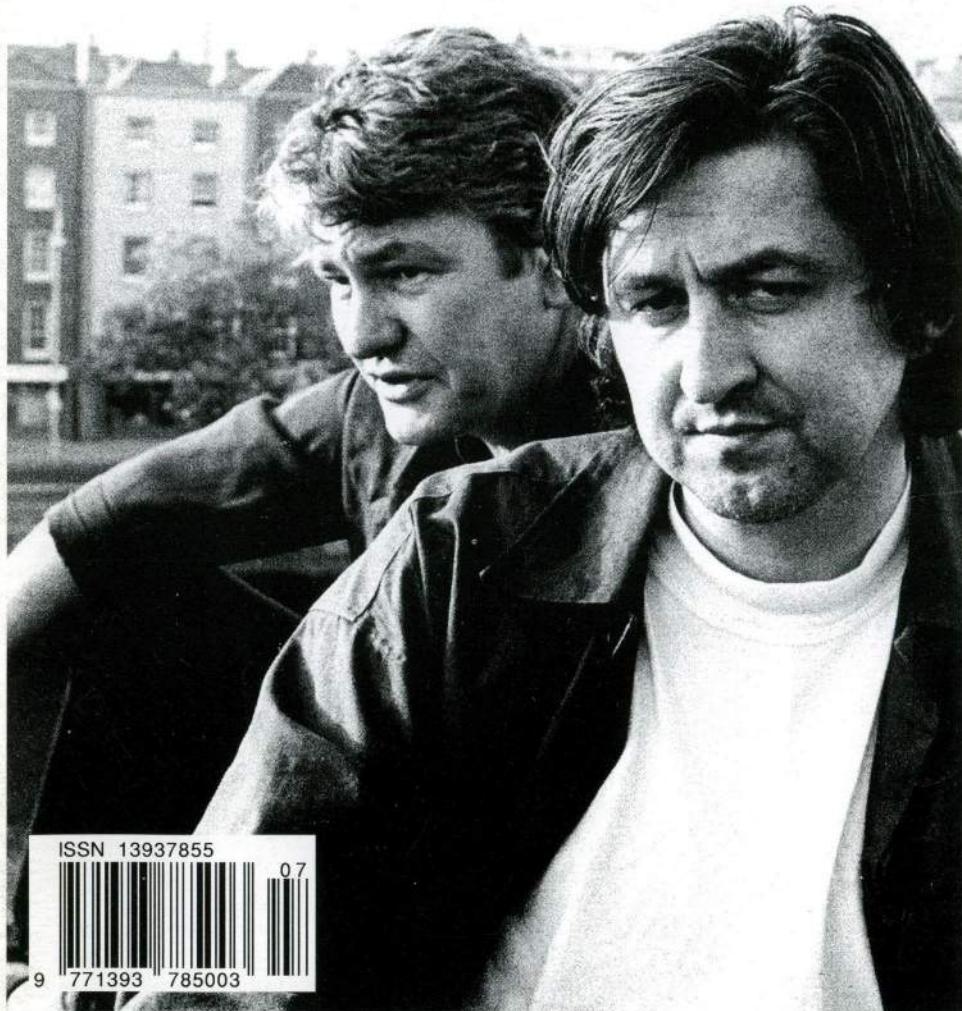


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**ON THE COVER:** Páraic Breathnach (left) and Fiach MacConghail; photo by Tom Lawlor.

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# Losing the Plot

IT'S BEEN AN EXTRAORDINARILY BUSY and surprisingly diverse few months for Irish theatre. Here everyone was predicting that all we'd have on our plates this spring and early summer would be full helpings of Friel, and while the Festival of his work has dominated the scene, we've also had exciting new work and revivals from nearly all the major independents, from Barabbas to Bedrock to Corcadorka to Corn Exchange to Druid to Operating Theatre to Red Kettle to Rough Magic. We've had new and modern European and British plays in Irish premieres; unprecedented combinations of physical theatre playing with new and classic texts; we've had cutting-edge multimedia; we've had collaborations over the span of centuries; we've had fresh takes on canonical chestnuts; we've had performers lying on their backs and talking out their arses.

In short, audiences have had a lot to chew on these past months; but our gripe at *irish theatre magazine* is that companies, building-based as well as independent, aren't getting nearly enough back from the people whose job it is to respond to their work in print — the mainstream critics. Adventurous work is being met with critical responses that range from the uncomprehending and unimaginative to the downright hostile, and traditional work too often gets an easy ride.

We are not arguing that every production should be reviewed positively, quite the contrary. The issue is not whether reviews are favourable or unfavourable but whether they are written in a style and form that indicates that the critic has the capacity to dispassionately view a work of theatre and then passionately engage with it in written form, through words that communicate to the reader what was seen on the night and

what the work in question has to say to the society around it and to the canon of theatre to which it contributes. Again and again we see reviews from critics who singularly fail to take on board the artistic project undertaken and which reflect an ill-argued individual opinion rather than a clearly articulated assessment.

Irish theatre is reaching new heights of professionalism and diversity, and yet the efforts of the sector are not being matched by an equivalent level of professionalism and expertise from critics, who have an enormous amount of power over how work will be assessed and remembered — not only by audiences but indeed by funding bodies who look to the newspapers as a public record of the success or failure of artistic endeavours. Irish theatre has many new stories to tell, but has Irish criticism lost the plot?

As our response to the vibrancy of the spring season, we've devoted the bulk of this issue of *itm* to reviews. We would take rather the opposite position to the critic who opined that there's nothing left to say about *Dancing at Lughnasa* other than that it's "lovely"; Declan Kiberd's extended re-assessment of Friel's landmark play, on the occasion of its first Abbey revival, leads off our review section on page 41.

**UPCOMING IN *itm*:** We're starting to think millennially (who isn't?); our year-end issue will attempt a comprehensive summing up of the state of Irish theatre as the nines turn to zeroes — from programming to personnel to venues to festivals to funding. If you've ideas towards such an assessment, we encourage you to badger us with e-mails, calls, and letters.

**R**UMOURS ARE STARTING TO CIRCULATE OF A NEW DIRECTOR training initiative between the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College and the Gate Theatre — which would certainly fill a gaping hole on the training scene here. No one's saying anything specific yet, but look for an official announcement around Dublin Theatre Festival time.

#### DUELING JUNOS:

Two of our most exciting directors will be opening productions of *Juno and the Paycock* in two different cities on the same day — 9 September. Noel Pearson is producing a **Garry Hynes**-directed *Juno*, with Michael Gambon as the Captain, Marie Mullen as Juno, and John Kavanagh as Joxer at Dublin's Gaiety; Pearson says that if all goes well, he's looking to transfer the production to Broadway. And in London, **John Crowley** will direct Colm Meaney as the Captain, Derbhla Molloy as Juno, and English actor Ron Cook as Joxer at the Donmar Warehouse. (Both Hynes and Crowley contributed to our article on student theatre in this issue, which begins on page 15.)

**NATIONAL THEATRE NEWS:** No, the Abbey haven't appointed a new artistic director yet. We hear the list is down to four candidates: Two Irish and two from Britain. They say they're still on schedule and that the announcement will be made by the end of summer . . . Now that we're all Frieled out, the next play in the Peacock will be a premiere from **Donal O'Kelly**, *Judas of the Gallarus*, directed by **Jason Byrne**, running 13 August - 18 September;



CROWLEY, ALAN O'CONNOR

**TWO TAKES ON A CLASSIC:** Garry Hynes and John Crowley

the cast includes Karen Ardiff, Steve Blount, Denis Conway, Paschal Friel, and Lalor Roddy. **Bernard Farrell**'s *Kevin's Bed* makes a final victory lap through the mainstage, from 17 August - 25 September. The Abbey will present two world premieres during the Dublin Theatre Festival: **Frank McGuinness**' *Dolly West's Kitchen*, directed by **Patrick Mason** on the mainstage; and Brian Brady will direct **Chris Lee**'s *The Map Maker's Sorrow* in the Peacock. Lee was recently named the Anglo Irish Bank writer-in-association at the Abbey, and was co-winner of this year's Stewart Parker award for his first Peacock effort, *The Electrocution of Children*, along with **Joseph Crimmins**, whose play *Second Hand Thunder* was produced last year by Belfast's Tinderbox. After the Festival, the Abbey are producing a new Irish-language play by **Tom Mac Intyre**, *Cúirt An Mheán Óiche*, which

will premiere in Galway and tour the country before ending up in the Peacock.

#### AND AT THE OTHER END OF O'CONNELL STREET:

The Gate's Dublin Theatre Festival show this year will be a **Bernard Farrell** world premiere, *The Spirit of Annie Ross*, running from 30 September. The Gate are also re-mounting their comprehensive Beckett Festival at London's Barbican Centre from 1 - 18 September. The Festival comprises all 19 of Beckett's plays plus an extensive education programme and complementary seasons in the Barbican's cinemas and art galleries.

**RETREAT OF THE HERO:** The Dublin Theatre Festival are remaining tight-lipped with any official announcements of their international programme, but one theme that's certain to run throughout the autumn is a salute to Festival Director **Tony O'Dalaigh**, who's hanging up his hat after 10 years at its helm. We all must join together in urging Tony not to give up his theatregoing habits so as not to send attendance figures plummeting island-wide; is there anyone who's been as committed to the sector as he?

**BUSY FAY:** Bedrock's A.D. **Jimmy Fay** will have productions running in both the Dublin Fringe and the main Dublin Theatre Festival this year. For the Fringe, Bedrock are continuing their inquiry into the oeuvre of Bernard Marie-Koltès with a staging of his solo play *Night Just Before the Forest* in project @ the mint from 11 - 16 October with Shane Hagen performing; and Fay's also directing Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* for Bickerstaffe (a rather apt

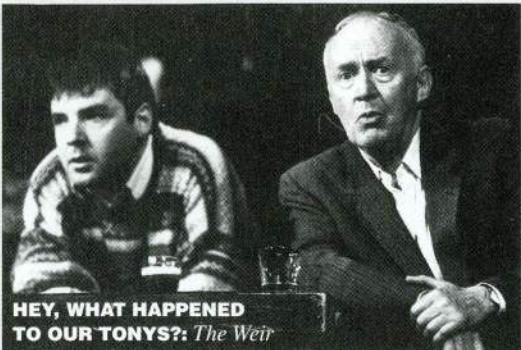
choice for the company behind the Cat Laughs, eh?) which will play two weeks in Andrews Lane during the Festival and then transfer to Kilkenny.

**UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS:** Meridian's next show is *The Mistress of Silence*, adapted by Johnny Hanrahan and John Browne from a 1994 novel by Belgian writer Jacqueline Harpman. It's a solo piece, performed by Jayne Snow, that will premiere in Cork's Everyman Palace in early

#### *The Scoop on the Fringe*

DUBLIN FRINGE DIRECTOR ALI CURRAN tells us that this year's Festival Club will be at Vicar Street and will feature, in addition to the traditional late-night pinting, live nightly entertainment that will require "participation from the theatre community." Start practicing your lap dancing now . . . Film will be a new feature of this year's Fringe; Curran is programming a small season of previously unseen Irish shorts as well as highlights of American underground cinema . . . The Fringe will also feature an expansive series of workshops for local practitioners in a variety of forms, led by visiting and Irish companies including *Told by an Idiot* and *Blue Raincoats*. Full details about the workshops including sign-up information will be available from early September.

September and then visit the Belltable, Limerick; the Dublin Fringe; and the Watergate, Kilkenny . . . Calypso Productions' latest is *Cell* by Paula Meehan, directed by Garrett Keogh. It runs 6 - 25 September at the City Arts Centre and then tours nationally through 16 October . . . Island Theatre Company are premiering Mike Finn's *Pigtown*, a promenade play celebrating 100 years of Limerick history, from 13 July - 4 August in the Belltable . . . Island are also co-pro-



**HEY, WHAT HAPPENED  
TO OUR TONY'S?: *The Weir***

**OUR BOYS ON BROADWAY:** Last year all anyone was talking about in New York was Irish theatre; this year, it seemed like no one really wanted to know. The Broadway transfer of Druid's *The Lonesome West* was nominated for four Tony awards but won none and closed soon after; *The Weir* didn't even get a look in at the Tony nominations. What happened? "I think most people found *The Lonesome West*

too similar in style and tone to *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*," explains Charles Isherwood, *Variety*'s New-York based chief theatre critic. "Also it opened at the tail end of what was a very busy season for straight plays and it sort of got lost in the shuffle." And the good news: Isherwood reports that, despite its awards shutout, *The Weir* is doing strong box office business this summer, outselling even *Closer*, the most hyped late-season

straight play. "*The Weir* is proving very popular with the traditional Broadway theatregoer. Its success is really overturning the conventional wisdom that you have to win Tonys to last on Broadway. It's even more surprising because *The Weir*'s reviews were quite mixed, weaker than *The Lonesome West*'s, for example." So keep those pints flowing, lads; we're rooting for you to run longer than *Cats*.

ducting, along with Yew Tree Theatre Company (note their newly revised name), *Alone It Stands*, written and directed by John Breen, about Munster's victory over the All-Blacks in 1978 in Thomond Park in Limerick. It'll tour from 20 September - 25 October, premiering at the Westport Arts Festival and then touring to rugby clubs as well as traditional arts centres . . . Kabosh's next production is an all-male *Romeo and Juliet* played as a five-hander, directed by Karl Wallace; it'll premiere from 27 September - 3 October in the Dublin Fringe and then play from 1 - 6 November in the Old Museum arts centre as part of the Belfast Festival . . . The Lyric have announced their programming through the end of the year: They're hosting Barabbas' *The Whiteheaded Boy* from 9 - 14 August prior to its American tour;

Frank McGuinness' *Carthaginians*, directed by Simon Magill, plays from 20 August - 18 September; Andrew Hinds directs Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, plays from 24 September - 23 October; and their Belfast Festival production will be *Waiting for Godot* directed by Gabor Tompa, playing 29 October - 27 November . . . Red Kettle's revival of Bernard Farrell's *Happy Birthday Dear Alice*, directed by Paul Brennan and featuring Anna Manahan, opens 12 July at the Theatre Royal, Waterford and tours to Kilkenny, Cork, Portlaoise, Mullingar, and Galway through 14 August . . . The Grand Opera House, Belfast are hosting the Royal National Theatre's production of Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, featuring Juliet Stevenson, from 28 September - 2 October . . . Storytellers' next produc-

tion is a restaging of Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's adaptation of ***Emma***, directed by Robin Midgely. It opens 15 September in the Town Hall, Sligo, and tours to Dublin, Cork, Longford, and Limerick. The cast includes Michael James Ford, Sarah Jane Drummy, Patrick Lennox, and Laura Hughes . . . Second Age's autumn production will be ***Hamlet***, directed by Joyce Branagh (yes, sister of . . .). It plays five weeks in Dublin's Tivoli starting 1 November, and then plays the Cork Opera House between 6 - 11 November. The cast includes Jennifer Barry, Michael Grennell, Angela Harding, Robert Price, and Anthony Kernan — an Irishman who's been living in London of late — in the title role. As it's Second Age's tenth anniversary production, they're preparing a photo-packed "mega-programme" to accompany the production . . .

**MARK YOUR DIARIES:** The **Belfast Festival at Queen's** runs from Friday 29 October - Sunday 14 November this year; among its international programme will be two productions from The Small Theatre of Vilnius: Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (5-6 November in the BT Studio) and and

Mikhail Lermontov's *Masquerade* (1-3 November in the Waterfront Hall). The BFQ's full schedule will be announced in mid-September.

**FESTIVAL ADDICTS UNITE:** What to do with those pesky few weeks in between the Dublin and Belfast Festivals? **The Granary Theatre**, Cork's Manager Ali Robertson is providing a solution this year with an as-yet-unnamed festival from 18 - 31 October. Productions will include Corcadorka's ***Misterman*** (18-20 Oct.); ***Black Box*** by the Coventry-based Talking Birds (21-23 Oct.); Kabosh's ***Romeo and Juliet*** (25-27 Oct.); ***Love's Labours Lost*** by Cork's Klassik Attack (28-30 Oct.); and ***Agamemnon*** by York's Actors of Dionysus (31 Oct.). All the participating companies as well as **KAOS UK** will lead workshops during the Festival.

**MCDONAGH DOWN UNDER:** Australia's Sydney Theatre Company, in association with Druid and the Royal Court, are producing ***The Beauty Queen of Leenane*** this summer. Garry Hynes directs an all-Australian cast; the production opened 21 June.

## this issue's featured contributors



With his article on Irish theatre in Edinburgh and Glasgow (page 33), **MARK FISHER** officially dons his mantle as Our Man in Scotland. Originally from England, Mark has lived in Edinburgh for 12 years and is the lead theatre critic of *The Herald*. From 1992-95 he was the editor of *Theatre Scotland* (R.I.P.), whose title he freely admits to cribbing from this magazine's predecessor, *Theatre Ireland*.

This issue's cover was photographed by **TOM LAWLOR**, one of Ireland's most acclaimed lensmen. His books of photography include *Dublin One in a Thousand*, which marked the city's millennium in 1982; *A Day in the Life of Ireland*; and *Tom Lawlor at the Gate*.



# THE TRI



PASTORAL, ANGELA CAMPBELL; WITH MACCONNELL, TOM LAWLER



# CKSTER

**PÁRAIC BREATHNACH** is a man of many artistic identities — a founder member of Macnas, a former Arts Councillor, an advisor and facilitator of numerous community arts projects, and now the driving force behind a new performance company, Fir Clis, whose first work Site premieres at this year's Galway Arts Festival. **FIACH MACCONGHAIL**, outgoing artistic director of Dublin's Project Arts Centre, met Breathnach this June to discuss this latest turn in his career path.

**FIACH MACCONGHAIL:** What was the genesis of *Site*?

PÁRAIC BREATHNACH: A couple of us worked on the production end of Cirque Plume in Dublin two [Dublin Theatre] Festivals ago, and we really enjoyed working with them. We started thinking that circus is part of the French national psyche, and we were trying to think of what would be part of the Irish psyche. . . (both laugh) . . . so we came up with the notion of a circus site — a circus act based on a building site. Given the present climate of property development and speculation and gazumping, as we worked on it, it started getting more focussed in on the last two years. Now it's purely about a building site, although there is a circus element, and a slapstick element to it; it does have a plot and a pathos as well.



**MAN OF MANY FACES:**

(opposite page, top)  
Breathnach in Macnas'  
Treasure Island (he's the  
one at far left); in a more  
pastoral setting, opposite  
below; and above with  
Fiach MacConaghail.

When you say you're working on this — is it that you work on the concept, or the structure, or the writing . . .

It's very convoluted. I have two main writing collaborators on this project, Jane Talbot and Owen MacCarthaigh, and it's about phone calls . . . It's about maybe you'd be in a hotel somewhere and you come up with an idea and you fax it off to your collaborators and next week you get a fax back saying that's a great idea, or that's a heap of shite, and then

you build up. Eventually we all get together and take all the notes and all the faxes and all the plotlines and maybe a weekend to talk it through. In this case the result of all that work was a rehearsal script which was only five pages.

### **And there's a journey in that five pages, a plotline?**

There's a finished, wrapped-up, rounded-off story. There would be some character notes in it, but I wouldn't know who the characters are. I would describe them verbally to the actor or director rather than write them down, and we would discuss them in rehearsal — what everyone wants to bring in.

### **Are you the director in *Site*?**

No, I'm an actor as well as one of the writers.

**Teasing out this collaboration . . . just talk to me in terms of rehearsals. You've finished a week's rehearsals. You are implicated in it because you are an actor. Are you solely an actor in this continuing collaboration, or are you part of the author scheme as well during the rehearsals?**

Well, once it hits the rehearsal floor it's open to all the rest of the cast to contribute to or take from. We'd throw it open to the floor, and people want different rules and different scenarios. It's nothing like I imagined now after a week's rehearsal, but it's brilliant. It's better than anything I ever imagined. So the script worked as a baseline. If we're stuck we'd use the script. If we come up with anything better, the script goes out the window.

### **Where will this work be seen?**

It's an outdoor show during the Galway Arts Festival and we'll be touring it over the next couple of years. It's not designed strictly as an outdoor show, but we want to do it outdoors in Galway because of the pressure on venues there; and because we felt that we would be much freer with what we want to do. And we're also trying to position the show away from a theatre audience. Even though it is a theatre project we are avoiding calling ourselves a theatre company. We are avoiding using the word theatre at all actually.

### **Why is that, Páraic?**

Theatre turns people off. Ordinary people down the country, my brothers and sisters, don't go to theatre. They'd go to films.

### **Why is that?**

There's a load of bullshit attached to it. Because of the nature of lyrical theatre, of language-based theatre, you need the code words, you need the devices. Unless you have the language of theatre, unless you are brought up in the conventions of theatre, you're alienated from it, and Irish theatre at the moment is getting more lyric-based.

**Although I come from a completely different background from you, Páraic, I would certainly at times worry about what I would call the tyranny of the text . . . in a way I can see what you're trying to get at with *Site* is that writing or describing a scene is not just about dialogue — it's more to do with a mood.**

It's about a mood, it's about a character, it's about a clue and sometimes you just put in a wee story that you have. The end of the show is based on a story I heard in Hamburg once . . .

### **Would you tell it?**

I was in Hamburg one time, and I met these German guys who said "Are you Irish?" I said "Yeah." "You're crazy," they said. I said "Why?" They said a gang of Irish men had done up this mill, the Spizenhalle, down at the docks. A big empty warehouse — they'd put in six floors of timber, pitch pine pillars — the whole lot. But the German contractor didn't pay them, so the guys just got chainsaws and went in there and cut the top floor, dropped one down on top of the other all the way down to the bottom floor. The Germans were saying "It's

crazy. They make the work and they cut it all down." I'm saying "The motherfucker didn't pay them, did he?" It's perfectly understandable within an Irish imagination to do that, but the Germans couldn't understand it at all. The end of the show is based on that story — the workers were ripped off, and they took the only action they could take, even if it meant destroying their own art, all the beauty of the work they had created.



**ANYONE FOR TEA?**: The company of *Fir Clis*' Site have a cuppa.

#### **What does the name *Fir Clis* mean?**

Literally translated it means "men of tricks" or "clever men" although "fir" would be a generic term for humankind in this context, rather than a sexist term only for men.

**The process of making *Site* is really interesting to me, but it seems to be similar to the practice you have done in the past. So why *Fir Clis*? Have you set up *Fir Clis* for *Site*, do you want to continue on with other work, or is it just a term of convenience for the moment?**

It's a deliberate action to redefine how I work. With Macnas, I spent a lot of my time building up the organisation and the infrastructure and the administration and the premises and the production facilities

and the tools and all the resources. That took up a lot of my energy. I felt that I don't want to be doing that any more. If you look around Ireland at the moment there's more administrators than artists involved and that's distressing, when I see the talent around me not being able to work full time. There's a show here, a show there — they're not benefiting from this Celtic Tiger economic boom stuff.

#### **That hurts you.**

Yes. It annoys me hole . . . When I was looking for models for *Fir Clis*, the only model that I could think of that would work would be the flexible, *meitheal* model. We all come together and do the job. When the job is done we shake hands and we wait till the next job. Get this year's hay in and we don't have to worry about that till next year again.

#### **In fairness, Páraic, you've used that model before.**

Not really. We hadn't that model before, in the sense that in Macnas the [theatre] ensemble were a section of a big community-based organisation. They were a wing of a huge operation. Whereas with this production, the motto on the rehearsal room wall is "This is it, there's nobody out there." (both laugh) There's no administration . . .

**The notion of setting up another company, beginning from scratch again — does it bother your arse to have to fill out application forms and do fundraising?**

Ah, that's just like tying your shoelaces. Get the printer working, knock out a few letters, get the cheques, and away she goes . . . the biggest problem with this show is, of course, the money. I haven't had any success in getting funding for it in terms of the Arts Council or any other foundations. I've been rejected outright.

Which in some ways, having been on the Arts Council, I could say I understand. You know the budget didn't go up great this year and it couldn't extend to cover a show down the West that may or may not happen or whose leaders may or may not be worthy of support. I can understand that. It still amazes me though, that having been on the Arts Council and knowing how well it works, if I couldn't get a successful application ready, who could? (laughs) I was a bit disappointed in that respect.

. . . Because there are so many new venues and so many new building projects, 90% of the Arts Council budget is spoken for before it even gets to the table, because they have to support these institutions. . . [But] I think the theatre fraternity can be their own worst enemy in terms of how they present themselves — in how closed it is and how elitist it is. Also, the hierarchical structure for the management of a theatre project is obsolete. When you look at a community project — the notions of democracy, respect that are involved — those things don't seem to cut it at all in theatre. There's no democracy, there's very little inclusion, and indeed sometimes there's very little respect either.

**I would say that the traditional method of running a theatre company does, or can, preclude democratic decisions.**

It does. By its nature it's archaic. I'm having a really big problem with the word theatre at the moment. Which is really unfortunate because I love theatre, since the first time I saw a show when I was six years of age I've been fascinated by theatre and I've seen theatre all over the world.

**Is it the word theatre? I travel quite a lot in Europe, and I talk to my colleagues in Britain, and the word theatre is becoming an anachronistic term. The word that I love using, which others tease me about**

**being slightly pretentious, is the word performance — that can include dance, theatre, drama, text-based, non text-based. . .**

Yes — they cross over. Whether people care to admit it or not, theatre is on its last legs. Even though there's a rash of new writers and new writing, theatre audiences aren't going up in any significant terms. In this Tiger economy that we're supposed to be in, the services industries and the entertainment industry segment are the biggest growth area. Why isn't the theatre section picking up on it? Why aren't there more people going to theatres? We are building theatres all over the country, but for what product, for what audience?

**I was reading, of all people, David Mamet over the last couple of days, and he said "Theatre is always dying." It's always dying because it's there to reflect society, right, and society changes all the time. We have this so-called Celtic Tiger scenario at the moment. The problem is then that theatre has to reflect that — or rather has to offer other alternatives, or has to forecast. When I see theatre dying it's because it's not fulfilling that idea of providing some kind of subconscious answer. I think younger writers like Mark O'Rowe are a way of theatre surviving. At times within organisations that stultifies. I think that the question is more fundamental than that. It's like road bowling in Armagh and Cork that's still around because of a couple of thicks say we'll do it every Sunday anyway. In some ways theatre is hanging out because of a couple of thicks who say we'll do it anyway. Whereas what's the relevance of theatre to the vast majority in this country? None.**

**Paul Mercier's answer to that question is it's relevant if you see yourself on stage,**

### **or your community on stage.**

Yeah . . . I like all of Paul's work. I was working in the SFX Centre at the time that [Mercier's company] Passion Machine did the trilogy of *Wasters*, *Spacers* and *Studs* there. I remember the community education programme . . . it was wonderful — the amount of people that came in to see that show from the local area, from

stimulating. I find going to theatre stimulating, when it's good. I don't cry in cinemas or at television, but I cry in theatre all the time. It's an experience you'd like to share with other people, but I cannot love something that excludes most of the people I know . . . most playwrights, most theatre people write and act and perform and direct for themselves; they don't actu-



ALAN O'CONNOR

**MACNAS MADNESS:** Midie Corcoran in *Macnas' Sweeny*.

the flats, and the way the energy on stage grew from the audience . . . but that was, as you say, seeing yourself on stage.

**What would happen if something like *Studs* or *Wasters* was placed within somewhere like the Abbey or the Gate? Is that what's going to reawaken these institutions?**

I don't think so. Theatre as in the Gate or the Abbey is an intellectual pursuit of those who like to be challenged in that way, intellectually. It's like Ibsen. Ibsen is a fantastic playwright, but you'd want to keep away. There's no car chases or nothing to keep you going. I find car chases

ally think an awful lot about the end product that the audience are going to see.

**In a way I would argue that that might not necessarily be the playwright's role.**

The role of the artist in society is to be a catalyst for change. The artist has a political role. Very few artists seem to take on that notion . . . [they don't seem to ask themselves] what am I doing here, is my art relevant?

**Was that one of the concrete directions when Macnas was founded?**

Very much so.

**I want to clarify rather than mythologise Macnas, so can we go back to its history?**

I used to work with another company before Macnas, called Situations Vacant, in the early '80s in Galway. We did a lot of street work when nobody else was doing street work . . . We did shows about race and about atomic weapons, about clean water, clean air . . . the usual young person's idealistic notions of how you might change the world by doing a show in Eyre Square on a Saturday — but it was good craic. That came to a bad end in that we did a show that was really offensive and we were slated for it, and we had to go to ground.

**So you re-emerged then . . .**

Then we started Macnas. There was a couple of us working together on community action things. When Reagan came to Galway we made a statue of him in the shape of the Statue of Liberty with a missile in his hand . . . and then we went on to do other bits and pieces; then the ACE Fund was announced and we wrote them a cheeky letter.

**Tell me about the ACE Fund.**

Arts Community Education was set up in conjunction with the Arts Council and the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1985 or '86 to develop models of good practice in community arts education. It funded four or five play projects, and Macnas were one of them. We were a rural-based community arts organisation. Our first big show was *The Game* which was a 15-minute football match put on in McHale Stadium in Castlebar before the Connaught final with the blessing of the GAA. We did a choreographed football match highlighting all the great episodes of GAA down the years and the audience loved it. It was brilliant. You can't imagine the buzz of fielding the high ball and getting threat-

ened by the corner forward and everybody laughing their asses off, 30,000 people . . . It was fabulous. Then we did our street parades and I always wanted to develop a theatre style from street work.

**So activism informs a model of theatre for you?**

I was very involved in politics at the time and used theatre in protest a lot in my college days and subsequently. I wanted to develop a new style of theatre, and I wanted to talk about things that meant something to us, which were stories that we grew up with in the West of Ireland,



AENGUS MCMAHON

**SHAZAM!**: Macnas' Balor

the mythology, and try and make it somehow relevant to us . . .

**And theatre was only one aspect of Macnas?**

Still is. The centre of the Macnas thinking all along was the community — the idea

of a group of people coming together, being in control of their own destiny, linking in very closely with their community and helping to activate and motivate that community in whatever way they want through an arts expression.

**You were artistic director of Macnas?**  
I never was really.

**Ah now, go on.**

No, I never really was. I never had that title although I would be referred to as that. Macnas was a collective.

**In terms of Macnas — and this is not a leading question — did you achieve the intention of the company? Was there a point in the '80s or '90s where you said that "It's clear to us that what we're doing is what we set out to do"?**

1993. We were kicking in 1993. We were doing a project involving five different community groups from all over the country, and the five of them together did five parades. We did a parade trying to incorporate East Belfast into a community network that year . . . we were just unstoppable, we could just do no wrong . . . I don't know how that changed. I think that it was just too much. I think we just burned ourselves out again. Macnas had this habit of burning itself out on a regular basis.

**I don't think it's just a Macnas habit. It seems to be a common burnout factor amongst arts organisations.**

They get stale and they get boring. People need to move on and it's very hard to walk away.

**Did you move on or were you pushed, or what's the story?**

I walked . . . Well, I didn't; I gave notice that I was leaving in a year and I spent that year

trying to restructure the company to survive without me, and for it not to be dependent on my energy to rock. In the late '80s and early '90s a lot of the responsibility for running the company came to me.

**Was that part of your personality? I mean I get accused of that here as well. Personality has its advantages and disadvantages.**

We had no option. The core group was dissipated and I had to restructure and regroup, and as a result of that I became very central to the organisation. I didn't like that because there was too much stress and it made the last year in Macnas very very difficult. In some ways, in hindsight, I often think it might have been a mistake to leave Macnas at that time because I don't think they were actually quite ready. I think I may have rushed it a bit, but I couldn't stand another year of it. I'd been there 11 years.

**Another difficult decision you made — or was it difficult? — was accepting the appointment to the Arts Council . . . you were there for there for . . .**

Three and a half years.

**How did you find that? You had been associated with policies of opposition perhaps; you had been associated with obviously a lot of very very good work, and then being in the heart of the only policy maker . . .**

It was an exciting time. It was a great time to be there, while Ciarán Benson was Chairman of the Council. We were doing things — we were rocking. My main quibble with the Arts Council when I was in Macnas was that they never saw a show in the West. Nobody west of the Shannon was ever on the Arts Council . . . I had two things that I wanted to do when I was on the Arts Council. One was give representation to the Connaught region. I

took it as a political point, which it is . . . The other thing I wanted to do was that at the time the community arts agenda needed to be dealt with, and that's probably my greatest disappointment with the Arts Council. Whereas we made some great progress in the area of arts and disability in terms of policy, I didn't make the impact I wanted to make in terms of policy for community arts. I couldn't believe how slow it goes and how loaded it is against you. I tried not to become the one lunatic on the left all the time — you know, to integrate in some way, to contribute to the solution of the problems. I learned a lot. I was very naive when I joined the Arts Council.

**Were you?**

Yeah, I didn't know how these things worked at all.

**Jesus, what hope do we have? (laughter)**

I was naive in terms of how policy is made, how funding objectives are met. It gave me a good insight into how government works.

**Do you see now, being back on the outside, that there is a way that the arts community, the arts sector can influence policy? Is it through somewhere like the Arts Council or is it through good old-fashioned lobbying of TDs and ministers?**

I think that the answer to any problem is organisation. If you have a labour dispute, if you've got a problem with the bosses, you've got to get organised. Unfortunately, the theatre sector are not well organised in the sense that they're all in competition with each other for shows, box office, resources and funding. And they see each other in terms of that competition.

**They do, yeah.**

Also they shoot themselves in the foot so often — they're all trying to throw the head all the time. You go to one of those theatre meetings, they're throwing the head and doing big grandiose speeches. That's ridiculous. Let's get organised — that's the only way to solve the problem, networking, people getting organised, making up your mind, agreeing to a common position and then hammering home that position. When that one is done, get another one and hammer that home. Also the remit of the Arts Council should be changed. I don't know if it's a good thing that the cultural policy of a country should be dictated by the friends and cronies of politicians. I'm one of them myself but I don't think it's a good idea . . . I think that arts funding has to be looked at. Arts funding should not be the remit of 17 people in Merrion Square.

**So, finally . . . you're 20 years in this business . . .**

At least.

**I'm trying to get a descriptive term for you, and I'm wanting to answer that question by asking you what you think your highlights over the last 20 years are. You worked in Galway Arts Festival, Macnas, Druid, Situations Vacant, Passion Machine . . . you've been working with U2, you've done production management work. *Meitheal* is a word that could encompass you alone in all the skills that you've used and you've harnessed.**

I'm a survivor. I like to have money.

**Are you an artist, Páraic?**

I call myself an artist and it took me a long number of years to feel that I was an artist. I only started using that term in the last two years, because I want respect. I demand respect. (laughter)

**That's a perfect way to finish this conversation. ■**



ISDA, WILLIE WHITE; 3 WOMEN, JOHN CARLOS; ENDGAME, CIARAN O'BRIEN



## Two Planks, a Passion, and a Rake of Pints

*Historically, student theatre has been the primary springboard for Irish theatre artists, but as the culture of training grows, that may be changing. An assortment of Irish theatre professionals offer memories of their student days and predictions for the future of the field; we also include a photo gallery featuring some of today's leading practitioners in their "glory days."*

## Fergus Linehan, Sr.

**L**OOKING BACK ON STUDENT THEATRE in the '50s, one is first of all struck by the poverty of it all, second by the amount we managed to do with so little resources. In retrospect, though it didn't seem it at the time of course, it was not a good decade for Irish theatre. The Abbey, playing after the fire that destroyed its old house, was at the old Queen's Theatre in Pearse Street (now long demolished) and probably at the lowest artistic ebb of its history. At the Gate, Edwards and MacLiammoir's great days were behind them and, though they still did occasional good work, they had been ground down by a lack of money. Outside Dublin, there was even less — the Southern Theatre Company in Cork (a semi-professional company), a few theatres in Belfast, the Taibhdhearc in Galway, also semi-pro (Garry Hynes was still a twinkle in her parents' eyes) and elsewhere nothing but the odd tour.

Yet all was not completely lost. There were stirrings and signs that better things might be on the way. At the little Pike Theatre in Herbert Lane, Alan Simpson and Carolyn Swift were putting on strange difficult writers with names like Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee and the local hard chaw Brendan Behan, while out in another little theatre above a gas company showrooms in Dun Laoghaire (inevitably nicknamed The Gas Chamber) Phyllis Ryan and the Globe Theatre company (made up of actors who couldn't get cast at the Abbey or the Gate — *plus ça change?*) were staging new work by little known writers like Brian Friel, a schoolteacher who wrote occasional humorous pieces for the *Irish Times*; Hugh Leonard, a civil servant; and the Kerry publican John B. Keane.

For us students, this was our education



in theatre. It was an age when there were no drama courses in the universities and precious few theatre schools either — the preeminent one, the Brendan Smith Academy, trained a whole generation of Irish actors, while the Abbey school was also the stomping ground for many. So, to learn, we went to the theatre. Not only to those named above but also to the Olympia, where we saw the touring versions of plays in that rising tide of British theatre about which we avidly read in the columns of Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson in the English Sunday papers. Theatre was cheap then (just as well 'cause we were all poor) and for not much more than an old shilling you could see Pinter, Osborne, and the other Angry Young Men, together with the inevitable Coward, Rattigan, other West End staples, and, before the cinema swallowed them up, such rising young actors as Michael Caine, Richard Harris, and Peter O'Toole.

University College Dublin was my university. Trinity Players was the other student drama group. We regarded them as a crowd of English wankers (many of them were English, anyhow), while I think they thought of us as a crowd of uneducated hayseeds. They had the old Players Theatre; we had two venues — a Little Theatre locat-



LYNNE PARKER

**HALL OF SHAME:** (Above left) Fergus Linehan, Jr. (right) and Gregor Singleton in a early '90s I.U.T.C. production; (above right) D.U. Players' Freshers Co-op, 1981; (previous page, top) Lynne Parker, Siobhán Bourke, and Anne Byrne in the mid '80s; (bottom left) 1990 ISDA Festival judges Paddy Woodworth, Barbara Bradshaw, and Derek Chapman; (bottom right) Mark O'Brien and Jason Byrne in an early '90s Dramsoc Endgame.

ed high in Eighty-Six, our student union in Newman House on St. Stephen's Green; and for bigger productions the Aula Maxima next door. It held about 300 people, had a fairly decent high stage and appalling acoustics — any actor who worked there could always be heard perfectly thereafter.

The plays we did have now become something of a blur. There were Yeats and Synge and a number of French writers (French theatre was more frequently performed then): Sartre, Anouilh and such Catholic playwrights as Claudel and Montherlant — we were all very Catholic back then. Inevitably, too, there were others now forgotten or out of fashion. I can remember a production of Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*; a verse play by Christopher Fry, *The Lady's Not for Burning*; and a mammoth staging of

Goethe's *Faust*, which did not, as the Spring issue of *irish theatre* stated, receive its Irish premiere from Threefold Theatre Company. [For the record, our reference was to the Howard Brenton version of Goethe's *Faust*, of which the Threefold production was indeed an Irish premiere. Touché. — eds.] Directed by Lelia Doolan, who went on to RTÉ, the Irish Film Board and God knows how much else, it featured as its set an array of vast cooking pots and kitchen utensils that dangled dangerously from the flies.

Another memorable production which I remember came from Galway, was the European premiere of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, directed by Michael Garvey, who went on to be Controller of Programmes at RTÉ. It swept the boards at the UDA Festival, the precursor of today's ISDA. The only trouble was that U.C.G. had failed to get the rights, and the play was due to open shortly in London. Letters flew back and forth, but thankfully Mr. Miller took a merciful view and decided that a bunch of Irish students weren't worth a lawsuit.

For many of us, though, student theatre meant revues, with which we packed the Aula Max and received many rave notices from the newspapers, which in those days reviewed all major student productions (Incidentally, the *Irish Times'* current drama critic, David Nowlan, was a stalwart of T.C.D. Players back then.) It was in this field that I first wrote for the theatre and it was here that those of us who entered and still soldier on in the Irish theatre were pre-eminent, people like Rosaleen Linehan, Frank Kelly, and Des Keogh. It causes me a certain amount of wry amusement to think that those who spoke in the most high-flown way about art and "The Theatre" now seem to be mainly successful lawyers,

while we, the mere comedians, are still involved in The Business.

The former include a couple of High Court Judges, a District Judge, a Very Eminent (as the cliché goes) Senior Counsel, and a whole raft of solicitors. There were, of course, some excellent legit actors, too. In our crowd, particularly, Kate Binchy, who spends much of her acting career in London; and Henry Comerford, a terrific actor who worked for a time in the Radio Éireann Repertory Company before retiring to Galway and (what else?) the law. He also wrote a couple of plays that were performed in the Peacock. Another who was involved was the future playwright Tom Kilroy, whom I remember directing a stage version of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* with Rosaleen Linehan in it. There was also Pat Laffan, a stalwart for many years now of the Irish stage and screen, who at that time planned to be an engineer, or so he said.

Trinity had the director Michael Bogdanov, then plain Mike Bogdin before reverting to his Russian ancestral name; Terry Brady, a very funny comedian who became a writer; and a whole host of people who ended up at the BBC. Memory is fickle (mine is anyway) so I've probably left out some very important names.

Nowadays, undoubtedly, things are better. There's more going on and many opportunities for theatre people to learn their trades. I don't know whether it's better fun now, but I doubt it. I suspect, though, that most of us from that vintage remember them, like me, as the best of times. Whatever we achieved subsequently, there was probably never such pure enjoyment. We have heard the chimes at midnight.

Fergus Linehan, Sr. is a playwright and novelist.



**RETURN OF THE HEROES:** Garry Hynes (left) and Fiona Shaw opening the ISDA Festival in 1993.

WILLIE WHITE

## Garry Hynes

**I**F IT WERE NOT FOR UNIVERSITY COLLEGE Galway's Dramsoc, I'm not sure how I would be earning my living now but it would certainly not be in theatre. It's easy to look back and see a school play in primary school or vivid memories of the few amateur productions I saw as a teenager as early signs of my eventual career; the truth is until I came to U.C.G. in the early '70s I hardly gave the theatre a passing thought.

Indeed joining Dramsoc in my first week in college was only part of a general sign-up for half a dozen college societies. Liberated from the dull routine of secondary school where the only extracurricular activities were sport, I was intent on enjoying college life to the full.

At the first Dramsoc meeting I signed up to direct a play. I wasn't very clear on exactly what that involved but I absolutely knew that I couldn't act. I was assigned *The Browning Version* by Rattigan — a choice I thought odd then and even moreso now. I decided I couldn't cast it and ransacked the shelves of the library for an alternative. I



found *The Loves of Cass Maguire* by Brian Friel, and another first-year student, Marie Mullen, to play the title role, and so began four passionate years that in every single way shaped the rest of my life.

Looking back on it now it seems there were a number of particularly happy elements around U.C.G. Dramsoc at that time. First of all, the society was going through a particularly successful phase; the year before I came to college, they had a major hit with Peter Barnes' *The Ruling Class* which made a big impact in Galway. There was too a very strong team in charge, people like Noreen Murphy — a Spanish lecturer who directed *The Ruling Class* — Paddy McGovern, Ollie and Martin Mannion, Gerry Taheny, Ruairí Stafford (an older brother of Maeliosa) and a host of others. Consequently there was also a very strong team spirit which we first-years were willingly drawn into. Another important element was that there was far less of a town/gown division in Galway than there might have been. Big Dramsoc productions were staged in the Jesuit Hall rather than the Grammar School which was part of the University. This gave me an early sense of theatre as part of the overall fabric of a community. In some ways it was not a great leap to think that if Galway enjoyed

our productions while we were in college, why should we not go on doing it after we left university — which is of course what we did when we formed Druid after we graduated.

Also in those years, Dramsoc productions went on the amateur circuit. I will never forget the pride that I felt when Paddy McGovern told me that the committee had decided to send *Cass Maguire* to the Tubbercurry Drama Festival, nor a few years later when we won the Roscommon Festival with *Elizabeth One*, thus earning a place in the All-Ireland Amateur Drama Finals in Athlone. It was this experience that I remembered when Druid started touring to places like Limerick and Sligo, and I knew that there was an audience out there who we were not going to get to if we continued to play only the major urban centres.

It is difficult to sum up what it was those years in Dramsoc gave me, but finally I suppose it was a sense of engagement: with my colleagues, with the community, and I suppose too with myself. Suddenly I was involved in something that connected with me, and if we got it right, offered the possibility to connect with others as well. It gave me a very powerful sense of being alive in that time, and I have been very thankful to U.C.G. for giving me that first opportunity to experience that feeling.

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Garry Hynes is a founder member and artistic director of Druid Theatre Company.

## Lynne Parker

**T**HE SUPERB THING ABOUT PLAYERS was that you could make a complete arse of yourself and it didn't matter. No one was there to tell you what not to do so you went ahead and did it anyway. When I was at Trinity in the early

'80s, Players Theatre was still at No.3 Front Square. It was shabby, messy and occasionally rat-infested — just like a proper theatre, in fact — but it was ours and we loved it. From time to time someone would paint it pink or fill it full of sand but you could always unpaint it the following week. The first time I ever directed a show, on the opening night no one knew their lines and the set fell down. Anywhere else I would have been shown the door but all my mates were on the Committee — come to think of it I was on the Committee — so I was given another go.

We were particularly lucky. In the early '80s there happened to be a great influx of talented people, many of whom are still in the business. D.U. Players assumed the character of a small company and for most of us it became a full-time occupation, working long hours for no money. What a perfect preparation for a life in the professional theatre.

The important thing was that it was a deliciously extra-curricular activity that you would never have to write essays about. You got to do everything, from stage management to ticket-selling to poster design, and your success was measured by your peers and that toughest of examiners, the general public. The system was fairly Darwinian. He or she most able to throw their weight around, either through talent or pure brass neck, held sway. But cock it up and there would be no shortage of people to point it out. Again, a perfect training for the brutal world outside.

One thing that disappeared when the theatre moved to the Beckett Centre was that springboard for independent theatre companies — the Players summer season. The location just beside Front Gate was ideal for abducting American tourists and making them pay hard currency for packet soup and A Lunchtime Show!, often of



the leprechaun variety. The money raised would then be put towards the evening shows, or Art. This is how Rough Magic started, and many other similar companies. It is a splendid example of how to make something out of nothing which is sadly missed.

*Lynne Parker is the artistic director of Rough Magic Theatre Company.*

## Richard Cook

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT the fact that indigenous Irish theatre is little over 100 years old, but little has been written about the fact that comprehensive Irish drama training is some 90 years younger. This is surprising because the absence of formal drama training has had a massive influence on modern Irish theatre.

When I went to Trinity College in 1985 I had an immediate ambition and a longer-term goal. The ambition was to act in as many D.U. Players shows as possible and the goal was to become the greatest actor in the English-speaking world. I was seventeen. The ambition was easily enough achieved: Rough Magic — as they were to become — had mostly graduated

KELLY, LYNN PARKER



**THOSE WERE THE DAYS:** (left) Rough Magic stalwart Darragh Kelly on the Cork train to ISDA, ca. 1980; (above) Richard Cook in a mid-'80s production of *A Man for All Seasons*.

which left plenty of opportunities for cocky young freshers. At the end of 1985, I applied to R.A.D.A., Bristol Old Vic, and Central School Of Speech And Drama and in May of 1986, I found myself bashing out a Bassanio and Brian from Peter Nichol's *A Day In The Death Of Joe Egg* in three different rooms in three different parts of London. A horrible failure at all of them left me — a quite arrogant me — confused and disappointed. How good was I and how good was D.U. Players?

The answer is probably good and goodish, but in truth, it was difficult to assess. This held for all college theatre at the time because — friendly critics aside — it was the students who were doing the assessing. For the serious actor or director the self-taught annual Leaving Cert (ISDA) provided the year's high point and a carefully stage managed standing ovation could even bring home a few awards. It was great fun and when 17 of us went off to tour the United States in

1987, American theatre students (particularly directors) were amazed and openly jealous of our freedom to control the various drama societies from whence we came. It was all very flattering, I suppose, but I couldn't help feeling envious of them too: fantastic facilities, weeks and weeks of tightly programmed theatre study and a department of experienced working professionals paid to facilitate and nurture creativity.

Of course (as the American tour and its aftermath taught me), not only did we have none of that, but we didn't particularly want any of it either. Although it wasn't articulated much, tiny budgets and bare stages were accepted as part of the university experience and most of us believed that scarcity of resources somehow infused our endeavours with character and a unique passion. Which it probably did. But what we didn't realise as students were four things: (a) we often put on very bad productions; (b) we often selected very conservative plays; (c) we were often very cautious; and (d) we never quite understood that a pre-occupation with (Drama Society) politics dictated our approach to the theatre which we put on. Possible big link between (c) and (d).

Now it seems crystal clear to me that university theatre then is much like a lot of Irish theatre now. And if I'm right, it's not difficult to see why: in 1986, approximately 80% of all Arts Council-funded theatre companies had college graduates at the helm and this figure was doubtless higher throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Many of these characters are still knocking around of course happily extending their college theatrical education to the bigger stages and I would argue that they are largely responsible for the general lack of innovation and imagination in Irish theatre.

Before the American tour, I'd argued in favour of keeping the old Players building

in Trinity's Front Square rather than moving to a new space, which the college authorities were offering to build. In the end, I bottled out of the vote and abstained, although we were well beaten anyway by the pro-move lobby. My concerns then were that the identity and importance of Players would become diluted by the Trinity Drama Studies department and that this would be a bad thing. However, when I returned from America a year later, I tried to re-engage with Players and failed miserably; to be honest, I think that all 17 of us who'd gone to the States would have failed, and it's not that we had changed hugely, it's that Players hadn't, wouldn't, and couldn't change at all. In the context of the developing Gaiety School of Acting, Trinity and other professional theatre courses, university drama societies were having their springboard to professional Irish theatre taken away and scarcely anyone noticed.

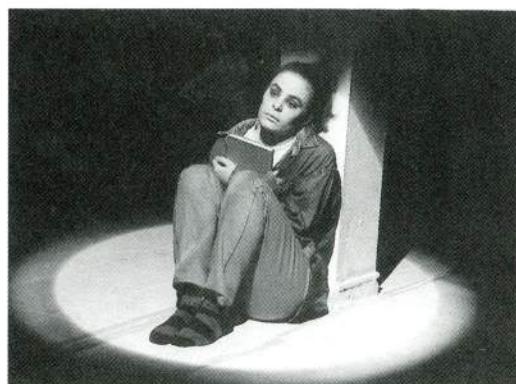
Ten or more years on and the number of actors, directors and writers who come directly from a college drama society directly into professional theatre is down to a trickle, albeit a steady trickle. This is a good thing because a new generation of ambitious, imaginative, challenging (and playful) practitioners are continually emerging who see themselves as shapers of a new theatre, rather than servants of an old one.

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*Richard Cook is co-director of Bickerstaffe Theatre Company and director of the Cat Laughs Comedy Festival*

## *John Crowley*

LIKE MOST PEOPLE WHO'VE WOUND up in the profession after University, the College Drama Society (University College Cork's Dramat) consumed all my energies and enthusiasm, relegating the notion of a degree to a poor



and somewhat distracting second place. When I arrived in Dramat in the early '90s, I started off acting but kicked that fairly soon (!) and after directing a couple of shows, was happily resolved in what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

Despite chalking up production after production, I don't think I actually learned a great deal about acting, staging, or design at University. I really only learnt about these things after leaving, by working with actors, writers and designers infinitely more experienced than me but generous enough to overlook my inexperience. The major drawback of student drama is that one is only working with peers who probably know no more or less than you, so one is never challenged to be more inventive or to take risks. But paradoxically, one is never again afforded as free or protected an environment in which to make theatre as at university. It was a wish to exploit that freedom, combined with the increasing frustration of trying to match the casting requirements of a chosen script with the narrow age range of students available, that led me to devise a piece around a specific bunch of actors. As is often the case with a turning point, I was too bound up in the practicalities of putting this new piece together



CARETAKER, CIARAN O'BRIEN

#### SEEDS OF GREATNESS: (left) Roscha

Murphy in *Alice (or Walking and Falling)* at U.C.C. Dramat; (above) Conor McPherson and Mark O'Brien in an early '90s U.C.D. Dramsoc production of *The Caretaker*.

to notice a subtle but fundamental shift beginning to occur. *Alice (or Walking and Falling)* was put together in three-and-a-half chaotic weeks, but was very well received and was revived many times, toured abroad, and picked up various awards before finally being laid to rest.

In retrospect the piece seems like a triumph of form over content, but one thing is certain — which is that at the end of it all I had a vastly different sense of what was involved in making theatre than when I began. Formerly my sense of directing was all about finding a script and everything emanating from that centre — which in the case of student theatre can meet with many limitations, such as casting, as I've mentioned. Whereas now I felt one could work in the opposite direction, and let a project develop very naturally, within the limitations of a specific situation and that it would transcend those limitations. I wouldn't wish to diminish the importance of practical, nuts and bolts skills, and God knows I was on

a steep learning curve in the immediate years after leaving university to acquire some, but the spirit of freedom involved in approaching a play, or a way of working exactly and only as one wants, is something I remain grateful for having gained at University.

*John Crowley is a director and is associate director of the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London.*

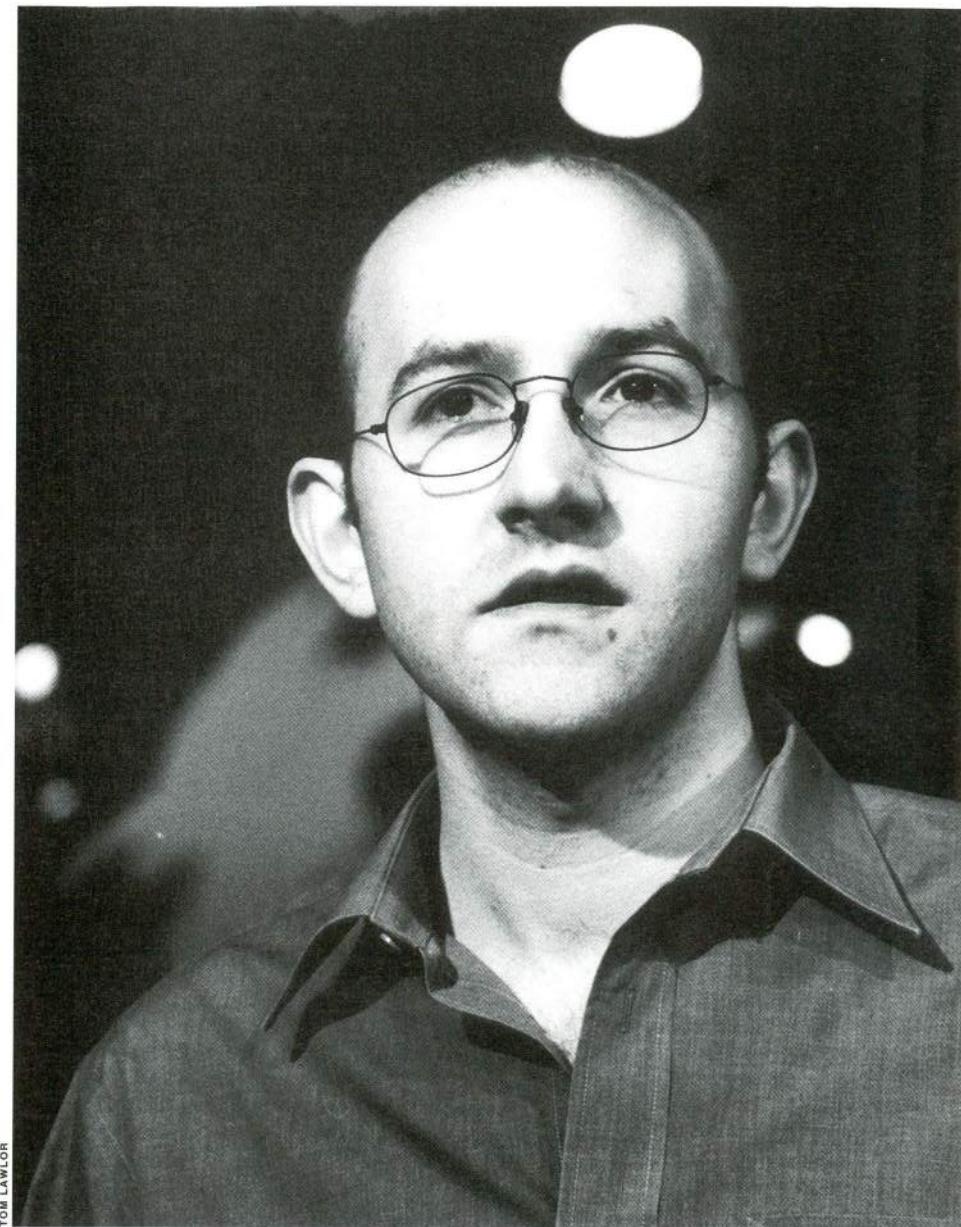
## Willie White

I AM GOING TO ADOPT A CONTRARY position with regard to student drama.

Having frittered away many years in its embrace at U.C.D. in the early '90s, I am not assured of its intrinsic value. In my years at Dramsoc, I made good friends, enjoyed myself, grew up, and was even a success of the system, winning an award at an ISDA, but I really believe that I learnt very little about theatre. In saying this, I would make a distinction between drama as comprising convincing acting and a well-dressed set and theatre as a much more expansive realm of possibilities. The social aspect of the society's activities taught me about commitment and teamwork and camaraderie, all valuable qualities in the theatre, but I would question the ends to which that energy was applied.

In my experience most students don't go to the theatre, including even those students who study theatre. In the case of U.C.D. this lack of interest is exacerbated by the college's peripheral location to city centre theatre activity. Drama society members are generally not aware of what's going on in theatre in their own town, however much they may be preoccupied with Beckett, Berkoff, Mamet or whoever's cool these days. Occasionally

CONTINUED ON PAGE 71



TOM LAWLER

# NORTHERN STAR

28-year-old Northern Irishman Mick Gordon is one of the most talked-about theatre artists in Britain.

KAREN FRICKER met him in London to talk about directing, Irishness, and *How He Met Peter Brook*.

**M**ICK GORDON, WHO IS 28, WAS BORN AND RAISED IN Northern Ireland, and is regarded as one of the most exciting young directors in Britain. His talents were incubated at the Royal National Theatre Studio, where he was director-in-attachment for several years before taking over as

artistic director of the Gate Theatre, the tiny Notting Hill space that's been the launching pad for many a high-flying director — Stephen Daldry, Katie Mitchell, Ian Rickson, Annie Castledine, and James MacDonald all worked there at early stages of their careers. Gordon's freelance CV includes credits at the Oxford Playhouse, the Riverside Studios, several major theatres in Argentina, and the Royal Court. He counts "the two Peters" — Hall and Brook — as his most significant mentors, and he's ironing out the details of a deal to co-direct, with Hall, a 14-hour long production about the Trojan War called *Tantalus* that will tour the world.

You don't get this successful this young without being intensely driven, but in person Gordon is down-to-earth and focussed on the present moment; he may spend a certain portion of his time jetting to international directing assignments, but when he's in London he's in the Gate most nights, tearing tickets and dispensing front-of-house charm because, as he puts it, "that's the job." Slight, beanpole-thin, and balding, Gordon has an intense friendliness and a wound-up energy that leaks out through his spasmodic laugh and certain twitchy habits, like highly focussed gum-chewing. He is scrupulous in answering questions, considering his answers at length and refusing to be

drawn into empty platitudes; while I try to get him to expand on his stellar connections and his future plans, his conversation continually loops back to the work itself — to the plays he stages and the values behind them.

There weren't a lot of theatrical influences in Gordon's childhood in Protestant, middle-class Holywood; his interest in theatre was first sparked on a summertime teaching job in Poland when he was 17. He read history at Oxford — he wasn't tempted to stay in Ireland for university, he says, simply because Oxford was the best place to learn his subject — and started acting and directing while he was there. After graduation he did some work for the Oxford Playhouse, read a lot of directing theory, and eventually moved to London, into a "ridiculous, huge warehouse that I and a friend were sort of babysitting for someone. It wasn't an ideal place to live, but we did have a lot of space, so I started to hold theatre classes on Tuesday nights with friends, and then their friends started to come . . . it sort of spiderwebbed."

Gordon started to direct small productions at the Institut Français and Battersea Arts Centre, which led directly to the gig at the RNT Studio, an incubator for experimentation and new work whose productions are generally not shown to the public. And then the Gate job came available; Gordon took over the theatre's artistic directorate in September of last year.

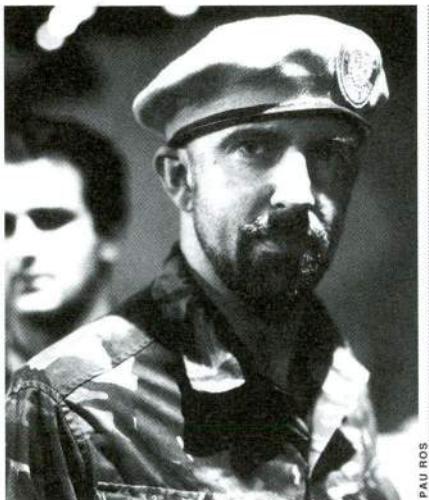
The Gate's overall brief is international work in translation; Gordon programmes the theatre in short, three- to five-play seasons based around whatever themes and ideas he feels are current at the time. His first season was called "At Home with the Exiles," and included the U.K. premiere of Aimé Cesaire's *Une Tempête*; Brian Friel's *Volunteers*, which also had never been staged in Britain before;



Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*; and Wilde's *Salomé*, in an unprecedented co-production with the Riverside Studios.

Why exiles? "I wanted to address this theatre itself, the community in which we find ourselves. Notting Hill is an interesting place — there's a large Caribbean community that exists alongside a very wealthy community that's starting to shut it out. That's why I did a French West Indian *Tempest* that talked directly about the colonial experience . . . Also, personally, being from Northern Ireland and being away from home — I have spent a lot of time wondering why so many Irish people have had to leave Ireland in order to write and create. Being from Northern Ireland is an amazing cultural position to be in. Seamus Heaney talked about it brilliantly when he described a person walking up a cobbled path wearing a yoke with one pail containing Irishness and the other Britishness, and trying to balance the two."

Of the Friel play, Gordon says, "*Volunteers* is fantastic, and it's been overlooked because it was misunderstood



PAUL ROSE

**WAR STORIES:** (left) Christopher Whitehouse in *Volunteers*, and (right) Damian Myerson in *The Colonel Bird*, both directed by Mick Gordon.

when it was first produced in 1974 in Dublin. It's a rigorous examination of different varieties of Irishness in the form of the different men who come to an archaeological dig, and by the end of the excavations the play concludes that none of those varieties — Republicanism, Nationalism — is sufficiently better than the others."

"What Friel was saying," continues Gordon, "is that it's the nature of Irishness and the problem of Irishness to try to encompass all the various histories that claim that name. Friel didn't have an answer but he was asking the question 25 years before anyone else. But when it came out in 1974, people wanted an internment play, and that was how it was read, and so it was critically damned. But those ideas are still relevant now and I wanted to see how it would play now."

Gordon's production was universally praised by critics and audiences and was courted for remounting by all the major Irish festivals — Dublin, Belfast, and Friel.

One of the major reasons why none of the deals came through, says Gordon, is because of the Gate's bare-bones working structure; the theatre doesn't have the resources to tour productions and keep up its own programming at the same time. Gordon is one of only five full-time staff at the theatre; in addition to his programming and directing responsibilities (he directed three of the four first-season shows), Gordon's also in charge, with producer Philippe Le Moine, of keeping the theatre financially afloat. "We have to get 100 grand into the theatre every year to keep it running," explains Gordon. "That's a pain in that it can be boring, but the thing about being so poor is that you know that whoever you're talking to is going to have more money than you, so it's very easy to beg."

There are other virtues to having no money as well: "Our production of *The Suppliants* had a chorus of 25. Nowhere else in London could have done that, because they'd have to pay the actors. There can be an incredible creative liberation in that kind of poverty." Gordon is quick to point out, however, that he doesn't fetishise the poverty aesthetic; he's visibly proud of new co-producing initiatives he's spearheaded with larger institutions like the Riverside and the RNT Studio, which make it possible for Gate actors to be paid on certain productions, for the first time in the theatre's history.

Gordon's second season was called "Idiots": "It was about enlightened fools," he explains, "about how outcasts are a reflection of the society they emerge from." The season featured *!El Quijote!*, a new version of the Cervantes classic by

Belfast native David Johnston; *The Colonel Bird*, an award-winning Bulgarian play; and *Svejk*, a new adaptation of *The Good Soldier Svejk* by Dubliner Colin Teevan. None was directed by Gordon, who was busy tending to freelance assignments — in the past year he's directed two Spanish-language productions, of the West End hits *Art* and *Closer*, in Buenos Aires, as well as the world premiere of Gary Mitchell's *Trust* at the Royal Court.

"Everyone said Gary and I should work together because we're the two Protestants from Northern Ireland," says Gordon, "but even though we have a shared history, the specifics are different and we have a different point of view about what we think the future should be. But we have respect for each other's viewpoint, and I have respect for his voice: the Northern Irish voice wasn't really being heard on stage, or it hadn't been heard since Stewart Parker and then it was heard in a very romantic way. *Trust* is real, brutally real."

"I spoke to [Royal Court artistic director] Ian Rickson before *Trust* was reviewed," continues Gordon, "and he said he was proud that this play was going on at the same time as *The Weir* [which Rickson directed]. Ian warned me that we might well be poorly reviewed, because Gary's is an uncomfortable voice, but the reviews were very strong." Gordon wouldn't engage in the question of whether Mitchell's voice is limited to his immediate experience: "There is this ongoing argument that Gary should get away from Rathcoole, but I don't know whether that's good advice. I want to read more of his plays and then respond to the plays. I hope to be involved in his future as a writer."

The final dangling fact I have to pursue before the interview is out: How did he get to know Peter Brook? The story's better than anything I could have made up:

In 1995 Gordon got wind, through the RNT Studio, of an exclusive workshop that Brook was planning in Paris with the likes of Simon McBurney and Deborah Warner. "I asked could I go, and initially the Studio said no, it's invitation only," recounts Gordon. "Peter was working on *Qui Est La?* at that time and I had just written a proposal about a *Hamlet* project as well, so I had them fax it over to Peter and he said, yeah, I'd like to meet Mick, bring him along."

The words "cheeky" and "jammy" are racing through my mind, but Gordon tells the story as if there's nothing out of the ordinary about forging a friendship with one of the most revered figures in world theatre; and it's perhaps this quiet confidence that is a major key to his success. And, perhaps, it's early encounters with figures like Brook that have helped him gain that confidence. Wasn't he afraid of meeting Brook? "I was a bit nervous going over because I was worried I would never be as good as him. But when I met him, he was so himself that I just creased up. I realised that the best thing I could do was not to try to be Peter Brook but to be excellently Mick Gordon, and I had a brilliant time and we've stayed in touch."

Did Brook teach him how to direct? "You can't teach a director how to direct. You have to do it. It's true — an out-of-work director is a contradiction in terms. You have to constantly be throwing your theories into practice because that is where the creativity is — where those two things meet and how they transform into art." ■

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*Karen Fricker is Variety's Irish theatre correspondent, a frequent contributor to The Sunday Tribune and The Arts Show, and is co-editor of this magazine. Ian Shuttleworth's review of Trust appears on page 68 of this issue.*

# Outrageous Fortune?

**OPHELIA BYRNE** reports on the latest developments in arts venues and funding in Belfast.

**I**N CULTURE AS IN POLITICS IN BELFAST, TO BE OR NOT TO be is most definitively the question at present. The city's principal arts funders are thoroughly investigating the development of the infrastructure of the city's venues and spaces — and given experience to date, the answers will come fast and tough.

The Belfast Civic Arts Theatre now stands empty, its contents literally auctioned down to the last beer mat. The first venue to be individually appraised by funders, its review resulted in a rapid and permanent withdrawal of public funding. With a list of organisations expecting the outcome of similarly tough appraisals shortly, the signal could not have been more clear. For the arts in Belfast, as in politics, things are about to shift: whichever direction is taken, the ride ahead is guaranteed to be both exciting and stormy.

In part, this flurry of activity has been prompted by a set of coincidental factors, generated at a speed which has taken everyone by surprise. First, audiences are voting for peace with their feet by returning to see live performance in Belfast. With the advent of the ceasefires and the "not peace, not war" situation, most all of the key Belfast arts venues

— mainstream as well as non-traditional — have experienced an increase in audiences. All told, as a recent report declared, the Belfast audience base has "changed dramatically": the somewhat unexpected issue now is how to manage such growth.

This is also the challenge facing inner-city Belfast. The opening of the landmark Waterfront Hall has been of tremendous symbolic importance; now run-down areas in the centre of the city are being revamped. Currently tipped for drastic change is the formerly-declining Cathedral Quarter of Belfast. Laganside Corporation (an Urban Development Corporation funded through the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland) has been awarded the responsibility for the development; in apparently much the same way as Dublin's Temple Bar, it declares that culture will be a centrepiece of the development strategy. First to find a home in the

Quarter has been the Community Arts Forum, while later this summer, Belfast Community Circus will move into the area. Just who will constitute their neighbours is the subject of no small debate. Some nine potential arts projects were originally earmarked for the Quarter, including a major arts/entertainment venue; the other projects will fit in a range of small and medium scale cultural venues.

That the Community Circus has undertaken such a major move has primarily been made possible through new funding opportunities — chief amongst these the National Lottery Fund, administered by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The new Lottery strategy, published in April, commits it to an annual budget of £2m for new buildings, with £1m for refurbishments. Separate to this, six of the Arts Council's major clients, including the Circus, began a Lottery-funded Advancement programme last year; this has required participants to work with external advisers towards far-reaching reappraisals of their circumstances. The Lyric and Riverside Theatres are amongst those being enabled by the Advancement programme to "review and change their artistic missions and/or business operations to achieve long-term creative and financial stability": each is now armed with a development plan tailored to their needs. For some, the holy grail of capital funding may now be in reach.

Or is it? Together, the factors described are indeed suggestive of tremendous opportunity, combining the three elements beloved of arts venue managers: audience, location and funding. And certainly, almost every key performance venue in Belfast has moved to take advantage of the situation. Development plans have been mooted variously by the Crescent Arts Centre, the Lyric Theatre,

the Old Museum arts centre, the Grand Opera House, the Ulster Hall/Group Theatre and before its demise, the Arts Theatre. There have also been no less than 11 other capital developments proposed in Belfast featuring the provision of performance venues or spaces. Together with the Waterfront, this constitutes a veritable explosion of interest in capital development arts projects for Belfast — an unprecedented situation for a city where, in the not-too-distant past, the simple survival of a venue could be marked as an achievement.

Voices of caution at such enthusiasm are being raised by funders, most notably Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In 1996, as the major funders of the arts in Belfast, they publicly stated their concern at the possible outcome of non-strategic development of the performing arts infrastructure. At particular issue was the existence of future revenue funding to support all of the key venues' development plans. To this end, the two Councils jointly commissioned consultants Boyden Southwood to carry out a review of city performing arts venues and spaces, and to make strategic recommendations to inform future funding of arts developments.

Completed in 1996, the recommendations of the review were alarming. Boyden Southwood suggested that if no strategic venue choices were made, that Belfast venues would suffer from seating over-capacity, unproductive competition, and insufficient resources. The two funding bodies reacted swiftly. Boyden Southwood's report was rapidly adopted by both, and a working party was established. Now commonly known as the Southwood Group, the party is composed of Belfast's two major funding Councils acting in remarkably close co-operation. As such, the Group is extremely po-



**RELOCATED:** Belfast Community Circus recently moved to the Laganside area.

ful, and its decisions are now being awaited with keen interest.

Eight areas of interest are currently being investigated, four directly involving venues. It was the first hard-hitting appraisal conducted for the Southwood Group which led to the demise of the Civic Arts Theatre. This appraisal was undertaken as part of a report on middle-scale theatre by consultants David Pratley Associates with Pricewaterhouse Coopers; soon after the publication of the report, the Arts Theatre's major funder, the Belfast City Council, opted to withdraw its subsidy. Attention has now turned to the futures of the Ulster Hall/Group Theatre, the Crescent Arts Centre, the Old Museum arts centre and the Lyric Theatre. There are varying suggestions for each, ranging from the with-

drawal of public funding to retaining the status quo, mergers, site redevelopments, relocations and/or revisions of management structures. Reports on the first three organisations are due shortly and the second part of the middle-scale theatre report is also due for completion in the near future.

Responses from the arts community to such investigation have varied from the cautiously optimistic to the downright hostile, the latter coming not surprisingly from the Arts Theatre management. It directly raised issues of accountability and transparency, declaring that the 50-year-old theatre deserved more from Belfast City Council than "a decision taken behind closed doors at sub-committee stage to close it down." This charge is refuted by the Council's Arts Office. It stresses that the Arts report, like all the analyses mentioned, was undertaken in consultation with the organisation concerned; detailed lists are publicly available, representatives say, which prove the formal commitment of the Southwood Group to also consult with the wider sector. Meanwhile, the independent theatre sector points to a short-term crisis in venue provision: until the necessary research is undertaken and decisions made, they say there is a venue "freeze" leaving them nowhere suitable to perform. The idea of re-opening the Arts Theatre as a home for independent theatre is therefore under investigation by the Tinderbox and Prime Cut companies.

Other organisations to respond independently have included Dubbeljoint Productions and JustUs Community Theatre. They have jointly founded a new "professional/community theatre arts space" in partnership with BIFHE (The Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education) and the Whiterock Children's Centre. Amharclann na Carriage/Theatre

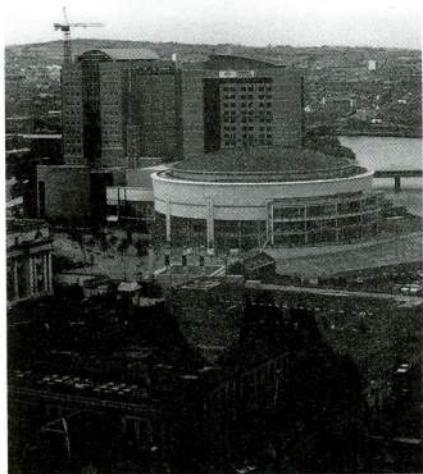
on the Rock will soon open at the BIFHE Whiterock site in West Belfast.

From the Lyric Theatre, Northern Ireland's repertory theatre, there has been very little public response at all. The Lyric has completed the Strategic Stocktake phase of its Advancement programme, and is now in the Delivery phase, which can last up to five years. David Grant, outgoing Artistic Director, points to the adoption of new programming principles for the theatre, while a new Director of

version of the Artistic Director job — appeared several months ago, the theatre says that no announcements can be expected until at least September. The future direction, artistic or otherwise, of the Lyric therefore remains unknown at present.

So far, the arts community has taken the developments on the chin. If the changes are managed well, the city has the potential to act quickly and get it right: to ensure the mistakes made by other cities are not replicated, to act proactively rather than reactively, to ensure that a balance of venues is provided suited to the audience and product available. There is also the potential to do this at a time of possibly advantageous political change, most notably a new Minister with responsibility for the Arts sitting in the Assembly. At the time of writing, however, the future of the Assembly is not certain.

In more than one arts organisation, change is being handled with difficulty internally. The cost and numbers of consultants working on the various reports is raising eyebrows in the local media. The Lottery capital grant fund is not infinite, and is committed to providing arts facilities not just for Belfast, but for the whole of Northern Ireland. And while the organisations under review are co-operating fully, it is only natural that individuals within them share an apprehensiveness about the future. This is not immediately helped by a marching season in full sway, a reminder (if it were needed) of more difficult times. Politically and artistically, the scene in Belfast is about to shift. To be, or not to be?



**THE LATEST LANDMARK:** Waterfront Hall is the centrepiece of the Laganside redevelopment.

Administration and Resources, Les McLean, has recently been appointed. No statements have been forthcoming, however, on the key issues of constitutional change, the theatre's location or on the naming of an Executive Producer. Though an advertisement for the latter position — a renamed and restructured

*Ophelia Byrne is Curator of the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive, Linen Hall Library, Belfast. She also edits the magazine/journal Youth Drama Ireland.*

# The Heat Is On

*The Olympics of the arts world — the Edinburgh International Festival and Fringe — are coming up in August, with a bumper crop of Irish entries in their theatre programmes. So everyone's Irish-mad in Scotland, then? MARK FISHER offers a questioning view.*

THE EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL AND FRINGE ARE the Olympics of the arts world. And as with the Olympics, the home team sometimes admits defeat before play has even started. No-one could match the Soviets at gymnastics, just as no-one can hope to beat the Russians when it comes to Chekhovian naturalism, or the Germans when it comes to highly-funded prestige drama, or the Poles when it comes to gloomy meditations in darkened rooms. In such cases, Scotland's theatre establishment is best sitting back, enjoying the show and accepting that it's just not in the same league.

But not every country produces gold medalists as a matter of course. Nor does strength in one area mean strength in another. And my feeling, as an Edinburgh-based critic, is that the theatre of Scotland is pretty evenly matched with that of Ireland. There are some countries whose work is intimidatingly good, those who leave you reeling from the innovation and wishing your home team could do the same. Ireland isn't one of them.

It's great to see brilliant performances

from Ireland, of course, but it's no big surprise to see an Irish dud. Exactly the same can be said of Scottish theatre. So when I hear that a glut of Irish work is heading to the Festival and Fringe this August, my expectations are neither high nor low. I'm open. Ask me in September.

If my point of view sounds chilly, I should say that many of the capital's leading institutions are extending a big thumbs up in the direction of Irish theatre. The Edinburgh International Festival has booked *The Wake* by Tom Murphy, making a hat-trick for director Patrick Mason and the Abbey Theatre after *The Well of the Saints* (1994) and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1995). Meanwhile on the Fringe, the Traverse Theatre is presenting Corcadorca's *Misterman*, Kabosh's *Mojo-Mickybo*, the Lyric's *Stones in his Pockets*, and Rough

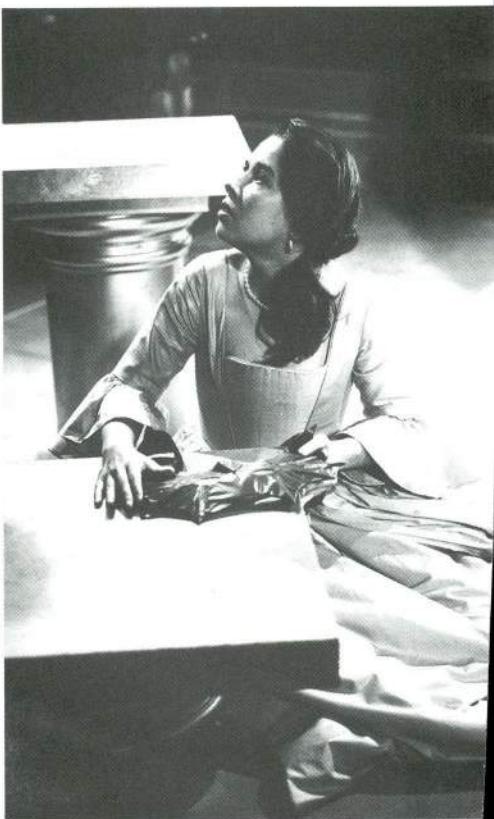
Magic's *The Whisperers* — amounting to one third of its programme. And the other primo Fringe venue, the Assembly Rooms, have weighed in their support by booking the Bush Theatre production of Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* as well as several leading Irish comedy acts, the Nualas and Ed Byrne.

It's fair to expect the enthusiasm of the programmers to be reciprocated by Scottish audiences. A spokesperson for the Traverse Theatre recalls how Tinderbox Theatre Company's *Language Roulette* played to sell-out audiences in April 1997, the same year that Corcadorka's *Disco Pigs* became the hottest ticket on the Fringe: "The public really seem to relate to Irish theatre and it's always a winner when you programme it. *Language Roulette* sold out its whole run in advance, which is almost unheard of."

Scottish audiences do seem to have an affinity with Irish theatre. Maybe it's a Celtic soul brother thing (Glasgow's Tron Theatre, incidentally, is backing a three-way collaboration between Theatr y Byd's Ian Rowlands from Wales, Chris Dolan from Scotland, and Paul Mercier of Passion Machine in Dublin), or maybe it's more simply an acknowledgement that Ireland tends to produce lively and literate popular drama. Glasgow is especially receptive to Irish theatre, both welcoming Irish visitors (the Tron hosted a whole autumn season in 1992) and staging Irish plays (the Arches Theatre is always good for an obscure O'Casey or Behan; the Citizens' for a G.B.S., a Beckett, or a Synge).

Likewise, once the Edinburgh Festival is out of the way, the city's Royal Lyceum will launch into an eight-play season that includes Brian Friel's *Lovers*, Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun*, and Helen Edmundson's *The Clearing*, an English play set at the time of Cromwell's tenure in Ireland.

It is to Ireland's benefit that it has such a formidable tradition of dramatic writing,



**HITTING THE ROAD:** (clockwise from above) Pauline Hutton in *The Whisperers*; Olwen Fouere, Jennifer O'Dea, and Anna Healy in *The Wake*; and Aidan Kelly and Karl Shiels in *Howie the Rookie*, all of which are travelling to Edinburgh this year.

something which Scotland sadly lacks. It's a tradition that has been inherited by the likes of Friel, McGuinness and Murphy, written with an authority, ambition and sense of scale that is harder to find among contemporary Scottish dramatists. I suspect they treat your playwrights better than we



But if I'm still sounding chilly, there's another reason. The recent wave of Irish dramatists that has so animated the London theatre has almost completely passed Scotland by. In New York earlier this year, I found the locals were far better briefed about Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh and the gang than I was. If Dublin's Lucid Productions hadn't brought the one-man *Rum and Vodka* (which I liked) to the Fringe last year, I'd have seen nothing by

McPherson. Without the Arches Theatre doing *Boss Grady's Boys* in 1998, Sebastian Barry would be just another name. Ironic, isn't it, that one of the places most open to Irish work has missed out on some of its hottest exports.

That doesn't mean that what's left is the dregs, in fact, away from the hype, it's probably a good deal healthier. But unlike some countries that enter the forthcoming Festival Olympics fielding only the finest competitors, Ireland is more susceptible to the hit and miss. The Corn Exchange's 1998 Fringe production, *A Play on Two Chairs*, for example, suggested that Ireland has yet to find a facility for physical theatre to equal its famed linguistic dexterity. That show rode into town with a brace of reviews from the Irish press so enthusiastic that the critics seemingly had as little sense of the possibilities of physical theatre as the company. Did *Disco Pigs* really come from the same country?

But in a head to head battle with Scotland, there is one area in which Ireland certainly leads the field: that of the company name. Scotland is useless at them; Ireland does them with flair. Scotland specialises in the off-putting (Theatre Cryptic), dreary (Borderline and, believe it or not, Company Theatre) and the unpronounceable (the quite good Communicado has just been reinvented as Theatre Archipelago). Ireland, on the other hand, suggests mystery and imagination with Corcadorka, Rough Magic, Druid, Macnas, and Fishamble, names full of promise and the kind of unhinged inventiveness expected of the rock music world. It's a frivolous point, but if you can't make your company sound enticing, what chance your shows?

*[Taking Fisher on his word to "ask him in September," his assessment of the Irish productions in the Edinburgh Festivals will appear in our autumn issue — eds.]*

# Volume Control

**JOCELYN CLARKE** thumbs through the latest theatre books and journals.

LET'S BEGIN AT THE END . . . TO ROUND OFF the Friel Festival come two volumes of criticism on Brian Friel's work: a dedicated issue of *The Irish University Review* and Richard Pine's *The Diviner*. The first, edited by Anthony Roche, features 16 essays by academics and writers on a variety of Friel plays as well as a piece by George O'Brien on Friel's early columns in *The Irish Press*.

All of the essays, some better than others, not only offer intriguing insights into Friel's writing, but also share a satisfying diversity of approach — from Seamus Heaney's long poem "The Real Names," to Thomas Kilroy's affectionate account of his friendship with Friel, to Frank McGuinness' proem "Faith Healer: All the Dead Voices," to Csilla Bertha's sterling defence of the much-maligned *Wonderful Tennessee* ("Six Characters In Search Of A Faith: The Mythic And Mundane in *Wonderful Tennessee*"), and Anna McMullan's fascinating feminist critique of Friel's most famous play ("In touch with some otherness: Gender, Authority and the Body in *Dancing At Lughnasa*."). As a volume in which to dip in and out, *The Irish University Review* (£8.50) is perfect.

Unlike the second, Richard Pine's *The Diviner: The Art of Brian Friel* (UCD Press, £19.99) is a reissue with new chapters — "Plays Of Language" and "Time and Plays Of Beyond" — and demands that the reader wade through the whole book.

Having Friel's ear, Pine is in the enviable position of knowing the writer's intentions, but unfortunately this also makes for a critique of Friel's work which is at times extremely partisan and irritatingly self referential — particularly his analysis of the late plays *Molly Sweeney* and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* And while occasionally Pine does offer some cogent analysis and interpretation of *Translations*, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *The Loves of Cass Maguire*, and *Aristocrats* — seen through a post-colonial lens — for the most part his book suffers from loving his subject too much rather than too well.



**YOUNG LOVE:** Danti-Dan

AMELIA STEIN

Moving from the criticism of plays to plays themselves, Rough Magic's first collection, *Rough Magic: First Plays* (Methuen/New Island Books, £11.99) is a welcome remedy to the principal problem of play publishing — namely the lack of it, particularly in Ireland. Featuring Declan Hughes' *I Can't Get Started*, Donal O'Kelly's *The Dogs*, Pom Boyd's *Down Onto Blue*, Arthur Riordan's *Hidden*

*Charges*, Gina Moxley's *Danti-Dan*, and Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney*, the Rough Magic collection achieves two important ends — it allows the plays to be disseminated to a larger public with the hope of new productions, and to be reassessed.

As to the latter: The plays have mostly weathered well. They all share a knowing scepticism about the Celtic Tiger, even before the phrase was coined, particularly *Hidden Charges* and *Down Onto Blue*, and revel in their own enthusiasm and imagination, notably *The Dogs* and *Danti-Dan*. However, and this the curious thing, how would they be staged now? These plays and their writers evolved out of a particular environment which infused them with a theatrical and dramatic personality, and of the writers, only two have worked with other directors and companies . . . *Rough Magic: First Plays* documents the success of the company's new writing policy, but reading the plays themselves raises questions of their future; only *Danti Dan* and *Down Onto Blue* seem to speak with as much urgency and force as when they were first produced.

Looking distinctly chipper in its slim green and blue jacket is Michael West's *A Play On Two Chairs* (Mermaid Turbulence (sic), £4.00). First performed in 1990 in D.U. Players, and revived last year in Dublin, Edinburgh, and New York, West's play is destined to become a best-seller — watch out for productions on the student and amateur circuits — with its minimal design and casting (two chairs and two actors), sassy dialogue, elliptical narrative, quirky characterisation and gobs of theatrical invention. It is also a joy to read on the page and to imagine on the stage: *A Play on Two Chairs*, to borrow a phrase from Broadway, has got legs.

Jocelyn Clarke is lead theatre critic of The Sunday Tribune.

## Local Links

DARA CAROLAN reports on the amateur drama scene.

THE AMATEUR WORLD TENDS TO QUIET DOWN in the summertime, but there is some interesting news emanating from Naas, where the Moat Club are embarking on a project that will bring a welcome resource to amateur and professional practitioners alike — a £1.2 million capital project which will include a new 200-seat theatre on the existing town centre site with an exhibition area, rehearsal rooms, and meeting rooms. The project will incorporate an existing historic building, and it's expected that work will start early next year. Naas will then join a number of amateur companies who have provided new theatres around the country — among them Tallaght Theatre; Kilmallock; the Backstage, Longford; Carrigallen; and Donegal.

### NEWS FROM THE DRAMA LEAGUE OF IRELAND

The 34th annual D.L.I. summer school takes place this year from 14-21 August. Courses on offer include acting, technical skills, and directing, and this year features a new collaboration with the National Theatre, whose Outreach Director, Kathy McArdle, will teach a course on community theatre . . . Two Drama League resources available to its members are a database of professionals who are interested in conducting workshops and classes and working in an advisory capacity to the amateur sector; and a library of plays — 200,000 comprehensively catalogued manuscripts. For more information on these resources contact the Drama League on 807-2443, ext. 2331 or e-mail: daracarolan@tinet.ie.

Dara Carolan is the Drama League's project officer.

# Entrances and Exits

**LOUGHLIN DEEGAN** charts comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

**MAURA O'KEEFFE**, managing editor of this magazine, is replacing **MARTIN MUNROE** as the Theatre Shop co-ordinator. **MUNROE** has moved back to his native Chicago and is working for a dance company there.

**CAROLINE DENNEHY**, previously of CoisCéim Dance Theatre, the Gate, and the Abbey's Literary Department has also recently moved Stateside, to New York. Also at the National Theatre, **KATHERINE BROWNIDGE**, previously of the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, has been appointed Marketing Manager. **DEIRDRE PURCELL** has been reappointed to the board of the Abbey and **EITHNE HEALY** has been newly appointed to the board, replacing **GEMMA HUSSEY**.

**JANE DALY** has been appointed Acting Drama Officer at the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaón. She is replacing **PHELIM DONLON** until mid-November, who has assumed the role of Assistant Director to replace **MARY CLOAKE**, who is undertaking a six-month research placement at Trinity College. Also at the Arts Council, **NESSA O'MAHONY** been appointed Head of Public Affairs.

**MARY O'DONOVAN**, previously of Pan Pan Theatre Company, has been appointed as the first General Manager of the Dublin

Fringe Festival. Other new members of this year's Fringe team include former Belltable press officer **SIOBHÁN COLGAN**, who will cover PR for this year's Festival, and **JONATHAN SHANKEY**, who is co-ordinating the Fringe's comedy programme. **CATHERINE LAFFEY**, formerly of the Dublin Fringe, has been appointed Communications Manager at City Arts Centre. At the Dublin Theatre Festival, **TAMBRA DILLON**, formerly Vice President for Marketing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, has been appointed Development Manager.

**DR. JOSEPH LONG** has been appointed Director of the Drama Studies Centre at U.C.D. and continues as Chairman of the Project Arts Centre.

**MARIE JONES** has left her position as Storytellers Theatre Company's long-serving Company Manager. **DONAL SHIELS** is currently acting as the company's Producer on a contract-by-contract basis. **MARIA FLEMING**, previously of Druid, has been appointed Company Manager of Calypso Productions.

**JOHN BREEN** is the new Artistic Director of Yew Tree Theatre Company, Ballina. **JO MANGAN** is currently employed as

Administrator of Fishamble Theatre Company. **PAULA McLAUGHLIN**, former administrative assistant of CoisCéim, is the new General Manager of Kabosh in Belfast.

**CAROLINE SENIOR** is the new Artistic Director of Garter Lane Arts Centre. **BRIGID RODEN** has replaced Gerard AE Watson as Chief Executive of Cothú — the Business Council for the Arts.

**REGINA DOYLE** has been appointed Acting Director of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig, following the departure of **BERNARD AND MARY LOUGHLIN** for Spain. **GRÁINNE MILLAR**, Projects Manager at Annaghmakerrig, has also left to pursue other projects.

**JACK CAWLEY** has been replaced as Production Manager at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway by **PETER ASHTON**.

#### NEW VENUE NEWS

**PATRICIA MCBRIDE**, previously of the Lyric Theatre and Charabanc, has been appointed the new General

Manager of An Grianán in Letterkenny, which is due to open in October. **HELEN LEWIS** is the Director of the recently re-opened St Michael's Theatre in New Ross.

The new **PAVILLION THEATRE** in Dun Laoighaire is due for completion by the end of the year. A Theatre Manager will be appointed by late July.

#### SITUATIONS VACANT

**JIM NOLAN**, Red Kettle's long-standing Artistic Director, will be leaving his full-time position in December. He will continue an association with the company but will also be pursuing a career as a freelance writer and director.

At the Galway Arts Festival, **TED TURTON** has programmed his fourth and last festival. The position of Artistic Director is currently being advertised and a replacement is expected to be announced in September.

*Loughlin Deegan is a playwright and is company manager of Rough Magic Theatre Company.*



**THE LADS:** Some of Red Kettle's stalwarts, including out-going A.D. Jim Nolan (far right).

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**DANCING AT LUGHNASA**

by Brian Friel

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

3 June - 17 July, 1999

Reviewed 14 June by DECLAN KIBERD

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO OVER-PRAISE Patrick Mason's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey Theatre this summer season. By now, the status of the original Abbey rendition is legendary and the fear of invidious comparisons might have deterred a lesser talent. That golden moment in Irish theatrical history when the five Mundy sisters were transformed into dervishes by "Marconi's voodoo" will never burst upon audiences with quite the shock of recognition which it evinced on its opening night in 1990. And, in the years between, there has been *Riverdance*. Yet Patrick Mason's new version achieves a singular effect. The distortion and rage which Friel places in balance against the bodily energy and celebration are fully manifest, perhaps for the first time, in a quality production, and the moment allows for a return to the more manic potentials of the native dancing tradition (in its strange blend of repression and exuberance), away from *Riverdance's* blander, commodified pleasures.

The darker implications of the play are now more apparent than they were in 1990, but they are offset by a wonderfully comic performance by Anna Healy as Maggie Mundy, a part rich in promising one-liners to which the actress brings the pressure of a felt experience. All of the acting is of a high standard (Anita Reeves and Steven Elliott excelling in polar opposition as puritan and hedonist), Joe Vanek's set is gorgeous, and the "radio days" feel is captured very satisfactorily by the period music and by some fine choreography.

This production followed hard upon

the Abbey's trenchant revival of *The Freedom of the City*, which held up very well across the decades, and it coincided with a subtle version of *Aristocrats* at the Gate. A major theme linking all three is the insouciance with which a people attempt to realise the present moment, even as the unstoppable force of history overtakes them. Friel has often been said to be obsessed with the past and with the distortions wrought by subjective memory; but, like all true artists, his real aim is to excavate and understand the present. He is less interested in the past than in our current power over it, including the human capacity to reshape it to our current needs.

In the earlier plays, self-serving lies about the past told by desperate or stressed individuals were interrogated by a framing commentary — often done by deep-voiced Americans with an academic profile and neutralist pose, whether the sociologist in *Freedom* or the historian in *Aristocrats*. These are arguably the most weakly realised characters in their plays (in the sense of being the hardest parts to act with any complexity or conviction.) By the time he wrote *Making History* (1988), Friel was ready to problematise the framing narrator and also to integrate him into the action, even when such a framer was an Irish historian. Most readings of that under-rated play see it as a dramatisation of Hayden White's thesis in *Metahistory* that there is no such thing as objective history, merely an endless plurality of histories at the mercy of such external factors as the forms in which they are encased and the needs of the currently ruling regime (two elements which are often seen to conspire).

*Making History* was quite wrongly interpreted by historians (long nervous of Friel's politics) as an attack on "revisionism" Irish-style, yet its underlying argu-

ment was that all histories are necessarily revisionist. Its author went on in *Dancing at Lughnasa* to perfect a method beloved of most revisionist historians: he attempted to restore to a precise historical moment, August-September 1936, the openness which it once had, before hindsight gave all the events which followed the look of inevitability. Here, the framing figure is not some impersonal, academic authority, but a youngish man who tries as best he can to remember the events in which he was marginally caught up as a seven-year-old boy. He knows that his version has more to do with atmosphere than fact, and that he will never recall things exactly as they were. David Parnell's Michael in the current Abbey version well captures that acceptance of self-limitation; his look is quizzical or amused when not downright diffident.

This is important because some well-argued feminist readings of the play have treated Michael as if he were just another all-controlling macho framer. Yet the character is so far from omniscience or authority that, in this production anyway, we are more aware of him as the vulnerable seven-year-old on whom the sisters often eavesdrop than as the mature adult who looks back on them (and on his prior self). By far the most stunning and beautiful of Friel's formal arrangements here is the tension between Michael's narrative summaries (pacy, pithy, and pungent) and the actual lives being lived in slow-mo by the sisters in the farmhouse. Even

as he keeps swooping forward into the future ("The industrial revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg"), they seem to pull events back into the present, the better to hold onto the moment and make it last just a little bit longer in all its bittersweetness. Perhaps this is why there are so astonishingly few references to the past in the sisters' world of the play; and why those few are of such momentous significance (Maggie's recollection of a



**SNACKING AT LUGHNASA:** Lynn Cahill as Rose in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

AMELIA STEIN

"fixed" result in a dance competition many years earlier, and Father Jack's recall of his mother waving an unsmiling farewell as he left for the missions in 1911, an epiphany of heart-breaking intensity rendered with understated grace by Des Cave).

If there was a single weakness in the Abbey production, it may have been in the reluctance of the director to heighten the rather brutal contrast in pace between

the narrative summaries and the enacted scenes. There is a sense in which Michael is in direct contrast with those scenes as the play moves into its second half, committed to a faster, more modern pace of life. His commentaries are increasingly resumed as almost-violent intrusions on the sisters' actions, while on other occasions those actions seem to over-ride his sentences. The play was, after all, composed in the later 1980s, a period in which theories of "uneven development" informed a debate about Ireland's economic under-performance. The idea that the country contained both First World and Third World realities had been canvassed by the present writer in *The Irish Times* and by Frederic Jameson in a Field Day pamphlet. Friel's formal arrangements in *Lughnasa* are another way of dramatising that painful bifurcation.

The part of Father Jack is crucial to that debate. The 1980s was the decade in which many priests, nuns and lay missionaries began to return from the Third World imbued with the radical ideas of liberation theology and with the desire to re-establish intellectual and social connections between Ireland and the decolonising world. Some, like Jack, had learned much from the culture of the peoples among whom they found themselves. Missionaries, unlike the colonial administrators in Ryanga, had to understand the souls of those to whom they ministered, if they hoped to transform them, but to engage in that enterprise with any intensity was to expose oneself to the counter-claims of the local culture. While the colonial district commissioner refuses to speak Swahili to the natives, Jack does so, with predictable results — he "goes native", as his British friend would warningly say.

Following his return, the harvest festivals of Uganda mingle in his head with

the fire festival of Lughnasa, in ways which suggest how deep the analogies between Celtic Ireland and contemporary Africa might be. If Ireland was, in Luke Gibbons' words, a First World country with a Third World memory, Father Jack is trying harder than anyone — except possibly Michael — to put together the missing pieces. Yet, so estranged were most of the play's first interpreters from the Irish past that they were forced to rush off to the library and read Maire MacNeill's *Festival of Lughnasa* in order to investigate what precisely Friel was on about. Nevertheless, the potential of the African analogy was not lost on an audience which had recently read in *The Commitments* that the Irish were "the niggers of Europe." Whether that analogy needed the playing of African music during linking-sections of the recent Abbey production is, of course, open to question.

*Lughnasa* is a post-colonial play, also, in its capacity to qualify the bleakness of its content with the wonderful buoyancy of its formal devices. Its style sings of hope even as its message is depression. In that, too, it captured its cultural moment: for the bleak debates of the 1980s would soon give way to the economic affluence of the 1990s, as the country recovered its self-belief, and the more negative valences of the Third World analogy faded, leaving only the positive cultural implications. Not long after the 1990 premiere, Mary Robinson was elected President, and in her term of office she managed to reach out to the African constituency, inverting Roddy Doyle's aphorism when she told the Somalis that they were "the Irish of Africa." While that statement has left her accused of patronising hungry Africans, its intent was honourable and clear — and all the more significant in coming from a woman who was a noted Europeaniser. President Robinson, in

effect, combined the post-colonial and the European cultural traditions of the island in much the same symbolic fashion that Friel had achieved in his play.

By allocating the play to the National Theatre, Friel found a way of painting the familiar Field Day themes onto a truly national (and even global) canvas. *Dancing at Lughnasa* may be said to have anticipated much else that followed — not only the expanded definition of Irishness in global rather than narrowly 26-county terms, but also the willingness to reimagine the national condition which has characterised the politics of the decade, and also its poetry and prose.

*Declan Kiberd is author of Inventing Ireland and Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at U.C.D.*

**ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN  
WONDERLAND**  
by Lewis Carroll,  
adapted by Jocelyn Clarke

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company  
16 - 20 March, 1999 at the Hawk's Well  
Theatre, Sligo, and on tour  
Reviewed 20 March by SEONA MacRÉAMOINN

IMAGINATION IS GIVEN ITS FULL DUE in this accomplished adaptation of the Lewis Carroll classic by Blue Raincoat Theatre Company. From the moment that Alice, ever curious, tumbles down the hole in hot pursuit of the White Rabbit and his pocket watch, the writing and pacing of the play are in perfect harmony. The language and the performances find a tone that seamlessly brings writer and actors together and makes for lucid, intelligent theatre.

Jocelyn Clarke has adapted the novel for the stage in an innovative and challenging way that implicates audience and author along with the characters. In fact,

the dictum for good storytelling uttered by Alice "that you should begin at the beginning, go on till you come to the end, then stop" is liberally interpreted here. The play begins by establishing a framing device, as Lewis Carroll (David Heap) conjures his imaginary characters into being. Throughout the play, creator and character challenge one another and the perspective shifts between child and adult and between real and fantasy as Alice grows smaller, then becomes bigger and then smaller again. The Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, the Duchess and the Queen, Alice, the White Rabbit and the Dormouse are all sublimely self-possessed. Clarke's version manipulates Heap's narrator into confronting the alternative logic that he has imposed on the story and on the



KIP CARROLL

**SLIP SLIDING AWAY:** Fiona McGeown as Alice in Blue Raincoat's Wonderland.

actions of his characters.

The company of actors are divinely in sympathy with all of the characters as they all, by and large, take on several different roles. The visuals are much left to the imagination and to the inventiveness of the actors. Fast, disciplined, humorous and highly physical, they realise, with immaculate ease and no costume changes, the house of cards, the teapot, a grunting pig/squalling infant, an autocratic Queen or a game of croquet. The actors are a bravura ensemble, speaking, singing, leaping, rolling, racing up and down ladders, as voice and body scale many heights.

Heap transforms into a solemn Mock Turtle relating even more tales to Fiona McGeown's entranced Alice. Mudita Proctor costumes the actors in shadowy grey and black but the power of the actors' performance imbues them with vivid colour and light in the audience's imagination. Blue Raincoat artistic director Niall Henry directs and choreographs the movement consummately. *Alice* is a most diverting piece of theatre that skilfully expands our imaginations.

Seona MacRéamoinn writes about dance and theatre for The Sunday Tribune.

#### **ANGEL/BABEL**

Operating Theatre  
project @ the mint, Dublin  
27 March - 3 April, 1999

Reviewed 23 March by ANNA McMULLAN

IN APRIL 1998, AT THE SAMUEL BECKETT Theatre, Dublin, Olwen Fouere gave a reading of Beckett's "Lessness," a short, haunting prose piece, featuring a "little body heart beating" alone in a desolate wasteland of "ash grey all sides earth sky as one all sides endlessness." In *Angel/Babel*, clad in a dishevelled space



ANELIA STEIN

**HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM:** Olwen Fouere in *Angel/Babel*.

suit or padded boiler suit, Fouere performed an intergalactic version of this isolated figure whose heart beating might be the last sound to echo through the stratosphere. But is this a human heart or is it animated by the electronic apparatus to which the body is wired up? Is the body really alone or is it subject to an unseen power or presence? Through voice, soundscapes and image, *Angel/Babel* articulated a millennial anxiety about the shifting borders between the human and the technological, the prospect of ecological disaster, and the limits of individual control over the body, psyche and environment.

*Angel/Babel* was a collaborative project between the founders of Operating Theatre — Fouere and composer Roger Doyle — and director Leon Ingulsrud of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute. Paul Keogan, the lighting designer, lit the performance with exquisite precision. During rehearsals, Fouere was suspended in space for much of the

performance, but, due to an injury, when the lights went up on the night I attended, she was lying on her back, her body covered in a network of wires and nodes, facing away from the audience, but reflected back at us through a large mirror.

The voice was technically modified so that gender inflections became ambiguous, and the electronic qualities of the voice were emphasised. The text seemed to generate itself through repetition with variation (not incidentally, an important structural principle in Beckett's work as well). The voice was used to create a texture of sound patterns from a whisper to a scream, underlined by the sound score, whose abstract formations were interrupted by reminders of the human: a groan or a cry.

The lack of movement meant that the smallest shift of corporeal position or speech became significant and sudden changes seemed almost shocking. While the text seemed sometimes to be caught in a loop of repetition, occasional phrases of poetic resonance emerged like embers in an atrophying universe. While the body moved only slightly, the exploration of the space was effected through the mesmerising razor-edged beams of light which rested within or combed the space, occasionally creeping along the ceiling to penetrate the space of the spectators. If the human was portrayed as the ghost in the machine, the technological took on an uncanny anthropomorphic presence.

This was a performance piece which did not operate according to the recognisable dramatic conventions of plot, character or setting. It explored the remains of the human in a world of increasingly virtual global communications, as a body struggled to utter and project some image or trace of itself (emphasised by the mirror). The final image of the figure rising to take up the position of the star constella-

tion, Orion, seemed both affirmative and moving. I was reminded again of "Lessness": "one step in the ruins in the sand on his back in the endlessness he will make it."

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*Anna McMullan is a lecturer at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College.*

**ARISTOCRATS by Brian Friel**

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

4 May 1999 - 19 June 1999

Reviewed 16 June by VICTOR MERRIMAN

BEN BARNES' PRODUCTION OF *ARISTOCRATS* is a fine achievement by any standards. This play calls for intense individual realisations by the actors, and a precise, but not schematic orchestration of the ensemble by the director. Christopher Oram's set encloses both the upstage interior of Ballybeg Hall and the downstage tennis court in brown mottled walls. Distressed furnishings of another era define the "large and decaying house overlooking the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal," while persistent tufts of field grass threaten the limits of the playing area with the encroachment of a feckless hinterland. Rupert Murray's lighting supports and focuses the dramatic action with economy and style. Joan Bergin's costumes enhance the visual setting and contribute strongly to an absorbing theatrical text.

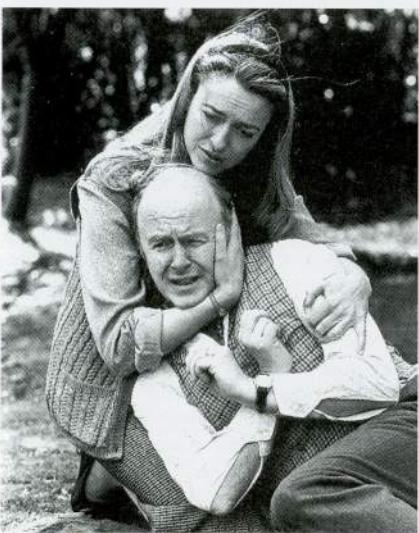
The performances are uniformly committed, actors working for each other in the service of a densely layered performance text. The playing divides into sophisticated, subtle readings of both individual role and ensemble function, and more problematic representations. Mark Lambert's Casimir is extraordinarily fine, presenting the barbarity at the heart of his life experiences in concert with his dignified coming to terms with a life lived on a reduced scale. Frank McCusker brings intelligence and commit-

ment to Eamon, a role gifted with playing audience to Casimir's unbearable self-revelation, and cursed with the burden of editorialising on the enduring subservience of the Catholic peasantry. The Act 2 duet between the two men is a rare moment of profundity, a complex of insight and emotion. Alison McKenna's Claire is very finely judged, embodying a range of confusions around the past, the terrifying future and the medicated present, while engaging fully with the many games which she must instigate and in which she finds respite. Donna Dent's Alice and Catherine Byrne's Judith demonstrate the actor's struggle to establish autonomy within the ensemble in the case of roles written to type: the selfless older woman contemplating uncertainty and loneliness, and the childless alcoholic wife.

In all cases, the more problematic portrayals result both from the writing and from production choices. William Roberts'

Tom Hoffnung illustrates this dynamic: Hoffnung is an onstage observer, a crucial role in many of Friel's plays, and the device by which the fictions of Ballybeg Hall are exposed to critique. Hoffnung's defining characteristics — Americanness and scholarliness — are framed, however, as inherently ridiculous, even contemptible: "There are certain truths that are beyond Tom's kind of scrutiny." The writing asserts and privileges an essentialised emotional capacity as the property of Irishness. Americanness is "other" to this, and is presented as irredeemably arid: an obsessively quantitative worldview, unable to engage with the joys and pains of human experience. Hoffnung, vested with a task which includes directing the audience toward contradiction is set up to fail from the outset. The performer's task in this case demands a reading against the grain of the writing. Specifically, the production might refuse the audience a laugh at the title of his proposed book: *Recurring Cultural, Political and Social Modes in the Upper Strata of Roman Catholic Society since the Enactment of Catholic Emancipation*. Playwrights from Shaw to Murphy have examined this terrain. This is the implied theme of *Aristocrats* itself. To risk trivialising such content, and the acts of scholarship which excavate it for critical purposes, reduces a central argument for reviving the play: that it question the evolved position of the inheritors of that class — a social group amply represented at the Gate on any given evening.

Raymond Williams described Chekhov's characters as "living lives of quiet desperation." Audience misrecognition of despair as celebration, often discussed in relation to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is at issue again in *Aristocrats*. On the night I saw the production, many present acknowledged no distinction between Claire's desperate grab at Eamon's whiskey glass at the



**SUSPENDED IN CHILDHOOD:** Catherine Byrne and Mark Lambert in *Aristocrats*.

thought of her impending marriage (Act 1), and the well-crafted joke involved in Casimir's telegram (Act 3). Both got a laugh. This flight from engagement to shorthand responses which travesty emotional pain is a significant cultural problem. It empties theatre of meaning. It is to the credit of the players and the director that in a naked contest between crass refusal of meaning and that public questioning which is the *raison d'être* of drama, the play prevailed.

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Victor Merriman lectures in drama at Dublin Institute of Technology.

**BT CONNECTIONS FESTIVAL**

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

April 5 - 10 1999

Reviewed by KIARA DOWNEY

ONE OF THE BIGGEST YOUTH THEATRE EVENTS of the year came roaring through Belfast in April, with 14 groups from both sides of the border presenting new plays scripted by an impressive collection of international playwrights. A total of ten new works by authors including Dario Fo, Alan Ayckbourn, and Sharman MacDonald were commissioned by British Telecom, the Royal National Theatre, and Faber and Faber in a project called New Connections '99.

The project is a bi-annual event that invites chosen writers; 150 youth theatre groups from across the U.K., Ireland, and Europe; and 11 host venues to create new plays for young artists. Each play is specified for performers between the ages of 11 and 19 and limited to one hour in length. Each participating youth theatre company chooses one of the commissioned plays, attends workshops with the writers, and performs in regional competitions in hopes of being chosen to perform in a final bash at the National this July. It's an exciting

scheme that ignites plenty of creative energy and does much to link the professional theatre with young people interested in the form. In addition to promoting new writing and cultural exchange, New Connections '99 boasts some of the most exciting theatre of the year.

April's programme in Belfast was one of the first regional festivals building up to the final gathering at the National. The five day line-up included two nightly performances at the Lyric and two daytime shows at the Methodist College. Of the numerous productions to hit the boards in Belfast, two have been selected to advance to the showcase in London, one from Waterford and one from Belfast itself.

Waterford Youth Drama were selected for their production of Paul Goetze's *Pilgrimage*. Told in the fashion of a fable and employing a seer and chorus, the play explores tribalism and traditional beliefs that lead to bigotry and bloody feuds. One year after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and with ancient feuds continuing to flare in the Balkans, *Pilgrimage* is a play with contemporary resonance, but the heavy-handed writing and long-winded sermons about peace and the subjective nature of historical memory overwhelmed most of the productions. In many performances, the people on stage seemed more like lecturers than actors. Waterford's energetic approach to the dense script clearly served them well, as they are the only production of *Pilgrimage* to be selected for the final programme. Waterford's production rose above the others with a marked sense of ensemble cooperation. Numerous members of Deirdre Molloy's troupe turned in excellent performances. Deirdre Dwyer's portrayal of Lena was among many strong interpretations of minor, but significant characters. This particular production overcame textual shortcomings and is well-deserving of its National debut.

Also selected for a National appearance is the group from Belfast's Methodist College with their superb staging of Christina Reid's *I'm The King of the Castle*. Reid, a native of Northern Ireland, attended Methody's Lyric performance and was treated to an imaginative production of her coming-of-age tale about a young girl growing up in 1950s Belfast. The play spins from a celebration of childhood innocence to a delicate inspection of war's cruel reality. Methody's actors, supported by clever



**GETTING CONNECTED:** Students at the launch of the BT Connections Festival.

set and costume design, successfully played a diverse range of characters and ages in a demanding ensemble project. Under Joan McPherson's direction, this young group created a professional quality production. Stand-out performances from Kerry Cleland and Philip Mulryne were bolstered by supporting players who began the play as kite-flying children with skinned knees and believably matured into leisure suit wearing teenagers of the 1960s. Methody and Reid are certain to make a grand showing in London.

Kiara Downey holds an M.Phil from the Samuel Beckett Centre and currently teaches drama to young people in Los Angeles, CA.

### THE COUNTRY BOY by John Murphy

Druid Theatre Company

27 May - 12 June at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, and on tour

Reviewed on 1 June by KAREN FRICKER

GARRY HYNES' DESIRE TO TAKE A FRESH LOOK at John Murphy's *The Country Boy* is visionary, but the resulting production something less than that. Written in 1959, Murphy's sole play is a popular favorite for student and community groups but hasn't had a major professional production since 1965. Indeed the play was ripe for a new take; Hynes' Druid Theatre production reveals it as a watershed, a summing up and advancement of themes that continue to echo in the nation's consciousness and its dramatic literature. What's shocking is the play's anger; Murphy's jaundiced view of emigration makes Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, written five years later, read like a fantasy tale. But *The Country Boy* is still a product of its time, and Hynes' apparent decision to play into its clichés, anachronisms, and character types makes for a jagged evening's viewing.

That this is something of an Ur-play of Irish drama is made clear even as the lights come up on the interior of the Maher household in rural County Mayo, which looks like nothing so much as the set for Druid's production of *The Leenane Trilogy* with a fresh coat of paint (indeed the production reunites the *Trilogy* team of Hynes, designers Francis O'Connor and Ben Ormerod, and composer Paddy Cunneen).

Elder son Eddie moved to America 15 years ago, and elderly parents Tom and Mary Kate are preparing for his first visit home with his Yank wife Julia in tow. Younger son Curly, fed up with farm life and with his cantankerous father, is planning to follow his brother back to the States, even though it means leaving his



DEREK SPERNS

**CULTURE CLASH:** (from left) Stella McCusker, Peter Gowen, Shelley Williams, and Cillian Murphy in *The Country Boy*.

girlfriend Eileen behind.

The play spans the month of Eddie and Julia's visit, as their initial bravado wears off and the truth of their life in America — he's an abusive alcoholic and they live in squalour — becomes clear. The play's conflict is centered in the fascinating character of Eddie, who's stuck on a treadmill of self-destructive behaviour but is self-aware enough to throw himself in his brother's path before he makes the same mistakes; Eddie's come home to make sure that Curly will stay in Ireland, marry his girl, and accept his life's small scope. Murphy thus casts a remarkably clear eye on the complex networks of romanticization between Ireland and the U.S.; unlike Gar in Friel's *Philadelphia*, for whom America is a dreamland, Eddie — unable

to adjust to his adopted country and over-idealising his home country — embodies the troubled, complex reality of the emigrant experience.

But for all its prescience there's a lot about Murphy's play that now grates as old-fashioned — several of the characters are one-sided, the conflict between Tom and Curly poorly fleshed out, and the resolution of all the conflicts too pat. Hynes' strategy is to go along with what now rankle as the play's inconsistencies, even to play them up; after a lightly comic first act, Julia's first entrance — in a soaring beehive and garish dress — sends the production veering into farcical territory.

It's all quite funny, but nothing particularly new, and certainly provides little preparation for the dark turn the story is soon to take. Play and production are at their troubling, intriguing best in Julia's Act 3 confrontation with Eddie, as the artifice drops away and they tell each other the truth about their marriage for the first time. Then the play shifts again into comedic territory as Eileen gets her ring and Julia and Eddie's problems seem on their way to too-easy resolution.

One has the sense that the production will mellow and blend as the run continues, but on opening night the actors seemed to be performing in their own plays, focussing more on navigating the shifts in their characters than on interacting with each other. Cillian Murphy, so impressive in *Disco Pigs*, needed stronger directorial supervision to stop him from delivering most of his performance to his shoes, and one wished that the wonderful Eamon Morrissey and Stella McCusker had been given more than one stage Oirishey note to play. The production's problems, like the play itself, came to center on Eddie; it was hard to tell whether Peter Gowen's uneven performance, braying one moment and cowering the

next, was a character choice or actorly uncertainty — at times, he seemed to be reaching for lines.

It's hard not to read a statement into Druid's choice to premiere a new, Hynes-directed production in the very week that their staging of Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* vied for Tony Awards on Broadway; it feels like an affirmation of the company's commitment to local audiences and to the renewal of the Irish canon. Fair play to them for that; one only wishes that the production itself hit its targets more squarely.

### THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY

by Brian Friel

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

22 April - 29 May, 1999

Reviewed 28 April by MUIRIS MACCONGHAIL

THREE CITIZENS OF DERRY, A WOMAN AND two men involved in a civil rights march and seeking refuge from the noisy and violent riot that follows, secure sanctuary through the unlocked doors of the Guildhall and find themselves in the Mayor's parlour. They have violated the other side's temple and will pay dearly for their sojourn. The three have never met before nor had any of them been to this place: they are Catholics, meaning they are not Unionists. Within the parlour the three begin to talk about the events which brought them together.

Mrs. Lily Doherty (Sorcha Cusack) opens the conversation. She has an engaging manner in her storytelling and brings into her account of events lively portraits of her neighbours and friends with their distinct characteristics of speech. She brings her own knowledge of the effects of CS gas: "Do you know what they say? That CS gas is a sure cure for stuttering." Sorcha Cusack's performance throughout the recent Abbey production is a commanding

one, embracing the humanity of the whole event and giving a vivid and moving picture of life as wife and mother in Derry.

Michael Hegarty (Gerard Crossan) is a civil rights activist. He has detected that there is a "hooligan element" now involved in the civil rights process and remembers the earlier days of protest in which even placards were forbidden by the organisers: ". . . and that was really impressive — all those people marching along in silence, rich and poor, high and low, doctors, accountants, plumbers, teachers, bricklayers — all shoulder to shoulder . . ."

"Shite — if you'll excuse me missus. Who's for more municipal booze?" asks Skinner, the third of the trio. While the others were talking he has looked into every nook and cranny of the hospitality suite. Michael Colgan plays up Skinner's streetwise quality and the cynicism of his lines. His barbs are thrown like darts against Michael whom he relentlessly taunts about the membership of doctors and accountants in the civil rights move-



AMELIA STEIN

**STREETWISE:** Michael Colgan in The Freedom of the City.

ment. Their battle is fought out against the care and concern which Lily has developed for them and which Cusack sustains throughout; her performance put me in mind of the words of John Hume at the end of his 1970 RTÉ programme about his native city: "For Derry is the mother of us all." In the really fine acting of Colgan and Crossen, I heard echoes of those great debates that took place then in the City Hotel, Derry before the IRA demolished that forum. Here, the direction and performances brought alive again the great debate about how to effect change, posing a radical social (perhaps socialist) approach against a gradualist one: that debate is one casualty amongst many in the North. Crossen's Michael Hegarty is the most challenging character in Friel's play — uncomfortably in the struggle, but wishing he were somewhere else.

Friel's ear and his skill to encapture and follow through in all of these strands is the durable part of *The Freedom of the City*. I remember thinking how little of that was evident in the first production at the Abbey in 1973 directed by Tomás MacAnna. But perhaps that production was too close, for all of us, to the Bloody Sunday murders of 30 January 1972. Here, director Conall Morrison's use of docu-broadcast type devices including wheel-around sound effects provide a too-close reading of the events of that awful day. The early moments of his production verged on propaganda, and distracted from the real value of Friel's text — those charged conversations, conducted at many layers, in the Mayor's parlour. I think Friel himself should have cut or changed the montages of sermons, drunken ballad mongers, sociologists' explanations, judge's rulings, and evidence from security personnel that are intercut throughout the play. What Friel is talking about in the play could have hap-

pened anywhere at any time; it is happening now. Lord Justice Widgery, the judge in the real-life Bloody Sunday tribunal, was a creature of his collapsed world and time. Lily, Skinner, and Michael are the relevant people in Friel's play. They stand the test of time and I hope they are not among the disappeared.

*Muiris MacConghail is a journalist and broadcaster, and teaches at the Dublin Institute of Technology.*

#### GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER, DO!

by Brian Friel

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

16 April - 15 May, 1999

Reviewed 20 April by KAREN FRICKER

THE FRIEL FESTIVAL BEGAN WITH A decided whimper with the Lyric's production of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* The choice of this particular play and venue to launch the Festival didn't bode well; it's Friel's most recent work and was almost uniformly panned when it premiered at the Abbey in a production directed by Friel himself in 1997, and the Lyric is the only non-Dublin venue in the three-month long Festival, which gave the production a sense of marginalisation from the start. And indeed, despite a superb central performance from Bernard Lloyd, Benjamin Twist's production cannot overcome the melodramatic and confused quality of Friel's script, the interest of which lies more in what it says about Friel at this point in his career than in what goes on on stage.

The play opens and closes with its most moving, near-identical scenes: middle-aged writer Tom Connolly (Lloyd) visits his catatonic, 22-year old daughter Bridget (Sarah Wilson) in hospital and carries on both sides of a conversation with her as she rocks and stares blankly;



JILL JENNINGS

**DAISY, DAISY:** Bernard Lloyd and Maggie Cronin in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*

we are to learn that the outrageous stories that he tells her, of her sprinting grandmother, dashingly criminal grandfather, and musical prodigy mother are tragically ironic parodies of the people's true identities.

Another of the fabulous stories that he tells Bridget is that he's finally finished his current novel; in fact, he's been unable to complete the book for five years, and he and his wife Daisy (Maggie Cronin) are in dire financial straits. Their friend and Tom's main rival, Garret, has just sold his archive to a Texan library for a large sum; Tom has therefore invited the library's agent, David Knight (David Howarth) to look at his manuscripts in hopes of a similar sale. On Knight's last day at the Connolly's home in the remote, fictional Donegal town of Ballybeg, the couple throw a garden party; in attendance are Daisy's parents — he a semi-retired cocktail pianist, she a retired doctor growing

increasingly incapacitated by arthritis — as well as Garret (Christopher Whitehouse) and his wife Grainne (Rosaleen Pelan), who snipe at each other constantly.

The garden-party setting and the introduction of a number of characters who are basically there to wait for a life-changing verdict (Knight's) has Chekhovian resonances; but what plays out on this long afternoon are a series of subplots that are overwrought and at the same time under-articulated, largely because the conception and execution of character is flawed.

Friel's given each of the characters a Big Problem — Tom's blocked; Daisy's father Jack is a kleptomaniac; Garret is a pompous blowhard and a sellout (a point underlined with far too much emphasis in Christopher Whitehouse's appallingly hammy performance); and even Knight is recovering from a breakdown and desperate for success. All the women share the same problem: they've sacrificed everything for, and thus are forced to live through, their weak husbands. But none of the characters is satisfactorily drawn; when they launch into extended soliloquy, as each of the main characters does at least once, they all speak with a too-similar, and too-literary voice — they are all far too eloquent in the face of all the emotional conflicts and personal revelations that litter the play. And too often Friel relies on the female characters to tell us what the men are feeling and thinking — thus both genders become stereotyped cyphers.

Where the play really feels like it's taking place is inside Friel's head; what he's wrangling with is the life of the writer, and the writer's relationship to posterity. His mouthpiece for this is Tom, and the arc of the story, as much as there is one, is Tom's conflicted and changing attitude towards the sale of his papers. When it looks like Knight might not buy, Daisy suggests Tom show Knight two of his

unpublished novels, which he wrote just after Bridget fell ill 10 years before; Tom agrees, and just before the interval drops a bombshell about the books to the assembled company: they're hard-core pornography.

Now, that's a potentially fascinating development — that a parent might respond to the horror and pain of a child's disappearance into mental disease by writing something as societally marginal and disturbing as porn; but that idea is not delved into, only suggested and then passed over. At any rate, these novels turn out to be the missing link in Tom's story, in Knight's view, and he goes after the archive with a vengeance; but now Tom has cold feet. It becomes Daisy's responsibility to explain to us why: for Tom to give up his papers is to commit himself to history, to posterity, to the record; now his reputation as a great writer will be assured. But he fears that this certainty will strip his talent away — it is the ambiguity of relative obscurity, perhaps, that keeps his creativity alive.

It's impossible not to read autobiography here; in the play, Friel, a great but aging writing talent, is grappling with the double-edged sword of success, the artist's constant internal wrestling with the desire for recognition and the fear that accepting that recognition will deny him his voice. That this notion is being expressed through a play that simply doesn't work is deeply poignant; that this play is opening a Festival which seems designed to cement Friel's canonical status is unmissably ironic. Late in his career, Friel has written a bad play about the fear that success will make him a bad writer, and this is being presented as the launch event of a Festival that's meant to celebrate his oeuvre? There's two words for that: bad producing.

**HADES** by Declan Gorman

Upstate Live Theatre Company

October 27 - November 7, 1998 at the

Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda, and on tour

Reviewed 30 March 1999, at the Old

Museum arts centre, Belfast,

by OPHELIA BYRNE

MOVE OVER, BALLYBEG: UPSTATE IRELAND has a new theatrical home. Even as the country revels in the current Frielfest, enter Ballinascaul, setting of *Hades* — like Friel's Ballybeg, a fictional border community full of shadows, half-lies and "shadowlives of perennial ritual." There, however, the similarities appear to end. Populated by nightclubbers, ostrich farmers and environmentalists, buffeted by Celtic Tigers and Peace Process initiatives, Ballinascaul pulls border-county Ireland blinking onto the contemporary stage — and with no small punch. Relentlessly modern, playwright/director Declan Gorman's world elicits an immediate shock of recognition: the distance between it and its Donegal counterpart seems immeasurable.

For if, as Tom Kilroy recently stated, a lively collaborative, community theatre is emerging to challenge the traditional pre-eminence of the literary in Irish drama, Upstate Live, Gorman's Drogheda-based theatre company, might well lead the charge. *Hades*, the company's second production, was written by Gorman himself after a series of workshops held with community groups and professional actors. The resultant work combines unusually deep roots in its society with an approach to writing and staging which is high-minded and inventive. The play is multi-layered and densely interwoven, depicting not just one story or even several, but cumulatively that of an entire North-East border town. The stage teems with some 30 characters who individual-

ly embody that combination of deadly predictability and fervent energy recognisable to citizens of Smalltown, Anywhere.

So, while George Patterson, small farmer and good neighbour, supports the annual Orange Parade, privately he suffers a crisis of loyalty which is intensified by events in the peace process. Local Big Fella Adrian Cronin, on every cross-border committee in town and married to a Councillor's daughter, simultaneously conducts a not-so-secret affair with an Armagh woman. Monsignor Daniel Lillis, an upstanding golfer tipped for a Bishopric, agonises secretly about a son fathered years before, while tortured Nicky Nixon, local alcoholic and vagabond, wends his way to a self-inflicted hell, eaten by memories of a homicide committed as a young man.

To enact his busy narrative, Gorman takes an effective, minimalist approach to all other elements of the drama. Though informed by Greek myth, the piece wears its classical knowledge lightly. It is written in the local North-East syntax: to a dialect naturally spare and witty, Gorman adds no extraneous purpose patches, and the dialogue is simply and devastatingly direct. So, too, is the staging: costumes and setting (by Maureen Finn and Pete Ward respectively) are spartan, while accompanying music is carefully chosen and apt. Strong and, in the main, judicious use of stylised movement is contributed by choreographer Carina McGrail. If slightly awkward in more serious moments, it contributes in no small measure to the play's most impressive directorial achievement: Gorman's handling of the rapid-fire movement from one scene to the next. The piece constantly builds and deconstructs itself, hurtling with an insouciant confidence from carefully created scenes of bleak despair to



RAYMOND HENSHAWE

**PUNCHY:** Ciarán Kenny in *Hades*.

moments of comic surrealism.

This fluidity conveys the impression that *Hades* is a neat piece of dramatic construction — no small feat, as the play actually embraces too much. Every storyline is given unexpected twists, and most characters acquire unsuspected depths; though these narrative developments ring true, the sheer volume of information can be sometimes overwhelming, with the audience struggling to keep up. Those who do are amply rewarded, however. At the heart of this 1990s work, Gorman ultimately finds modern-day Gars — fragile individuals struggling to hew lives out of bewildering times. Unlike Friel's 1960s hero, their problems may lie more in staying than leaving Ireland, but they are nonetheless people yearning for the familiarity of home at a time when, in the play's words, "Nothing's certain anymore."

Despite this, *Hades* evokes no sense of *déjà vu*. Revisited here with pace and verve, its themes feel strangely new and absolutely of the zeitgeist. In this, Gorman is aided hugely by the Upstate performers. Collectively, the five *Hades* actors (John

Hickey, Sinead Flynn, Ciarán Kenny, Aaron Monaghan and Sinead Douglas) create an ensemble of unstinting, focused energy; individually they handle their considerable, multi-role responsibilities with ease. Though the piece remains too disparate despite their efforts, *Hades* is still a hugely enjoyable piece of theatre. By turns fierce, humorous and gentle, its irreverent chutzpah makes Upstate a welcome addition to the Irish stage.

**HUPNOUSE by Charlie O'Neill**

Barabbas . . . the company  
7 - 29 May, 1999 at project @ the mint,  
Dublin and on tour  
Reviewed 12 May by KAREN FRICKER

THE EVER-INVENTIVE BARABBAS ENSEMBLE make a tentative foray into new textual territory with *Hupnouse*, their first commissioned play. The Lecoq-influenced company have primarily worked through collaborative creation; in their acclaimed production of *The Whiteheaded Boy* they successfully merged their signature clowning style with a traditional well-made play. *Hupnouse* further exhibits the company's ability to adapt to different writing styles and themes; the problem here is simply dramaturgical overabundance — writer Charlie O'Neill's taken on more issues than the play can hold up.

Laurent Mallet's fantastic junkyard setting places us at the edge of a major city — Dublin, we later realise — where a trio of outsiders tries to find a way to live together as they negotiate half-forgotten memories of their lives outside this place and, in a major plot development that weighs in too late, face the demolition of their community by "townie" bulldozers. We are in a liminal zone here: carrots grow in banana skins, trees are made of metal, and the three characters appear human but exhibit improbable behaviour,

rinsing their mouths with paint remover and consuming their own excrement. They speak in a pidgin language, mixing Hiberno-inflected English with baby talk (annoying), neologisms (hilarious), and cleverly re-formed epithets.

O'Neill's award-winning first play, *Rosie and Starwars*, was about the experience of travellers in contemporary Ireland, and this too is a story about otherness: these creatures look and sound like us, but different; they are dirty and do gross-out things but they're also lovable, feeling beings whose outsider behaviour has been exacerbated by lack of understanding. As Ireland diversifies, racism is emerging as one of the biggest social problems the country faces; this play is an admirably subtle attempt to tease out issues of bias and acceptance through the style of a com-



**TOPSY-TURVY:** (from top) Mikel Murfi, Veronica Coburn, and Simon O'Gorman in *Hupnouse*.

pany which itself has always stood outside the mainstream.

But the play's not just about racism; it's also about love, relationships, family, and

Ireland's urban overdevelopment; when abortion, among the most over-articulated devices in 20th-century Irish writing, pops up in the second half, one feels the play truly spiraling out of narrative control. O'Neill does successfully pull off a complicated weaving together of time periods — memories layer with live action and what "real time" is is purposely left unclear — there are so many subplots running through the play that it becomes exhausting to follow them all. He has a tendency to over-explain; a Beckettian nowhere-land theme is too forcibly hammered home in the play's first minutes, and the ending is an uncertain morass of syrupy sentiment and hard-hitting social commentary.

The three performers make a superb ensemble, with outside actor Simon O'Gorman integrating seamlessly with Barabbas core members Veronica Coburn and Mikel Murfi; the third member of the company, Raymond Keane, directs with authority and sensitivity.

*Huphouse* is a big-hearted but flawed first attempt at text-based topicality; Barabbas' promising-sounding next project also involves an outside writer, Donal O'Kelly, working with a company of 15 actresses and Keane on a long-term collaboration that will premiere at the Abbey Theatre in March 2000.

#### LIVING QUARTERS by Brian Friel

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

19 May - 19 June, 1999

Reviewed 17 June by LOUISE EAST

PERHAPS THE BEST REASON FOR HOLDING a Friel Festival is not to celebrate the playwright's most famous works but to bring some of his older, lesser-known plays to the surface and examine them for their real dramatic worth. *Living Quarters*, which was first performed at the Abbey in 1977 is one such hidden gem, a piece of

theatre obviously overshadowed by works such as *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Translations* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

Many of the themes of these better-known works are present in *Living Quarters* — the fallibility of memory, the equivocation of words, the power of the unsaid — but it would be a mistake to see the play as a dramatic re-working of old themes or as a kind of primer for work to come. Particularly in this tight and well-performed National Theatre production directed by Jason Byrne, *Living Quarters* has cadences and resonances all its own.

Clive Geraghty is Commandant Frank Butler, a man who has felt imprisoned for years, both by a second-rate commission at the army camp in far-flung Ballybeg and by his arthritic and overbearing wife. Now things finally seem to be going well. Following the death of his wife, he has remarried, to the glorious Anna (Mary O'Driscoll), and, having saved the life of nine men while on a tour of duty with the U.N., promotion seems inevitable.

The action takes place during the celebration of Frank's return, a night full of attempts at reconciliation that are fumbled towards but never quite achieved. His eldest daughter, Helen (Cathy Belton), makes her first trip home from London since the death of her mother six years before, despite the memories it brings of her failed marriage to her father's batman. Miriam (Rita Hamill) only lives nearby but manages to leave her goonish husband, Charlie (Ronan Leahy) behind; the youngest, Tina (Eithne Woodcock) is delighted to have the family together, and even Ben (Charlie Bonner), the black sheep of the family, shows up to offer congratulations. Father Tom (Des Nealon) with his tall tales completes the group, as he always has.

But from the start it is clear that things are not what they seem. Tony Flynn plays

Sir, a slightly ominous mixture between a modern-day director and a Greek chorus, who dictates the action using "the ledger," an big black book of compiled memories that each of the characters holds about that fateful night. The action on stage is actually a physical re-enactment of the years of tortuous reconstruction and regret that all the characters have individually endured.

The Greek influences in the play do not stop at using a chorus — when Anna steps out of line and blurts out her secret, that she's committed adultery — the audience knows from early on that tragedy is in the cards. Far from hampering the dramatic tension, this knowledge frees us to concentrate on the undercurrents that run beneath the family gathering, and to contemplate the vicissitudes of memory. Yet while the device of Sir is for the most part well worked out — and

Byrne has obviously paid close attention to its dramatic demands — it sometimes becomes a little too close to a gimmick, distracting from the all-too-human emotions in play and forcing the audience to focus only on the tricksy manipulation of time and reality.

Still, the excellent ensemble cast (and especially Geraghty and Belton) kept the pace and the tension admirably taut, helped in no small part by Johanna Connor's pragmatic set design and Paul Keogan's lighting.

*Louise East is an Irish Times columnist.*

#### LOVE IN THE TITLE by Hugh Leonard

4 March - 17 April, 1999 at the Abbey

Theatre, Dublin and on tour

Reviewed 31 May at the Civic Theatre,

Tallaght by SEONA MACREAMOINN

"IT'S LIKE LIVING YOUR LIFE BACKWARDS" remarks one of the characters in this latest work by Hugh Leonard. Reworking the past and exploring the power and unreliability of memory may be familiar territory for this playwright, but with *Love in the Title*, he takes an unexpected approach. He removes all the familiar signposts in dramatic structure and chronology, thus allowing himself to play with history and time in a more radical way. The characters in the play travel between 1932, 1964 and 1999, to and fro across those 60 eventful years.

They are Cat, Triona and Kate, representing three generations of one family; in the given frame of a summer day in Co. Limerick, we watch as they excavate the past and re-interpret large and small events in their shared lives. With other playwrights, characters talking and lolling in the long grass might signal a pastoral idyll, but with Leonard leading the way, you know that the exchanges will be sharply coloured with humour



**FAMILY BUSINESS:** Charlie Bonner and Cathy Belton in *Living Quarters*.



AMELIA STEIN

**SPLENDOUR IN THE GRASS:** Karen Ardifff  
in Love in the Title.

and the emotional atmosphere unpredictable. This picnic in the Limerick meadow is no exception as grandmother, mother and daughter reminisce and challenge one another. Facts suddenly have ambiguous meanings, secrets once harboured are offered as provocation, and the unrealised expectations or repressed hurts that haunt all families scatter small clouds on this imaginary happy gathering. There is genuine laughter but it is always counterpointed with some witty but sardonic barbs that in the end shelter rather than reveal true emotion.

Such contradictions. We are entertained and engaged, but too fleetingly. The writing is vigorous and the dialogue is testament to Leonard's keen ear for wit and repartee. The ensemble of actors, while weaving well together, are ultimately constrained by their characters' lightness. Karen Ardifff's girlish gran with a lost love is a bit too coy, and both Catherine Walsh's Triona, an icon to '60s suburban perfection and Ingrid Craigie's '90s femi-

nist novelist Kate need more shading.

Director Patrick Mason and designer Joe Vanek, the creative team for *Dancing at Lughnasa*, apply their skills again to a summer field of light where women take centre stage and memory is the perpetrator. But despite the visual throwback and Leonard's invoking of the ancestral voices of mythology and folklore, this play is not Friel's Donegal writ large on the plains of Limerick. *Love in the Title* shows a marked development in Leonard's own distinctive style, and with more investment in character might have been a more moving play.

#### **MISTERMAN** by Enda Walsh

Corcadorka Theatre Company

The Granary Theatre, Cork

22 April - 8 May, 1999

Reviewed 26 April by KAREN FRICKER

CORCADORKA HAVE THE MAKINGS OF A disturbingly entertaining production in *Misterman*, but at the moment the show comes across more like a sketch than a fully realised evening of theatre. *Misterman's* brevity — it's less than an hour long — is symptomatic of its under-development; it feels like writer and sole performer Enda Walsh has only begun to flesh out the compelling themes and ideas he's trying to express.

Commendably, *Misterman* finds Walsh forging new thematic and formal territory; whereas his hugely successful *Disco Pigs* was a kinetic evocation of Cork youth culture, this show introduces us to a lonely 30-something Irishman who lives in the tiny, fictional-but-recognisable town of Inishfree. We spend what initially seems like an average day in Thomas' life, as he chats to his bedridden and adoring Mammy, then strolls around town, carrying on both sides of the conversations with the people he meets and commenting to the audience about their



**LITTLE BIG MAN:** Enda Walsh in *Misterman*.

foibles and shortcomings. He visits the gravestone of his beloved father, who was a popular local shop owner; presumably Thomas and Mammy live off of the profit from the sale of the shop, as Thomas doesn't work and — as becomes increasingly clear — has far too much time on his hands to dream and scheme.

The setting (designed by Aedin Cosgrove and Mick Heffernan) is attractive and brightly coloured — a simple painted backdrop, a red ladder which Thomas climbs up to talk to God, two table-and-chairs groupings — and Cormac O'Connor's sound design is dominated by sprightly, cartoonish tunes. It feels like a child's view of the world, and what we come to realize is that Thomas' outlook is a deeply immature and self-centred one; he's somehow convinced himself the whole town has gone morally askew and that it's his job to set it right again.

But play and production don't seem in adequate control of the way in which the darker truth of the situation overtakes the simplistic reality. The exaggerated sweetness of the locale and Walsh's askew appearance (a dark suit and heavy dose of Brylcream just for a walk to the shops?) seem an initial ironic tip-off that this fellow is a bit odd, but then things develop relatively normally, with the anti-social nature of Thomas' personality only coming through in erratic fits and starts. There are some imaginatively staged and creepily funny bits of business — "Time to take your top off, Mammy!" Thomas cries as he massages Vicks Vapor-Rub into a formica table a bit too enthusiastically — but little momentum or mounting sense of dread, just a series of encounters that fizzle out one after the other.

While Walsh's language is engaging and energetic, he simply doesn't give us enough information about Thomas, and it's hard to tell what he is trying to say about the character or about the society that produced him. Clearly Thomas is too connected to his mother, but that's endemic to Irish culture; what role did his father's death play in the situation? He confuses his father with God and he's prudish; is this a play about the negative ramifications of religious absolutism? He's prone to violence — in the span of the play he kicks a dog to death and beats up a girl who refuses his advances — but where this behaviour comes from or what it's supposed to mean is never clear. A significant problem is point of view: the play seems to take place inside Thomas' head, but even if we are being thrust into his garbled, warped reality we need some sense of consistency or accumulation to let us know how all the pieces are meant to add up.

Walsh is a quirky engaging performer and *Misterman's* production values are admirably high; O'Connor's thorough and

imaginative sound design is particularly impressive. The show's already booked into the Edinburgh and Dublin Fringes, and there's likely to be extensive international interest from producers looking to extend *Disco Pigs'* momentum — but another blast of development work seems called for before *Misterman* hits the road.

#### **MORE LIGHT by Bryony Lavery**

Activate Theatre Company

The Granary Theatre, Cork

14 - 17 April, 1999

Reviewed 14 April by EDIE DEMAS

IN 1990, ON MY LAST NIGHT IN LONDON after a productive year studying for a Master's degree in educational theatre, I went with a group of fellow students to see a production of *Marat/Sade* by the National Youth Theatre. It blew my head off. The production and performance standards were first rate, practically faultless. But what was most impressive and remains with me as a kind of benchmark for youth theatre performance, was the unflinching strength of the ensemble work and more importantly, the fearless approach of the young people to a difficult text which many would consider inappropriate for young actors.

The point of my nostalgia is that I recently saw another youth theatre production with the same kind of kick. Graffiti's Activate Youth Theatre recently produced *More Light* by Bryony Lavery, winner of a 1998 BT Connections Award.

The play is based on a Chinese legend about an emperor who commissioned a great tomb to be built by the finest minds of his court and, upon completion, moves himself, the great minds and all his concubines into the tomb — whereupon he dies and the rest are buried alive. Left in the inner sanctum of the tomb, his concubines are unattended for the first time in

their lives and must fend for themselves. The women speak as one voice until one of the characters, More Light, distinguishes herself by suggesting they feed off the Emperor's body; after all, they all soon agree, "the Emperor has always provided" for them.

The text, written in verse, is complex in form and multi-layered in meaning. Ostensibly it explores power in its political, social and sexual guises. Underneath this exploration of relationships, the text's strangely beautiful choral dialogue commands us to examine individual creative expression as we watch each concubine discover herself as a person separate to the group, with skills, talents, desires and interests of her own. Not a bad subject for 15 - 22 year olds.

In the notes to the script Lavery discusses writing for young people: "I have learned that you have to free your mind from thinking that because they are young, they won't understand complex ideas. You certainly have to be entertaining and cut out any flab from your work. Young people are very obvious critics. They will tell you directly what is not working. But, after all, they are open to ideas, excitement and magic."

Lavery's simple recognition of the writer's inherent biases concerning young people and her assertion of their strengths is very clearly at work in *More Light*. She challenges the actors and subsequently the audience to look beyond the sexual power struggles that More Light and the others have experienced with the Emperor. Instead she asks us all to consider society's attitudes towards art and the artist, ultimately challenging the authoritarian role of the "Western Male Expert" by urging the tiny voice of a young girl called Love Mouth to break free from the fold by singing rapturously, experiencing and expressing a pleasure

from her own creation that she had never experienced at the hands of the Emperor.

This is complex and sophisticated stuff — a far cry from the traditional school play. Lavery requires a no-holds-barred approach and the Activate production rose to the challenge. Director Geraldine O'Neill clearly demands complete honesty and openness from the actors and every one met her demand. O'Neill created a physical, vocal and spatial tension utilising precise movement, rhythmic choral work and innovative staging as a foundation out of which the individual characters could emerge.

As with the *Marat/Sade*, the Activate approach was unwavering and fearless. In a time when the word "appropriate" seems to have more layers and more meanings than ever before, this approach is not simply refreshing or interesting or even merely challenging. It represents a vital way forward in its ability to stop us in our tracks and remind us what it felt like to think, make, and create for the first time.

*Edie Demas has worked for Corcordorca, Graffiti, and Dublin Youth Theatre and is currently Education Programme Director for the Murphy's Film Festival in Cork.*

#### THE PASSION OF JEROME

by Dermot Bolger

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

11 February - 13 March, 1999

Reviewed 17 February by EAMONN JORDAN

DERMOT BOLGER IS A BRAVE, inventive and consistently daring writer, unafraid to write dramas set in the present. In this latest play Bolger's central character is a successful advertising executive, Jerome Furlong (Liam Carney), who is conducting an affair in a squalid Ballymun flat with his younger co-worker, Clara (Lisa Harding). After a cocaine



AMELIA STEIN

**MESSIAH COMPLEX:** *Donna Dent and Liam Carney in The Passion of Jerome.*

trip and an encounter with the ghost of a young boy who had hung himself in the flat years before, Jerome wakes up with stigmata on his hands.

Is the appearance of the stigmata a mystical blemish, a gift, a punishment or an expression of psychological trauma? While it is neither the purpose nor the obligation of the playwright to explain himself, the ambiguity here feels more accidental than purposefully or incisively dramatic. The religious dimension is intentionally loose, without either the glare of irony or the perversity of parody. The lack of either weakens the play appreciatively. Much comedy is derived from the responses of the local community to Jerome's marks, with the caretaker of the flats (Johnny Murphy) and a liberation theologian priest (Des Nealon) in particular, providing surrealistically dangerous moments.

Coinciding with the Easter weekend, the play offsets fasting against indulgence in cocaine, punishment against intellectual gratification, the pain of death against the near indifference of sexual encounter. According to Jerome, Viagra is the true miracle, not spectral apparitions and not

stigmata, and religion is an irrelevant superstition since there are no devils or angels, just consumers. It is a world where the Via Dolorosa might be the name of a computer game or of the local Italian takeaway, and where the Long Good Friday is a film or the name of an hallucinogenic substance; and it is a culture where Jesus is not to be prayed to but played: "Play Jesus for me. Play Jesus." Mysticism, atheism, wealth and post-modernism all collide.

The fundamental inadequacy of this play is one of tone, which remains throughout at best ambivalent and at worst suspiciously indulgent. And I say that for a number of reasons that have as much to do with contemporary dramaturgical practices as they have to do with the apparently passé nature of male angst.

Writing about male pain is always going to be difficult. Impotency, work dissatisfaction, dead siblings, sexual betrayal, childhood hurts and middle age crises are neither new nor dramatically inviting per se. How to invigorate that mix seems to be the challenge. Bolger is consistently ambitious in this, but to what effect? Jerome's pain is visible and apparent, but the pain is neither dark enough in its intensity nor consistent enough in its relevance to have a huge impact in performance. We discover something of the source of Jerome's pain in his father's drinking and in the dead infant borne by his partner Penny (Donna Dent), who comes from old Protestant aristocratic stock. Seven years on, their relationship is still haunted by this death. So when Jerome encounters the ghost of the young boy, is it just a partial manifestation of his grief for his child? The only truly substantial scene in the play is when husband and wife argue about this event.

Memory, sexual excess, pain, and the ghosts of dead siblings seem to be the recurring key ingredients in the writing of many contemporary scripts. Initiatory

and suspect, hauntings have proved to be one of the staples of Irish drama. The presence of ghosts, contradictory in itself, suggests that many characters are haunted by memory, omission, absence and longing. Ghosts give the writer access to what is other and what is difficult to articulate. In this play it is the relationship between the poltergeist and the zeitgeist that feels like the most interesting notion, but one that remains disappointingly unpursued.

The grossly overwritten published script bears little true relation to the performance one. Director David Byrne played a huge role overall in the shaping of this production and in the orchestration of genuinely good performances from his cast, but certain confusions and certain details in both the staging and in the writing remain glaringly inept. Redemption is not Bolger's strength; demise is his forte.

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Eamonn Jordan teaches at the Drama Studies Centre, U.C.D. and is editor of the Internet journal Irish Theatre Forum.

**QUAY WEST by Bernard-Marie Koltès**  
translated by David Fancy, Joseph  
Long, and Alex Johnston  
Bedrock Theatre Company  
project @ the mint, Dublin  
10 - 24 April, 1999

Reviewed 20 April by BRIAN SINGLETON

BEDROCK'S PREVIOUS SUCCESSFUL DALLIANCE with the urban apocalypse in Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains*... (1995) has had no imitators on the Dublin stage since. As a belated sequel they tackle the late Bernard-Marie Koltès, known for his theatrical territories *in extremis*. His characters, too, are often shorn of behavioural niceties and conduct their lives in a series of transactions rather than through relationships. Such work could not be fur-

ther from the run-of-the-mill Irish theatrical experience. It is neither rural nor poetically realistic. But it does possess a beauty in its concerto-like structuring of the urban, the post-industrial, the blindingly harsh, the verge of apocalypse.

Koltès's modern classic is set in a deserted New York dockyard warehouse (but it could easily be east of the Point Depot). It is inhabited by characters, some connected by family, most by similar circumstance of their alienation from society. They appear devoid of emotional affiliation, able only to form relationships which involve some form of barter or transaction governed by the harsh laws of supply and demand: refugees without papers, criminals, discontented youth, a charity embezzler and his hapless consort on the run and running nowhere in a haunting, cavernous port whose docks have dried up, whose last ship has departed, and whose warehouses lie desolate.

It is into this very environment (designed by Johanna Connor) that Bedrock's audience enters. It is in a state of conscious dilapidation, formed by metal grilles, girders, concrete slabs: damp, drab, eerie. Paul Keogan's lighting (surely one of the most imaginative designs in recent times) is at times sombre and subdued, at others harsh and chilling. Vincent Doherty's two-hour soundtrack adds filmic suspense to the environment. Director Jimmy Fay anxiously wants us to experience the setting both visually, aurally and experientially. The shadows, tunnels and unfamiliar sounds are hugely successful in achieving this aim. We are as uncomfortable as Monique (Michelle Read) as she stumbles fecklessly behind the runaway embezzler Maurice (Des Nealon). Our mental heel has snapped off our proverbial shoe as a succession of monologues (a dramaturgical choice testifying to the isolation of and lack of communication between characters) reveal the

warehouse's inhabitants, interspersed with short bursts of rapid-fire dialogue, spoken with a degree of violence and threat hinted at by the rifle carried by the mute Abad (Bisi Adigun), indicating the paucity of communication.

It is much easier to identify with Monique because she doesn't want to be there in the first place, and asks questions on our behalf, desperately seeking an



**THE EDGE OF NOWHERE:** Neilí Conroy and Kate Perry in Quay West.

ROS KAVANAGH

escape route though not at the expense of her companion. It mirrors our own experience: uncomfortable in this sensurround, dangerous environment and compelled by this drama which is relentless, which offers no light or comic escape route (and that, in itself, is a gauntlet thrown down at Irish theatre: the denial of laughter). We are so used to the social space of our dramas that this post-industrial space is frightening and unfamiliar. Its disuse and reoccupation by the dislocated and dispossessed leaves it devoid of any social, familial and cultural connotations. It gives no indices to characterisation. The people there know little or nothing about one another. Neither do we who have only

their monologues to guide us, which are highly unreliable as dialogue fails to interrogate them. These monologues rage with nothing to quench them. There is no telephone and no rule of law. There is no escape. We feel sorry for no one except ourselves. We may try to empathise with the characters' plight but our sympathies dry up rapidly. Even the murder of Maurice provides no solution, let alone catharsis. We are locked into the end of society as we know it.

Language is tortured and the translation bears this out, even if it did take three translators to achieve it. Only a few incongruities betray their transatlantic English; Maurice's car runs out of North American "gas" while interjections of "Please God" turns these characters occasionally Irish Catholic ... but only for the duration of the line. Fay directs environmentally, charging the atmosphere to almost breaking point and his broad strokes paint the big picture. His designers are a dream-team and help him considerably in this, but I couldn't help feeling that more time should have been spent on text work with the actors. Paschal Friel may look the part of brooding gangster Charles but shouting his lines to the point of inaudibility does little for characterisation. Similarly Kate Perry played an accent rather than a character. In such a wordy play clarity is of prime importance, and especially with a text so alien in many senses it is important to follow or at least to comprehend the characters' self-revelatory monologues.

Not for the faint-hearted, and certainly not for everyone, *Quay West* is a challenging, at times frightening, and hardly enjoyable experience in any conventional sense. But full credit to Bedrock for not taking any easy routes and letting us see that there is a theatrical world beyond the hearth.

Brian Singleton is a lecturer in the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College.

**THE SEAGULL by Anton Chekhov  
in a new version by Michael West**

The Corn Exchange

18 June - 17 July, 1999

at project @ the mint, Dublin, and on tour

Reviewed 28 June by BRIAN SINGLETON

"I LOATHE THOSE RUSSIAN PLAYS. ALWAYS full of women staring out of windows whining about ducks going to Moscow." This programme quotation from the film *Withnail and I*, together with images of ducks on publicity material and even a "real" plastic duckie on sale in the foyer, are determining markers for this innovative production by the Corn Exchange.

If Chekhov wrote the play in 1897 at the height of Modernism and a New Drama in Europe, this production radically relocates it to what might be the end of the Postmodern age where popular cultural representations of it interrogate, reexamine and even determine the nature and mode of its theatrical representation. Michael West's new version is radical in that it is a simulation of the real thing and yet wholly conservative, daring not to interrupt structure or disrupt narrative. Director Annie Ryan's production is a slap in the face of Chekhovian realism, which Irish theatre has pandered to, appropriated, and replicated for decades.

Some would contend that Chekhov's dramaturgy has been the single major influence on Irish theatre writing in the last 40 years. Where would Brian Friel be without him? The recent "Festival" has shown us Chekhov's "three sisters" trope in its full glory. Tom Kilroy's *Seagull* (1981) furthered this connection in its relocation of the play to an Irish context of "Big House" culture and native insurrection. But the realist representation by our theatres has tended to focus on character, relationships, and "real" lived emotion à la Stanislavsky.

Ryan's production denies all of this. Her

style rejects psychological realism and leans heavily towards the grotesque, a style that has a long tradition East European theatre, albeit in not as extreme a form as Ryan's. Her grotesque presents characters in masks, decoratively in fixed, exaggerated make-up, and gesturally in honed physical expressions. The actor's whole body constitutes the mask, and this is the principal challenge to realism, which it attacks and surmounts. Each character has a base emotion linked to their mask (Masha in black with a hot-water bottle, the actress Arkadina clothed as "fussily as a homosexual!!!", the teacher Medvedenko awkward and stilted in boring brown). The actors do not relive emotion falsely but expose emotion truthfully — something that may not always seem true to an audience more at home with close identification between character and actor. Her characters do not have emotional journeys but rather transitory emotional states.

It is a style which eliminates character psychology, and with it subtext and subtlety of characterisation. But it is also a style which paints a portrait of a group of characters trapped (in)voluntarily in provincialism. All of them are brittle, unhappy and compulsive, yet Ryan's style pushes them to their limits so they become fractured, psychotic and damaged. It all borders on the arch-camp (like a Richard Jones opera) and West's penchant for the comic pushes the grotesque at times into the realm of the absurd where Chekhov's celebrated symbols (not least the seagull itself) dictate action and motivate character. Characters become automatons trapped in a world of the symbolic, but the symbols are not heavily laden but pointed up, quoted self-consciously like a giant Monty Python index finger. The only casualty is that we know from the outset that the budding author Konstantin is going to shoot himself. But in this post-

modern world any theatre aficionado recognises the dramaturgy as cliché, and the Corn Exchange simply expose the cliché through a meta-theatrical style.

Style, though shaving the play of subtlety, relationships and emotional development, also exposes the characters' loneliness and pain. It becomes, thus, another instrument with which to torture them under the guise of a surgical scalpel. It cuts the play open, the characters bleed profusely, but the wound is never sewn up again. At the end of the play, for instance, we go to blackout



PAUL McCARTHY

**THE MOTHER FROM HELL:** Clara Simpson with Robert Price (left) and Andrew Bennett in *The Seagull*.

and a rumba, rather than watch a moment of poignant dramatic irony. Instead of empathetic identification we are made to suffer their pain by proxy, by being denied in the theatrical moment an emotion which we are about to feel. West cleverly engineers the emotional moment, allowing Ryan to snatch it away in a theatrical one-two.

Some key elements suffer, however. Mention of Konstantin's first suicide attempt is erroneously thrown away and the Trigorin/Nina relationship is as shallow as the Trigorin/Arkadina one is sexually explicit. The occasional "gag" (e.g.

Trigorin fiddling in his trousers with Arkadina astride him... for his notebook!), though hilarious, was a blunt instrument in an array of highly sharpened stylistic choices. Not all the actors had sufficient control of their masks — but then again, how often do these actors get to play like this? Sonya Kelly's Masha came close, Clara Simpson's Arkadina perhaps went too far at times, but Mark O'Halloran's prissy Medvedenko was a virtuoso display of control, gestural precision and pathos.

Chekhov's *Seagull* stood at the cusp of a new form of theatre (referred to self-consciously throughout the play) which was to dictate a template for most of the 20th century in European theatre. The Corn Exchange acknowledges this but uses it to call once more for new forms one turn-of-the-century later. They have invented here a style which interrogates text and challenges tradition, our notions of realism, and meta-theatrically comments on symbol, pointing out that it is only a dramaturgical device and not some visionary key to humanity. The West/Ryan Chekhov does not transport us back nostalgically to a temporal, geographical and theatrical familiarity, but points us forward to a possible future practice.

### **STONES IN HIS POCKETS**

**by Marie Jones**

7 - 19 June at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast  
and on tour

Reviewed on 8 June by

**ANNA CUTLER AND IAIN MACKENZIE**

SET IN A SMALL VILLAGE IN COUNTY KERRY, *Stones in his Pockets* is a comic portrayal of the Hollywood film industry's descent upon rural life in Ireland. Centred on the power of films to transform the lives of those they touch, we witness the easy money and potentially damaging effects that such transformation brings. The nar-

rative is structured through the experiences of two "extras," Charlie and Jake, reversing the filmic standard in which "stars" are at the centre of the action.

This is an assured production with high-quality performances from the two-hand team of Conleth Hill and Séan Campion, who each play a variety of roles. Ian McElhinney's direction is clean and his staging effective; despite the cinematic sky used as backdrop to the piece, he firmly grounds this play in theatrical, rather than filmic, techniques.

Indeed the production of the play seems to have greater cohesion than the playtext itself which is peppered throughout with contradictions — both structural and thematic — that never find resolution. Marie Jones' writing is witty, sharp and full of one-liners; the dialogue is particularly successful in reference to issues surrounding "easy money." In contrast, when it comes to the potentially damaging effects of Hollywood's presence in the community, the dialogue fails to take us beyond a caricature of suffering and as such it is difficult for the play to move to the profound depths to which it aspires. This is not to say that the play fails to address complex or profound issues, quite the contrary; but since many of the characters in the play are more stereotypes than rounded individuals, profundity spoken from their mouths can sound uncomfortably like cliché. This is one of the tensions that is difficult to reconcile: the balance between fast-moving dialogue with quick changes in character roles to more serious issues which needed slower introduction and more textual development.

On a thematic level, the issues surrounding perceptions of Irish rural life are also in conflict. Jones offers a critique of notions of the Irish rural idyll by gently

mocking Hollywood's "love of the land and its people" as well as providing a tongue-in-cheek Irish dance spectacle which the extras have to provide for the film's finale. But the economic fate of the community and the rival critique of a rural life that has been lost (represented in the

**THE LADS, PART DEUX:** Conleth Hill and Séan Campion in *Stones in His Pockets*.

play by an old man) seem to set up an alternative idyll which is not directly challenged. To be fair, the end of the play does try to tackle these and indeed other problematic issues through the character of Charlie, but there is a lot to take on board rather late in the day, communicated through explanation rather than action.

Having said this, it would be wrong to suggest that this play has not been successful. The Belfast audience thoroughly enjoyed the experience, laughed throughout and gave the performance great applause. For those intertextually inclined, the production also makes witty passing references to other films as well as providing tangential references to Beckett (a long line of boots, two tramp-like figures in search of meaning...), some of which are pleasurable additions, the Beckett perhaps a little dangerous given the profun-

dity of the original that is not matched in the present work.

However, if the aim was to return indigenous work to the Lyric and provide high quality performances through an entertaining piece of work, that has been achieved.

*Anna Cutler is the director of the Young at Art Festival in Belfast. Iain MacKenzie is a lecturer in the department of Politics at Queen's University.*

**TRUST** by Gary Mitchell

The Royal Court Theatre, in association with the Royal National Theatre Studio, at the Ambassadors Theatre, London

12 March - 10 April, 1999

Reviewed 16 March by IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

ON MY WAY TO THE AMBASSADORS THEATRE to see *Trust*, I passed a vigil for lawyer Rosemary Nelson — "murdered," the placards said, "with RUC collusion." Such alleged connivance between the security forces in Northern Ireland and Loyalist paramilitaries is a world away from the situation depicted in Gary Mitchell's powerful, disturbing new play, which darkens from domestic comedy to a quite terrifying stand-off. The era of the action is not specified, but it could be any time from the early 1980s through to the Loyalist ceasefire of 1994.

Geordie is a UDA godfather on the Rathcoole estate in north Belfast. Unemployed himself, he receives supplicants for jobs — or rather, "jobs" — checking even old friends for sound wires, just in case. His diffident, 15-year-old son, stunted by living in Geordie's shadow, is being bullied at school; Geordie and his wife Margaret differ over the approach to take — he opts to ignore the problem, she prefers to arrange a punishment beating. Meanwhile, he is approached with a deal

JILL JENNINGS



whereby a maverick British Army "special" (meaning SAS, one presumes), in order to get cash to disappear with his local girlfriend, offers a consignment of guns from his barracks. Both chains of events, unsurprisingly, go pear-shaped, with the trust of the title being betrayed left, right and centre.

Mick Gordon directs with an innate sensitivity to both the banalities and the complexities of Northern Irish life, from the big-picture internecine conflicts between Loyalists and the forces of the Crown to whom they are supposedly loyal to the minutiae such as a supporting character's habitual, casual use of the word "fuck" (as Michael Herr memorably described it) "like a comma." Rae Smith's design discreetly dresses the McKnights' living room just that little bit *too* nicely for a jobless couple. Some scenes are played on the auditorium steps and almost in the audience; Gordon succeeds in making this device bestow an unavoidable immediacy rather than just seeming gimmicky. But the heart of the production is a trio of magnificent central performances. Patrick O'Kane as Geordie both looks and sounds more than a little like the late LVF kingpin Billy Wright, his quiet command palpably masking a deep vein of savagery. Colum Convey as his lieutenant, Arty — almost the Joxer to Geordie's Captain — is by turns comical and repellent as a parasitical thug. Laine Megaw's Margaret is from the harder edges of the great Irish tradition of strong women, and simply by being frozen and mute for a minute or more after the climactic confrontation, delivers some of the most riveting acting I have seen this year.

But the most significant feature of the play, like the dog that does not bark in the night, is easy to miss. In this story of Loyalists, police and army, *nowhere* in the play — whether directly or even by the

merest implication — is *any* mention made of sectarianism, Republicanism, the "enemy" or any such dimension. The mechanisms of funding, arming and local codes of respect have entirely obscured the supposed reason for the UDA's existence; they are here, we infer, because they are here. Mitchell, whose own family come from the Loyalist community in Rathcoole, is quietly but eloquently condemning a culture in which the "grand causes" which have riven his homeland and mine are no longer even paid lip service. The play's run ended the day after Good Friday; I left praying — vainly, it now transpires — that by then our politicians would have found the strength to consign such a culture irrevocably to history.

Ian Shuttleworth is a native of Belfast who now lives and works in London; he reviews theatre regularly for The Financial Times, in which this review originally appeared.

#### THE WHISPERERS:

**Frances Sheridan's A Trip to Bath as completed by Elizabeth Kuti**

Rough Magic Theatre Company

8 - 17 April, 1999 at the Belltable Theatre, Limerick, and on tour

Reviewed 10 May at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght by CATHY LEENEY

AT THE LAST POST ON ITS COUNTRYWIDE tour, Rough Magic's latest show *The Whisperers* played at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght. The first half of the performance was written by Frances Sheridan under the title *A Trip to Bath*. This substantial fragment has been playfully and wittily completed and re-titled by Elizabeth Kuti. The reputation of Richard Brinsley's mother is certainly enhanced in this sisterly, Hoddlesque collaboration, as the second half of the play reaches all the right comic and stylistic destinations. Kuti enlivens the

plot with a series of felicitous happenstances bringing harmony at the close, but also an opening out into further potential mischief. Watch this space for *Whisperers II*.

The opening scene is wonderful. Lady Filmot (Andrea Irvine), looking divine, leans archly against a pillar, blowing bubbles. Suddenly, a huge, lumpy suitcase hurtles down from above, and slams onto the floor of the stage. The contrast of the rainbow-shimmering bubbles with the material weight of the luggage we carry is a perfect metaphor for all that follows. Later, some more fun is gleaned from the suitcase image when Sir Jeremy (Arthur Riordan) leaves the inn with a minute valise held between forefinger and thumb. These moments of invention were all too few.

The scene, designed by Blaithín Sheerin, moves from Mrs. Surface's inn, to a ball, and back to the inn. An L-shaped set of steps is set against a range of pillars, from Corinthian to a very chic-looking angular lit column. Some pillars were sunk into the floor and served admirably as tables and seats. One was perspex and filled with water, distorting all who passed behind it, and fizzling phallicly when the mood hotted up. Costumes by Jacqueline Kobler were all elegant, and some were beautifully executed. All set, then, for wit and satire at the expense of human folly and greed. But the first half is too much exposition and not enough sparkle, despite assured performances from Irvine, Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, James Wallace, Sean Kearns, and Arthur Riordan.

Irvine's mock-heroic description of her husband's fate at the paws of a grizzly, which opens the second half, effectively ups the momentum. Hers is a brilliant per-



AMELIA STEIN

**BEAUTIFUL SCHEMER:** Andrea Irvine in *The Whisperers*.

formance. When Lucy (Pauline Hutton) relaxes and stops signalling at the audience, she has real presence, and her mother, Mrs. Tryfort (Noelle Brown), a near-relation of Mrs. Malaprop, now lets rip to hilarious effect. The transmogrification of young Edward into a fop allows Demian McAdam to stretch himself beyond the sincerity of the young lover.

In the balance between sincerity and artifice, director Lynne Parker failed to enliven the Sheridan material sufficiently, until Kuti's dialogue demanded a higher register and the entertainment began. Latterly, the company's enjoyment was palpable, but the evening belonged to Irvine. Let's hope we see more of her skill soon, and hear more from Elizabeth Kuti's electronic quill.

Cathy Leeney is a lecturer at the Drama Studies Centre at University College Dublin.

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

an accidental eruption of talent will see a generation distinguish itself in a drama society and go on to form a company which will attempt to make its way into professional theatre. Such success stories are mostly accidental. Because of the nature of student drama there's no sense of consistency from one year to the next and no set notions of a training ethos or thought-through aesthetic.

Student drama prospered in an era when there were few opportunities for training in theatre. Children with theatrical ambitions reassured their concerned parents by going about getting "a good degree to fall back on" and then threatened their academic promise in involvement with their college drama society. At a time when the fringe as we know it did not exist, those societies served the purpose of corraling and nurturing young talent. Those who distinguished themselves in this arena at UDA or later at ISDA would then attempt to move on to the professional stage. Such ambition produced initiatives such as Project 67, later Project Arts Centre.

Unless there has been a significant change in the last four years, ISDA does not exist as a representative body for student drama. The Festival that runs under that banner is passed on each year from one drama society to another according to an informal system of rotation. No meetings take place of an Irish Student Drama Association during the year other than a few visits by society representatives to the venues organised by the host college. The single and most intense encounter between drama societies and their peers occurs then each year at the Festival. However, the Festival's inevitable competitive aspect tends to skew the possibilities for debate on the variety of practices on offer, as the most successful shows

establish a hierarchy of style. A valuable service provided by the ISDA Festival, however, are the post-show critiques presided over by the judging panel of theatre professionals and critics. Apart from the hilarity of the lies attempted by directors in order to hoodwink the judges into giving them an award, these sessions offer to drama society members the cold light of a practical experience of making and critiquing theatre. It is here that student drama is integrated into the grown-up discourse of theatre.

In my day there were occasional more in-depth incursions into that larger world of theatre. I was involved in Richard Cook's Irish Universities Theatre Company, a kind of post-ISDA supergroup (although only as a spear-carrier) in the summer of 1990. That company produced a lunchtime *Riders to the Sea* and an evening *Freedom of the City* which ran for about three weeks in the old Players in Trinity and gave us some idea of what it was like to perform in an independent/fringe theatre context. But at the end of the summer it was back to Dramsoc and Players for most of us, to the same shrunken repertoire and the same formless experiments.

Graduates of university drama societies now find themselves disadvantaged by their lack of formal training as they compete with their peers who have graduated from dedicated acting and other theatre training courses. Semesterisation and increased academic pressures have further hit drama society numbers and diminished their activity. It seems as if the golden age of a particular type of student theatrical activity is ending. But perhaps this article will annoy someone into proving a lot of the above to be wrong.

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*Willie White is general manager of Loose Canon Theatre Company and a co-editor of this magazine.*

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