of the attention in initial responses to the show, but the acting is of a very high standard throughout. Perhaps because Brokaw doesn't work in Irish theatre, we see many actors doing things that they normally aren't asked to do, with surprising results. It's no secret that Aidan Kelly is a good actor, for example, but here he's asked to convey much of his character through the use of silence and gesture – which he achieves excitingly well. Laura Murphy and Paul Reid are also impres-



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From September 2006, UCD plans to offer Drama Studies as a subject on the UCD Horizons Programme.

sive, even if there isn't quite enough chemistry between them to convince us of their feelings for each other. And Belton and Kavanagh are, as always, imposing figures, making their presences felt despite having relatively little time on stage.

This *View from the Bridge* is well acted and well directed: there's not a single weak link here. And, by asking us to consider where self-interest ends and charity begins, it adds much to our understanding of Irish theatre – and Irish society – in 2005. It's a sign of Miller's importance that a play first produced fifty years ago can have this effect; it's to the Gate's credit that they have brought it to us now.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in Drama at NUI Galway. He is reviews editor of this magazine.

**WATERFRONT WASTELAND/
MEDEAMATERIAL/LANDSCAPE**

WITH ARGONAUTS

by Heiner Müller

Project Arts Centre, 25-30 July

Reviewed 30 July

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

LOOSE CANON'S LATEST OUTING FOLLOWS their revision of straightforward material such as *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Hedda Gabler* with an ambitious staging of the already revisionist works of East German playwright Heiner Müller. Hailed in his lifetime as "the most important German dramatist since Brecht", Müller's reputation wavered following the collapse of the GDR, when his relationship with the Stasi came under scrutiny. But since his death in 1995, his place as an edgy interpreter of the twentieth century, caught between the forces of conformity and radicalism, has been cemented by the dearth of

political perspective in the theatre of the post-ideological age.

Embarking on a kind of scorched-earth, back-to-basics exploration of their aesthetic, Loose Canon have delved deep with this show. This is uncompromising, difficult, highly charged theatre, eschewing even the most basic pleasures of spectacle by its staging in dimly-lit space sonically bathed in an oscillating, alternately high pitched and low bass harmonic tone that makes your skin crawl.

The basic text is a series of meditations on human relationships seen through the filter of several Greek myths; primarily that of Medea but also Jason and the Argonauts. Dramas epic and personal are juxtaposed in repetitive, overlapping monologues and dialogues which serve more as mantras than as the engine of either narrative or characterisation. Müller seeks applicability in these stories to the everyday dramas of mortal lives, extracting only the human bile from moments of dramatic conflict in the mythic stories. The text leaves the provision of context to the audience, who are invited to assemble their understanding of the action from their own life experience of bitter relationships and the half-explained myths the stories are based on.

Placing the audience is actually crucial to the production. The spectator stumbles into the theatre in the dark, and finds Deirdre Roycroft and Karl Quinn in situ in a dark, vaguely institutional nowhere-space with seating on three sides but separated from the performance space by a large patch of empty floor. Roycroft is dishevelled and dirty, clad in a sweaty t-shirt and sitting on a mattress with tossed bedclothes. Quinn is in the guise of a nurse and watches an unseen TV sit-com from time to time, the laugh-track of



Deirdre Roycroft in **Waterfront Wasteland/
Medeamaterials/Landscape With Argonauts**

which provides frequent punctuation to both empty spaces and passages of dialogue. Gradually Roycroft's movements trigger rudimentary story action as Quinn and Roycroft repeat snatches of clinical monologues describing the mental state of Medea in her incarceration.

The second movement follows as Medea contemplates her inner and outer self, spitting bile at soon-to-be-re-married former husband Jason (Kevin Morley). Medea's fury takes in the audience itself here "My drama is a comedy: are you laughing?" she asks. A final section features lime-blanching Barry McGovern seated in a confined space revealed behind the plastic sheet which forms the walls of the set reciting an account of the journey of The Argo through a postmodern landscape of cinematic and other cultural imagery.

The relationship to myth is not entirely incidental, but it is far from immediate. Muller finds in these myths merely a jump-off point for personal angst with an underlying social current. The production is a drama of movement across empty spaces, wastelands of the mind and body, and requires good physical performance as well as clear direction to maintain connection with the audience and to avoid dissolving into pure abstraction.

Jason Byrne directs with precision, emphasising the meaning of movement and the place of the body in space. Roycroft has delivered some powerful performances in the past, and here faces an extreme test of her skills. Every time she stirs, there is drama. When dialogue does come, she speaks complex quasi-classical script with laudably precise diction while employing the relatively contemporary physical gestures of a woman on the edge. She also speaks within a fairly limited range of vocal modulation, producing a Beckettian hypnotic rhythm. The characterisation nonetheless requires a more visceral emotional engagement than the heady mind-games of Beckett, and Roycroft plumbs visibly painful depths of physical intensity to bring the audience inside her character's head.

Quinn and Morley play relatively small roles by comparison, but McGovern brings stability and gravitas to the last section of the triptych, which almost brings the audience back to some sense of spectatorial pleasure amid the stern challenge presented by this intentionally unpleasurable production.

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

THE YOKOHAMA DELEGATION

by Tom Swift

The Performance Corporation
Kilkenny Arts Festival
13-21 August, reviewed 17 August
BY LISA FITZPATRICK

FOLLOWING THEIR EXCELLENT PROMENADE production of Tom Swift's *Dr. Ledbetter's Experiment* at last year's Kilkenny Arts Festival, The Performance Corporation have returned with another imaginative show by Swift: *The Yokohama Delegation*, set in an office block. Directed by Jo Mangan, the play is set in a future where everyone drives a pod and traffic backs up on the M500. The play satirises contemporary Irish society's obsession with material wealth and its belief that consumer products will transform your life. The plot tells of Jason Jason's attempt

Emma McIvor and Stephen Swift in
The Yokohama Delegation

to steal the corporation's revolutionary Golden Fleece Personality Repair Patch, which is designed to overcome an individual's flaws and insecurities, making them a "success". As the Yokohama Corporation's marketing video explains, "this means just three things: Money, Sex, Power."

Set in the offices of the Corporation, the performance unfolds in a number of different spaces over two floors. The audience enters through the foyer, as a camera over the entrance films and projects their images onto the stair-well. A video advertisement for the Yokohama Corporation's products plays on a loop on a flat screen fixed to one wall, and a futuristic machine in the corner has a sign that reads "Place your hand here". When audience members

do so, they are given their own personal "success rating" by a disem-



COLIN HOGANT

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bodied voice. The deliberately irritating, excessively upbeat advertisement continues until the abrupt arrival of a young man, Jason Jason, who runs down the stairs. He pauses to quarrel nastily with a Medea, his former lover, whom he rejects; and as he turns from her she shoots him. A voice-over identifying itself as Zeus announces that "All living mortals climb the stairs to level 1. All non-living mortals proceed to basement 9 for check in." The announcement continues as the spectators climb the stairs, directed by extras in white decontamination suits, to enter the offices of the Yokohama Corporation.

The action traces the characters' journeys to this point, creating a circular narrative that comments upon the insatiable and circular nature of consumer desire. Thus the numerous comic turns include the two bureaucratic security guards who block Jason's access unless he can produce either form A or form B. But, as one of them explains to him: "You won't get a form for B unless you have A, and you won't get A, unless you already have B." The main narrative, recounted using dance sequences and music as well as dialogue, is that Jason Jason, aka Diomedes, returns undercover to the Yokohama Corporation to foil a dastardly plan to steal the Golden Fleece and transfer its production from Hibernia to Asia Minor. Production costs in Asia Minor are lower, and the wicked Miss Harpie plans to maximise profits, a story-line that echoes contemporary fears about globalisation. Ultimately, with the help of Dr. Phineus, the plan is foiled. The play ends, as it begins, with Jason's rejection of Medea.

With the female characters dressed in bright mini-dresses with matching shoes and wigs, and heavily made-up eyes, the receptionists in oval hanging plastic

chairs, and the workers seated at a low table at tiny computer screens, the set design is reminiscent of television science-fiction from the 1960s. The visual high camp is mirrored in the exaggerated performance style, plot, and characterisation, and Frank Mackey plays two roles in drag. The production team includes set designer Sinead O'Hanlon, costume designer Suzanne Keogh, lighting designer Kevin Treacy and original music by Sam Jackson. Sound design is by Paul Brennan and make-up by Lorraine McCrann. This design team clearly worked closely together to achieve a glossy and coherent visual style, that might be described as retro futurism meets James Bond on Mount Olympus. The performers, who are excellent, include Lisa Lambe, Carrie Crowley, Emma McIvor, Frank Mackey, Melanie Nezereau, Rory Nolan, Stephen Swift and Aidan Turner, and choreography is by Nanette Kincaid.

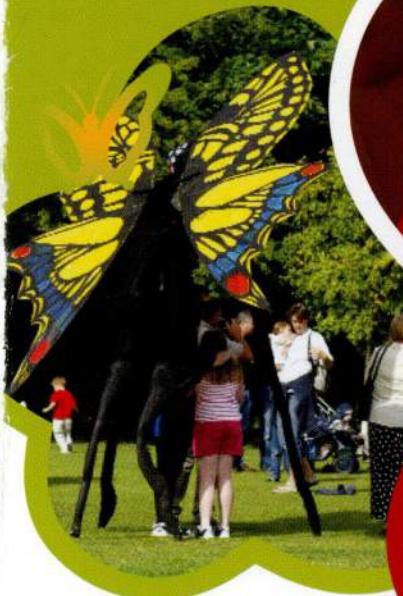
Overall, *The Yokohama Delegation* is a fun, light-hearted show that the audience clearly enjoyed. Although the simplicity of this company's *Dr. Ledbetter's Experiment* made for a stronger play and performance, there is a purpose for the outrageously overblown and convoluted plot in this latest production. Its complexities, further heightened by double-casting, characters in disguise, and intricate classical references, are part of the show's visual style and its fast-paced, energetic action. It bombards the spectators with its excess, simulating the excess of contemporary Irish society. Ultimately, the production shows that the Performance Corporation is a company that consistently produces stylistically unified and coherent performances and imaginative, clever work.



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