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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TCD SCHOOL OF DRAMA TRAINING; DANCING AT LUIGHLASA (PHOTO: SEAMUS LOUGHREAN); BELFAST ARTS PROTEST (PHOTO: DECLAN DOHERTY); THE HELIX, DUBLIN



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We Are Five

THIS IS *itm*'S FIFTH YEAR IN BUSINESS, and we are celebrating our anniversary by introducing some changes and improvements to how we do business. We will be publishing more frequently now, so expect more and leaner issues. We've streamlined our design and production values while maintaining our highly portable A5 format. But our fundamental *raison d'être* remains the same: to provide timely and topical coverage of theatre in Ireland and Northern Ireland through reviews, features, and news reporting.

Laying out our stall in this manner feels particularly urgent now, given the upheaval in which the Irish arts find themselves following on from the round of Arts Council funding decisions in December. Many arts organisations have been shaken to their core by cuts to their funding, and the increasingly public discussion that has ensued (long may it ensue!) has meant that all of us have been forced to re-think what we're doing and why. *itm* took a middling hit in the deci-

Many arts organisations have been shaken to their core by cuts to their funding, and the increasingly public discussion that has ensued (long may it ensue!) has meant that all of us have been forced to re-think what we're doing and why.

sions — a 9% reduction — and emerged from the resulting internal review still committed to more magazines, more probing questions, more risks, more funding sources, and a continuing dedication to a challenging critical stance.

This issue's content reflects the turmoil of the times: an extended essay in the news section, titled "Culture Clash," articulates our take on the Arts Council decisions; we offer a thought-provoking Sounding Board column about how the arts in Northern Ireland responded to a time of crisis; and Belinda McKeon's article on page 14 inaugurates a series of four essays (a special feature of our anniversary year) in which we ask a series of Irish critics and practitioners to

answer the same, broad question: "What is Irish theatre about?"

What is Irish theatre about? It's a question we are all asking right now. There's no one answer. But the more times and the more ways we ask the question, the better off we'll all be. That's the rationale behind our side of the business, at least. 

Full Speed Ahead

THE GOVERNMENT HAS APPROVED A 100 MILLION redevelopment of the Abbey Theatre on its existing location, to be financed through a Public/Private Partnership (PPP)... The Gate has received 300,000 from the Ireland Funds towards its own development project, which has an estimated overall price tag of over 3.22 million... The Irish Theatre Archive has left the Dublin Civic Museum and re-located to

Pearse Street Library, which has been restored by Dublin City Council... There is an error in information published by the Arts Council on eligibility for the undergraduate acting training award. The award is available to all students beyond their first year of training, rather than exclusively to third year students, as had been incorrectly stated... The University of British Columbia in Canada will accept entries for its Creative Writing Residency Prize in Stage Play until 31 Mar. The prize



JOE DOWLING, EITHNE HEALY AND BEN BARNES
AT THE ABBEY

of \$10,000 (Canadian) and a one-month residency at UBC will be awarded in October to the writer of an unproduced, unpublished full-length

TOM LAWLER

play. Information, rules and regulations are available from www.creativewriting.ubc.ca/events/resprise.

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

After *All My Sons* (closing 29 Mar), next up at the Abbey is Sebastian Barry's new translation of García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, directed by Martin Drury (9 Apr-17 May); a revival of Ben Barnes' production of *The Plough and the Stars* follows (26 May-12 Jul). After a short season of American play readings, the Peacock revives Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* (27 Mar-26 Apr) before Hilary Fannin's *Doldrum Bay* premieres, directed by Mark Lambert (6 May-21 Jun)... Tennessee Williams' *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, directed by Dominic Cooke, plays at the Gate from 20 Mar-26 Apr. The world premiere of Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall*, directed by Garry Hynes, runs at the Gate from 20 May-7 Jun... Next from Calypso Productions is a multi-cultural interpretation of St. Patrick's early life, *Mixing it on the Mountain*, written by Maeve Ingoldsby and directed by Bairbre ní Chaoimh (18-22 Mar). Calypso's *Stolen Child* returns to Andrew's Lane for two weeks in late Apr before touring to the Civic and beyond...

Next at the Lyric is Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water*, directed by Mark Lambert, (15 Mar-12 Apr), followed by Ian McElhinney directing Marie Jones' new play *The Blind Fiddler* (6 Jun-5 Jul)... Focus presents David Rubinoff's *Stuck* (2-26 Apr) followed by a Michael Harding's *Talking Through his Hat* (5-31 May)... In Project's Space Upstairs, Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*, directed by Pam Brighton, plays from 16-29 Mar, followed by a Rough Magic world premiere directed by Lynne



STOLEN CHILD

Parker, *Shiver* by Declan Hughes (24 Mar-19 Apr). SaBooge Theatre Company, comprised of Irish and international graduates of the École Jacques Lecoq, presents *Hatched* in Project Cube (8-19 Apr)... Prime Cut presents the Irish premiere of *After Darwin* by Timberlake Wertenbaker and directed by Jackie Doyle, at Project (22 Apr-3 May) and Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast (12-17 May)... The Civic Theatre produces Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* from 24 Apr-10 May.

The Day I Swapped my Dad for 2 Goldfish, adapted from the book by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean by Jocelyn Clarke and

what's news



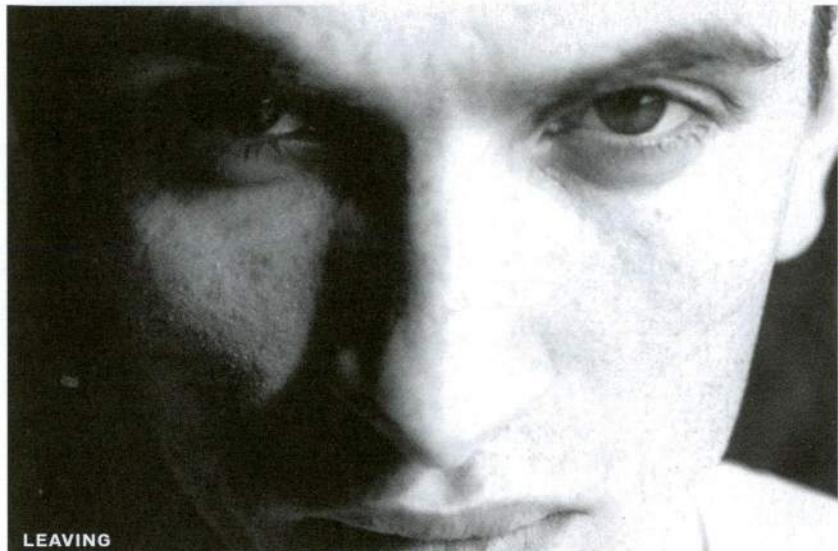
THE STRANGE VOYAGE OF DONALD CROWHURST

directed by Eric Fraad, will perform in the Ark from 18 Mar-17 Apr, with a national tour planned for May... Smashing Times present Mary Moynihan's *Out of the Outside* in the Bank of Ireland Arts Centre (24-25 Apr)... Druid has two productions on national tour: *The Good Father* through 5 Apr, and *Sive* from 14 Apr-31 May... An Grianán hosts the Yew Tree premiere of *Charlie*, a Haughey bioplay written and directed by John Breen, from 12-19 Apr, which will then tour... Three Machine productions continue to tour nationally: *The Vagina Monologues* through 31 May and *The Field* through 14 Jun, while *The Matchmaker* plays the Backstage Theatre, Longford from 17-22 Mar.

Be Your Own Banana tours *The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella* through 17 Apr... Barnstorm's latest, Shaun Prendergast's *Little Victories*, directed by

Veronica Coburn, continues a national tour until 20 May... Michael James Ford's production of *Crabbed Youth and Age* by Lennox Robinson continues in Bewley's Café Theatre until 19 Apr... Yasmina Reza's *The Unexpected Man*, directed by Caroline Fitzgerald, plays at the Pavilion through 15 Mar and tours through 5 Apr... The Everyman Palace hosts the Irish premiere of David Hare's *The Blue Room* (31 Mar-5 Apr), which, we are assured, contains celebrity nudity. Also at the Everyman, Co-Motion's adaptation of Roddy Doyle's novel *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* plays from 20-24 May.

Raymond Scannell's *Beats 'n' Pieces*, one of the fruits of the Rough Magic/Dublin Fringe Seeds programme, will receive a full production from Meridian Theatre Company during the seventh Cork Midsummer Festival (17-KIP CARROLL



LEAVING

28 Jun). Other CMF theatre highlights including the Cork premiere of Enda Walsh's *bedbound*; Boomerang Theatre Company's multi-disciplined arts project *Body Beats*, and a new site-specific performance from Corcadorca... The Irish Touring Company tours the Focus production of *Tillsonburg* by Malachy McKenna until 12 Apr... Galloglass' production of Athol Fugard's *My Children, My Africa*, directed by Theresia Guschlbauer, concludes its national tour in THEatre Space, Dublin (24-29 Mar)... Next at Andrew's Lane is a revival of the Fishamble production of *The Buddhist of Castleknock* (18 Mar-26 Apr)... Tinderbox's latest is a new version of Ionesco's *The Chairs* by Owen McCafferty, directed by Jimmy Fay, touring 5-22 Mar and then playing the Northern Bank Building, Belfast through 5 Apr... Island's production of Mike

Finn's *The Quiet Moment* plays in the University Concert Hall, Limerick (6-11 May) and then tours through 28 Jun.

At the Crypt, Laughing Gravy present *Gasping* (31 Mar.-5 Apr.), Toban na Rún stage Colm Maguire's *Henry's Bar* (7-19 Apr.) and Dionysius Theatre Company produce Howard Barker's *Judith* (22-26 Apr.)... Quare Hawks is touring its co-production with the Garage Theatre, *Leaving*, throughout Mar and Apr... Blue Raincoat's *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, written by Malcolm Hamilton and directed by Niall Henry, concludes its Sligo run on 15 Mar, with further dates in Town Hall, Galway (27-29 Mar) before travelling to venues in Poland and Germany... Belfast's Young at Art Festival takes place from 22-28 May with extensive theatre offerings for young people.

Culture Clash

AFTER A TUMULTUOUS FOUR MONTHS FOR THE ARTS in Ireland, what is the fallout, what are the lessons learned, and what is the way forward? The Arts Council's December announcement of its grant decisions for 2003, which included some significant cuts to arts organisations following on from its own reduction in funding from Government, led to an outcry from the arts sector unprecedented in recent times.

The media responded, and for an extended while the arts have been big news. It is questionable, however, whether the right message — if any clear message — has come through, and part of the job ahead for the arts sector is to consolidate its lobbying voice and point it in the right directions: not just at the Arts Council but at Government and the public at large. What is clear to us at *itm*, however, is that there are significant problems with and gaps in the Arts Council's vision for the arts as articulated in *The Arts Plan 2002-2006*, and that a gulf of understanding remains between the Council and the arts community about the Council's priorities and fund-

ing philosophy, exacerbated by inadequate communication from the Council.

Arts Council director Patricia Quinn, in an extended interview with *itm*, argued that a significant contributing factor to the controversy over the cuts is the arts community's continuing resistance to the Council's self-transformation from a funding body to a developmental agency. "We made no secret when we published the last Arts Plan," says Quinn, "that we are moving towards a strategic proposition that says the Arts Council exists to promote certain artistic objectives... instead of people trying to pull grants out of us, we are trying to push an agenda. It's not a secret agenda; it's a published agen-

da." It is resistance to this change, Quinn says, that is one of the biggest contributors to a "continental divide" that is keeping the Council from communicating well with the sector. Quinn insists that, if members of the arts community were to take a wider view than their immediate organisation or art form and try to appreciate the larger rationale behind the recent decisions, they would understand that those decisions are not random but part of the Arts Council's ongoing strategic development plans for the arts.

The principal problem, as Quinn sees it, is that the Council is not properly structured or staffed to deliver on its plans, and when questioned about problems of communication and delivery of commitments over the past years consistently refers back to these internal organisational woes. The Government's recent decision to back the Council's long-mooted internal reorganisation represents a major victory for Quinn, and one that she has pushed hard for. Seeing it fully realised, however, will take some time: the Council's advertisement of 12 positions in November did not yield an adequate panel in some cases, and they have re-advertised some jobs.

Those who resist Quinn's vision are fighting against not just changes in the Arts Council, but the general trend in Irish society towards planning, sustainability, and management. Quinn does

have powerful statistics to back up her vision: in the six and a half years that she has run the Arts Council, funding for the arts from Government has increased from 23,363,000 to 44,000,000. The question that we need to ask, however, is whether this massive influx of money has resulted in better art, and better circumstances for artists. Yes, we have a more developed infrastructure now, and some

better-organised theatre companies spread around the country. We have a large number of new venues. But this recent era of increased funding has not borne as much artistic fruit as it might have, and the Arts Council and the arts community still have much work to do to bring our visions and working practices closer together. The language and philosophy of planning, which might apply to

other areas of public life, do not map cleanly onto the work of making art; the vision of the Arts Council, as laid out in their current policy document, *The Arts Plan 2002-2006*, is not adequately phrased and envisioned so that it can be an effective and useful template for artists and arts organisations themselves.

Let's take one issue particularly close to *itm*'s heart: the standards and criteria that are being applied towards the Council's decisions and relationships. Numerous interviews with theatre company managers and artistic directors make it clear that the theatre sector does not under-



PATRICIA QUINN

what's news

stand there to be clear and articulated criteria (or in the language of planning, "performance indicators") by which the Arts Council makes funding and developmental decisions. The lack of such criteria is an ongoing problem for the Council, a fact underlined by Sir Anthony Everitt in his published evaluation of the *Arts Plan 1999-2001*: "The Arts Council has so far failed," Everitt wrote, "to research, design, and implement a comprehensive set of appropriate performance indicators, although work is in hand."

Those indicators have not yet materialised. While a key focus of the pilot stage of the Arts Council's Multi-Annual Funding (MAF) programme was discussion about the need for evaluative criteria, no such criteria were ever clearly articulated to MAF clients nor indeed revenue-funded clients. Several arts managers told us of plans they had drawn up and sent to the Arts Council proposing self-evaluative processes, which were never responded to, let alone implemented. According to Quinn and AC drama advisor Enid Reid Whyte, plans to develop such criteria have necessarily progressed in "fits and starts" given the Council's organisational concerns, but are now underway; an excellent essay by English arts consultant François Matarasso about the problematic necessity of quality-based criteria has recently been sent out to some MAF clients as a discussion document, and MAF clients are now being required to fill out an extensive quantitative monitoring form. A good

The theatre sector does not understand there to be clear and articulated criteria (or in the language of planning, "performance indicators") by which the Arts Council makes funding and developmental decisions.

step, but why is this happening only now, a full five years after MAF was launched with evaluation as one of its promised components?

Responding to repeated questioning about criteria, Quinn also points out that *The Arts Plan 2002-2006* contains performance indicators in the form of the "Measures of Success" listed as part of the articulation of every strategic objective. To articulate goals as part of the Plan is indeed a positive step, but the language used, particularly regarding issues of quality, is still impossibly vague (see box opposite). How many "more educational and professional training opportunities for theatre practitioners" will be enough to satisfy Council and the sector that we have achieved the appropriate measure of success in five years? And, even more crucially, who is to say whether we will have seen "improved quality of theatre production"? What is

quality? Who gets to define it? Do we define it the same way for the National Theatre, a small touring company, and a youth theatre company?

As evaluative criteria these "measures of success" are wholly inadequate. Yes, the Arts Council is understaffed and unable to deliver its remit fully, but it still chose priorities on how to proceed in recent years. That it continued to process grants and disburse funds without a clearly articulated set of criteria agreed upon through productive dialogue with the arts sector is uncon-

scionable. And if such criteria had been in place, the feedback that resulted from the recent round of decisions would have been much less negative and public: if arts organisations knew what the basis were for the Council's decisions, they would have some kind of framework through which to view those decisions, even if they didn't necessarily agree with them.

And so, what can be done? What *has* the arts sector done, and what can it do, to let those in power know what it feels are the flaws and problematics of Irish arts policy?

funding decisions was fractured and scattershot, the extended follow-through is shaping up to be hugely promising, as lobbying and advocacy bodies are emerging to stump for the arts not only to the Council but to the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism and to the public at large. According to spokeswoman Deborah Aydon, lobbying is now the "number one priority" of the newly-funded Theatre Forum. While the main focus of Associated Theatre Artists, according to founder Olwen Fouéré, is "improving the level of artistic exchange

MEASURES OF SUCCESS (FOR THEATRE):

More educational and professional training opportunities for theatre practitioners and artists.

Improved quality of theatre productions

Adherence to minimum wage and fee levels for theatre practitioners and artists by theatre management

Improved income support environment for theatre practitioners and artists

Improved physical infrastructure for theatre practitioners and artists

Positive trends in audience numbers and in artistic programming

Higher levels of domestic and international touring

Increased amount and diversity of income sources

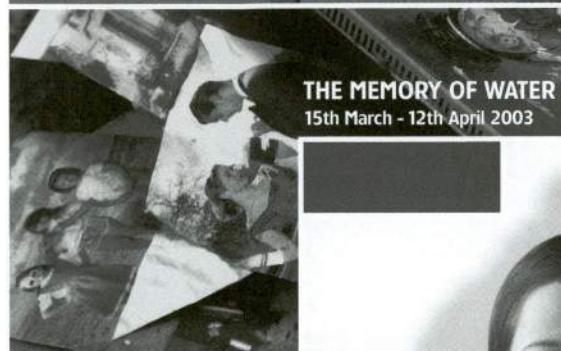
The first priority is to let the Arts Council know directly and clearly what is thought of their policies and decisions. If the arts community thinks the *Arts Plan* is an inadequate document (as *itm* does), it is that community's responsibility to offer its views on the Plan's shortcomings and potential improvements. Further action needs to be taken to lobby for the importance and status of the arts, to do everything possible to avoid another cut from Government next year. While the initial response to this year's

between theatre practitioners and the decision-making bodies," the group plans to team with Theatre Forum in their lobbying efforts. Irish Actors' Equity continues to organise and politicise itself around issues of working conditions. Individual and collective leadership is emerging to argue for the importance of the arts and artists to Irish society. But the responsibility lies with all of us who work in the arts. Are we willing to do everything we can, together, to avoid another dark December? 

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What happens when an arts community raises its voice against budget cuts? **MARK CARRUTHERS, STEPHEN DOUDS, and TIM LOANE**, all directors of Tinderbox Theatre Company, offer their view on the reasons for, and results of, a recent Belfast protest.

LAST YEAR APPEARED TO PROMISE SO MUCH for the arts in Belfast. Politicians and civil servants promised consultation and greater investment in the arts. Leading the charge was the City Council-inspired bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008. Then at Hallowe'en things began to unravel. Belfast was not among the six cities shortlisted to proceed to the next stage of the competition. Many working in the arts maintained the bid had always been fundamentally flawed, and that a recent 20% cut to the arts budget by Belfast City Council demonstrated a lack of real commitment to the future. The financial cuts and the failure of the 2008 bid galvanised the arts community and more than 200 groups and individuals picketed the Council's arts awards gala in November.

For the first time the arts community was united across disciplines, and suddenly the role of the arts became front-page news. Every media outlet fully reported the protest, and soon afterwards the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) appeared to echo the artists' core argument: the government was not doing enough. Barely a fortnight after the City Hall picket, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure presented ACNI with an uplift of £18 million. There can be little doubt that an administration dedicated to putting a positive sheen on the "new" Northern Ireland was bruised by the bid's failure and the cohesive protest

organised by the arts lobby.

But can the adversarial approach ever bring mutual respect and genuine collaboration? With hard cash on the table surely this is the time for debate between all stakeholders in the arts. Building on that need for better communication we are producing a one-off publication including 12 essays or personal manifestos, which will showcase a wide range of viewpoints on the present state of the arts in Belfast and beyond. It's not



SEAMUS LOUGHREAN/THE IRISH NEWS

intended to apportion blame, but to build on the momentum the additional money has generated and add fresh focus to an urgent debate. To the surprise of many, recent events have demonstrated that when the arts community is forced to come together in the face of external pressures, those holding the purse strings do listen.

The collection of essays will be published with financial support from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in May.

Lost in Space

FIVE YEARS AGO, IN THE INAUGURAL ISSUE OF THIS magazine, a member of the Irish theatre community shared his vision of what Irish theatre was about. In 1998, with increasing immigration weaving new threads into the fabric of national identity, Ireland was a country undergoing rapid

In the first of our four-part series of essays asking

"What is Irish theatre about?,"

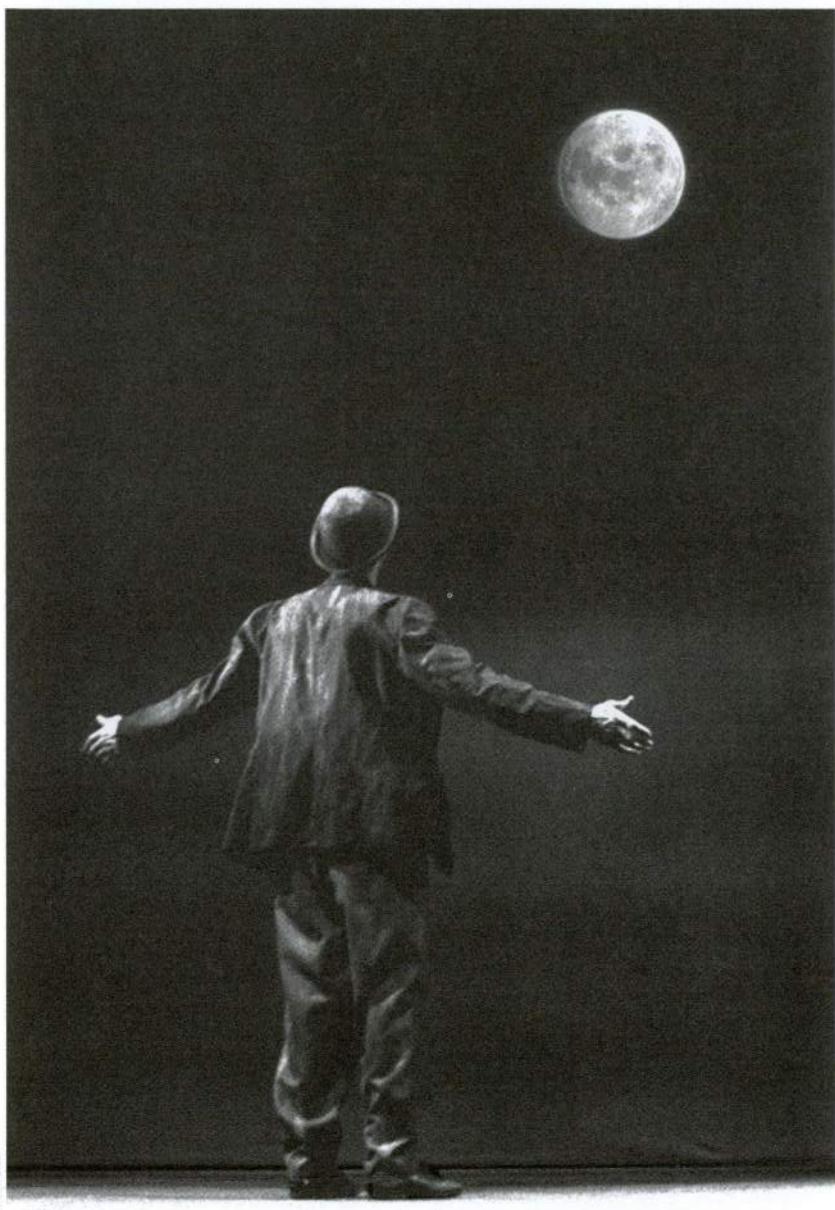
BELINDA MCKEON

argues for less business and more imaginative space.

change in its cultural and social makeup. Donal O'Kelly, then of Calypso Productions, argued for "a new form of Irish theatre" to express this new form of Irish experience. For a new nation more complex and heterogeneous than any simple definition of nationhood could express, only a theatre of multifarious styles and voices would suffice. Existing forms, dominated as they were by the naturalistic tradition, would have to be rethought. Released from old constraints, O'Kelly argued, Irish theatre could open up spaces in which to address the fragmentation of life in an increasingly atomised society. It was an optimistic vision.

Five years later, it looks like we're inhabiting Irish theatre's morning after optimism. Far from the emergence of new themes for a new millennium, the hobbyhorses of Synge and O'Casey are back with a vengeance. From poverty to power struggles, from anger to entrapment, from conservatism to claustrophobia, the old issues still inhabit the heart of Irish theatre, but are present less at an aesthetic level as at an everyday one, pervading the practicalities rather than the plays. These days, when we say that Irish theatre is about endless waiting, failed communication, or bitter disappointment, we're unlikely to be talking about *Waiting for Godot*, *Translations*, or *Bailegangaire* – and far less likely to be talking about their

WAITING FOR INSPIRATION
Barry McGovern
in *Godot*



KEVIN McGEELEY

equivalents in the work of the generation which should, by now, have emerged clearly as the successor to that of Walsh, Carr, and McDonagh. Rather, what we are likely to be describing are the current conditions for the creation of such work, for the nurture of such successors. Because these days, the central preoccupation of Irish theatre is the dramatic business of Irish theatre itself.

Drained by marketing, by accounting, by the daily demands of running a building, theatre practitioners are wondering how they wound up as characters in an episode of *The Office*.

In the past year or so, a discomfiting change has taken place in the way that Irish theatre practitioners talk about their art. Granted, theatre artists have ever grumbled about production budgets and funding problems; but try to engage them in even the most self-consciously arty conversation about their work these days, and listen to what emerges. The talk is still of challenges, tensions and problems of language — but of those which stem from outside the rehearsal room rather than those which enrich the work done there. Challenges like developing and staging a play in the wake of recent Arts Council funding cuts. Tensions like those between theatre companies and an Arts Council which favours those with efficient administrative structuring over those which channel most of their monies into production and touring. And language barriers like those which have arisen between artists and the Council as a result of its fencing in of the nebulous language of creativity with the impersonal terminology of corporate management, which translates "art form" as "sector," and "drama" as "product."

Suddenly, arts writers are wondering how they wound up as financial reporters, enduring a dreary litany of percentages, cutbacks, and deficits. But, drained by marketing, by accounting, by the daily demands of running a building, theatre practitioners are wondering how they wound up as characters in an episode of *The Office*. How did Irish theatre become all about the state of its books and the size of its buildings — about money, and about the caution necessary to keep it? The question is, how did Irish theatre become so miserably materialistic?

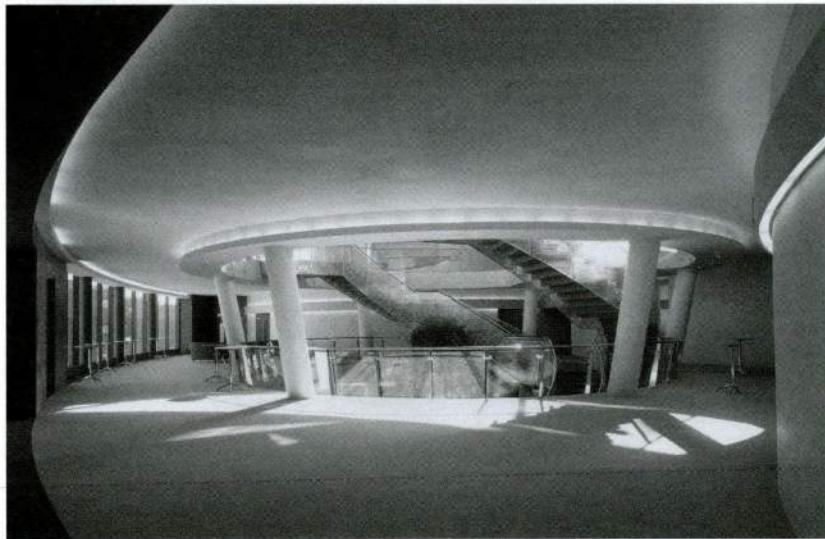
Certainly, a state of heightened fiscal awareness is hardly surprising in the current economic climate. It might reasonably be argued that, with the boom ended, and talk of war, now is not a time for Irish theatre to take risks; that, with far smaller funds available to distribute between the administrative and artistic sides of the business, it makes good business sense to think of financial ramifications ahead of aesthetic ambitions, to concentrate on keeping theatre buildings open rather than bringing to them new forms and new artists. It might be argued that now is a time to invest wisely.

But to argue thus is to miss the point, and, in so doing, to maintain a tradition of botched approaches to the evaluation of Irish

theatre which owns far greater responsibility for the current, subdued state of the art than do the recently announced Arts Council cutbacks. Because in theatre, risk-taking is not a luxury for the good times, but a requirement for the formation of the art; what may look like a saving on a balance sheet may actually represent an enormous artistic loss. Pointing to holes in the Exchequer pockets may only mask the fact that the fundamental poverty at Government level which is holding back the development of theatre in this country is not economic, but imaginative.

When, with the advent of late capitalism in the 1990s, the notion of theatre as "product" took hold — at audience as well as at Government level — turning the art into one more investment-dependent commodity, what was forgotten was that product is merely the outcome of process. Unpredictable and unquantifiable, process is about experimentation, about innovation, about trying out different approaches, about failing, and about starting over. "Fail again, fail better," in the words of one Irish playwright who knew only too well the disadvantages of working in a country which didn't understand theatre. But however much may have changed since Samuel Beckett left this country for a more open and encouraging scene in France, political and social attitudes to theatre in Ireland are still alienating writers and other artists. The problem is an emphasis on tangible, saleable, and consumable end results, on possession and location, on the aspects of Irish the-

SPACIOUS
*The interior of
the new Helix
complex in Dublin*



atre which can be seen easily and quickly, which can be name-checked into gushing speeches on the visibility and the vigour of the arts here.

What results is a dearth of new writing. A frustrated, under-challenged community of performers and directors. A fear pervading theatre companies that grant expenditure on production rather than paperwork will be punished by cuts. In programming, there results a virtual monopoly of cautious theatrical forms — revivals and naturalistic dramas with the familiarity factor, the guarantee of ticket sales. A reliance on festivals to pay lip service to other forms, other possibilities, other audience experiences. And an insult to the intelligence of theatregoers, who are too widely deprived, for the other 11 months of the year, of the creative alchemy between the artists and the audience that a piece of theatre should be. The result, in short, is a diminishment of the space of theatrical experience.

In the coming 12 months, as the impact on the sector of the Government cutbacks becomes clear, these problems will become very apparent. However, to understand their source, we have to look not at Government frugality but at Government flushness. We have to recall the boom, when the millions flowed on a glut of new venues for theatre around the country; when it seemed at last that theatre was being treated with respect. And we have to look at the state of those new venues today, and at the emptiness by which they have too often been marked since the builders left. What is to blame is a fundamental misconception of the space in which theatre takes place.

Like the sushi bars of the arts community, these new venues sprang up in the giddiness of the boom; sleek, confident proofs of the country's new-found economic health. They seemed to answer to Donal O'Kelly's vision of an Irish theatre scene which would expand to new places, new forms, and new audiences. But sushi bars they were not. It quickly became apparent that the one glaring absence from these new venues was the raw material of new writing. That, while a myriad of gleaming new spaces waited for plays to come, the plays weren't coming so much as returning; revival followed revival, and new work was a rare sighting indeed. For venues which had to function, to remain financially healthy, to think about the next year's funding announcements, new work was too much of a risk; investments had to be honoured. Physical expansion and multiplicity had led to conceptual restriction and monotony.

Rather than the new forms spoken of by O'Kelly, what resulted was an explosion of form-filling, the business of keeping theatre buildings open. It was an imposed extension of the boom-

New venues sprang up in the giddiness of the boom; sleek, confident proof of the country's new-found economic health. They seemed to answer the vision of an Irish theatre scene which would expand to new places, new forms, and new audiences.

time property fixation, vulgar and exclusionary; enter a materialistic theatre scene, preoccupied with finances. The impact on the real, lived space of theatrical experience has been devastating for all concerned. Artists are frustrated, companies are fraught, and audiences are falling. Physical space alone, it is clear, is not enough. Too easily, the building can stand as a façade, an excuse for the lack of intelligent and thoughtful involvement.

This is why the current emphasis, at both planning and funding levels, on designated or "official" spaces for theatre is discouraging. Despite the success of the Dublin Fringe Festival and the adventures in the area of site-specific theatre by companies like Corcadorca and Semper Fi, a certain spatial hierarchy still exists in the Irish theatre scene, a venue-based snobbery which whispers that, if a piece of work is not taking place on a main stage, but is in an alternative or a small space, it can't be taken entirely seriously. In any production, the physical setting sends signals to the audience, shaping expectations and influencing the audience's reading of that work, but when the setting is an established, official space with historical and political baggage, or with a house style of conservatism and caution, the space of that audience's experience can contract considerably. To place too much stress on designated spaces can lead to boredom for existing audiences and intimidation for potential audiences — some people may never walk into the lobby of the Abbey, but may enjoy theatre at a community level or in a less heavily coded environment, and the right of such audiences to continue to do so cannot be ignored. The Abbey has for long enough neglected its responsibility as the National Theatre — a



Photo Alice Fitzgerald

SPACE TRAVELLERS

Semper Fi in the
Stephen's Green
toilets

preponderance of revivals and naturalistic drama cannot reflect the diverse and contradictory forms of experience which make up the nation in the 21st century. But the task of assuming a new physical shape presents the Abbey with an invaluable opportunity to reconsider the relationship between space and theatre. Indeed, such a reconsideration is urgently needed across the entire theatre community.

Fortunately, moves are being made. In October, the Arts Council took the interesting step of bringing together theatre practitioners and members of the architectural profession with the purpose of addressing, in a series of discussions to be continued over coming months, the relationship between physical space and performance. While such an initiative might have been more useful four years ago, as the building epidemic began, and while its materialisation at this time suggests a focus less on the entire theatre community than for that one prominent theatre which is about to make a very public architectural transformation, the Council is to be credited for recognising that the "creative energy that exists between performance and audience" is a question of space, and one which needs to be reconsidered. Indeed — so long as the purpose was one of counsel rather than control — to openly focus on the question of the Abbey's new space in the subsequent discussions in this series might not be a bad thing, so urgent is the need for that new space to intelligently reflect the chiasmic form of modern Irish identity.

Another encouraging sign was "Engaging Theatre," a week of discussions on the position and purpose of Irish theatre held in December at City Arts Centre. The Centre is currently closed to regular business and undertaking what it calls the Civil Arts Inquiry, a process of reviewing its role and remit in a changing environment. This inquiry was framed by director Declan McGonagle asking whether the Centre's activities need to be building-based at all. It was this question which inspired participants in "Engaging Theatre" not simply to identify the problems facing Irish theatre, but to address them as problems of space, and to attempt, by opening up just that kind of space which theatre requires — one of engagement, of connection, of the flow of ideas, of collaboration — to find the beginnings of solutions.

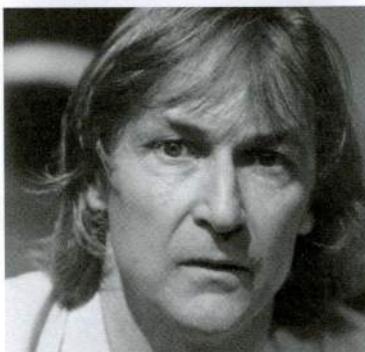
What the discussions made clear was that the theatre community's relationship with the Arts Council was characterised by a gaping space of hostility and incomprehension; what some participants proposed was that a new language for talking about theatre, one closer to the jargon of the Council and the Government, be adopted in the hope of rendering consul-

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tations more fruitful. Greater consultation was called for, too, with the community of performers, whose voicelessness in a writer-and director-led theatre scene was memorably articulated by Olwen Fouéré. Meanwhile, the crisis of administration was met with the suggestion that smaller companies pool their administrative structures, leaving more room for theatre, and that a venue like the former Arthouse could act as a centre for the business side of several companies. Some discussion focussed on the plight of the Crypt Arts Centre, suffering not only Arts Council cuts but the withdrawal of the FÁS Community Employment Schemes which paid much of the salaries of its administrative and technical staff; there were calls for lobby groups, for petitions, and for voluntary efforts to keep the Crypt open. However, the difficulties facing those young companies for whom the closure of the Crypt would worsen the constant struggle to find affordable spaces in which to develop their work, was more difficult to resolve. Ironically, however, the sense of resolve which emerged from "Engaging Theatre" suggested that the closure of a physical space for theatre may yet turn out to have been one of the healthiest moves for the real space of theatre.

The participants in "Engaging Theatre" talked about getting responsible. What is needed now is the activity of following through on this responsibility; theatre artists must fall back on their own resources, must cease to regard Arts Council funding as the beginning and end of theatre. Thinking about alternative sources of funding is important, but there is also the need to think about taking a less uptight, less materialistic approach to space — to be less bound to the notion of theatre as a building. Only when those invisible spaces of internal engagement and mutual empowerment which result from the crucial processes of discussion and collaboration are in place will we get a theatre of the type envisioned by Donal O'Kelly, a theatre of many forms, which explores the business of what Irish, and other, experience is about. And only then can we begin to say what Irish theatre is about. 



QUESTIONING
*Olwen Fouéré,
Donal O'Kelly*



Training Wreck

A

The Irish actor training sector has hit a wall, after nearly 20 years of rapid growth.

PETER CRAWLEY
gives an overview
of the field.

AS ACTING ANECDOTES GO, THIS ONE IS UNUSUALLY chilling: at the end of their years of tuition, hovering between the intimate community of a full-time acting programme and the uncertainties of working on the professional stage, a group of students were set in a circle. Their instructor then worked his way around the ring, predicted the fates of each would-be performer one by one. "Yes, you'll make it. No, you haven't got a chance. You, I don't think you'll do it.. No, you've been a complete waste of time." At the moment in Ireland, though, it is drama schools themselves that are arranged in such a vicious circle, each awaiting some news regarding its future development. And the indications aren't much more encouraging. In October 2002, Trinity College Dublin's School of Drama, the only institution in Ireland to offer a degree course in acting, did not take an intake of students for its Bachelor in Acting Studies (BAS), citing financial pressures. While the School intends to proceed with a fresh intake this year, Professor Dennis Kennedy admits that confusion over its future "has endangered the status of the course".

On January 30 of this year, the long-mooted Irish Academy for Performing Arts was effectively suspended, as the government announced that the €44.4 million originally designated for its establishment, "is not currently available". For Patrick Sutton, director of the Gaiety School of Acting (GSA), the news was "a major set-back to our initiative." Set to provide the "drama node" of the IAPA, the private Gaiety School saw their involvement as an opportunity to forge links with the State and to develop its unaccredited two-year training programme into a three-year degree course. Meanwhile, Department of Education and Science

cutbacks have seen the Dublin Institute of Technology's part-time course in Speech and Drama discontinued at the Conservatory of Music and Drama, while its current full-time three-year diploma still awaits word on development into a four-year degree course.

There are few exclusively acting-oriented courses outside of Dublin, although BA and MA programmes in drama in Queen's University, NUI Galway, and NUI Cork all contain practical and performance components. Meanwhile, several Institutes of Technology, from Waterford to Sligo, are establishing drama and acting courses in response to consistently high demands for them. Conversely, Siamsa Tíre's new degree in Folk Theatre in the Tralee Institute of Technology, with one year already in train, took no new admissions this year due to an insufficient number of applications.

When the outlook is bleak, debates over the merits of actor education should become more urgent. If the development of actors demands a development of training resources, notionally the government is committed to it (according to the Third Arts Plan and Programme for Government). However, in the gloom of the current economic climate, financial support is conspicuously thinning. Where the debate might once have been philosophical (are actors made or born?), political (does an acting school belong in a university?), or practical (how does actor training respond to the needs of the professional sector?), now the main concern is simply survival. From private school to vocational educational college and institute faculty to university department, everyone agrees on one point: this is an expensive business.

"If you're running an acting course, you immediately run into appalling difficulties in funding," says Victor Merriman, formerly head of DIT's Speech and Drama Diploma and currently working to establish a new performance programme in the Dundalk Institute of Technology. "Because the courses are not recognised as having specific funding needs, therefore the provision is not there for them. That means that they must compete with so-called heavyweight subjects like science or business for resources within the institutions — they will always lose. It's as simple as that."

Not encouraging news for Trinity's BAS, where government funding of €5,000 per annum per student was deemed "unacceptable" by School of Drama chair Professor Dennis Kennedy. Following favourable recommendations made by an independent evaluation panel, it is believed that Trinity College authorities were alarmed when the course's actual cost was estimated at over €10,000 per student. Presently the BAS is in an uneasy position, having left one academic year fallow while making an approach to the Higher Education Authority (a statutory body that channels government funding into universities) for

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DUNDALK I.T.

increased subsidy. The consequence of such a move — a political gambit, some say — has created the appearance of a school in trouble, tarnishing the prestige of the course. Negotiating the labyrinthine passages of academic process has also impeded the momentum of the course's development. "In a college this large," admits BAS coordinator Chrissie Poulter, "bureaucracies and institutions are like leviathans — they move very slowly."

Theatre studies lecturer and former course co-ordinator Andy Crook, for whom the BAS had to be seen as "a loss-leader, in the modern business vernacular," is more critical. "The irony is that we're talking about a course and a vocation that's all about the communication of ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions," says Crook. "And what has happened [here] is a complete blockage of ideas... And actor training is vital in Ireland. Theatre, it seems to me, is at a pivotal point in its existence — in the white heat of change — and training has to be part of that. Theatre always needs to change and it can't adapt unless people are taught."

Crook isn't the only one to see artistic development frustrated by the politics and bureaucracy associated with State-funded institutions. As DIT's development from diploma to degree hit the rocks of institutional indifference, Merriman laid the blame with the government. "If a private college wished to set up tomorrow and provide courses and recruit any number of students, they could do so. It's the State, quite plainly, which is stultifying growth in this area."

Climbing past some of the familiar faces that line the Gaiety School of Acting's stairwell, one wonders if freedom from academ-

Despite the highly competitive nature of acting programmes, there is enough creative coalescence to suggest that specialised courses now share the mantle of launching fledgling theatre companies.

ic environments and State partnerships is a notable advantage. "We [the GSA] live in a free-market," says director Patrick Sutton, "and we're funded and supported simply by ourselves." So conspicuous are the signs of the private school's ethos that his regular desk-thumping seems an unnecessary emphasis. "Make a Wish! 2nd Year Showcase Please Help" encourages a jar of change in reception, where brownies are also for sale. This year, Arts Council cutbacks mean that the GSA's sole government subsidy, funding for the Graduation Showcase, has vanished. Sutton, however, is confident that he will find the money from other sources. Indeed the school cannily supplements the €4,000 student fees charged for its two-year professional actor training programme through a lucrative range of part-time courses, where as many as one thousand students a week help to subsidise the main programme.

Why the Gaiety School should be so eager to enter into a partnership with the State, as IAPA's academic status would have signalled, is not immediately clear from Sutton's wary view of universities. "The GSA has been founded on the basis of training actors for the theatre, film, and television industry. We believe that the best place to do that is in an acting school rather than a university. That's why the school was founded. There are confines, huge confines, in trying to develop resources enough to enable you to train actors properly. That's the disadvantage of a university."

One strong advantage of a third-level institution, however, is accreditation, where diploma or degree status can open other doors for an actor — beyond that of an audition room. Merriman was acutely aware of this when heading DIT's programme. "We took a broad view; we tried to look at the working life of an actor and to prepare them for everything they would do," he says. This means that beyond the basics of actor training common to most schools, such as improvisation, voice and movement development, text analysis, theatre history, acting theory and technique, audition skills, and mounting full productions, DIT also provides teaching qualifications, allowing graduates to instruct drama in schools and communities.

Although DIT's new course chair in drama, Peter McDermott, maintains that faculty support for a degree programme does exist, he concedes that there are pressures on the course to increase their student numbers — not an easy process for an actor education programme. "While that's possible to do on more lecture-based courses, where you can have 60 to 100 people to one lecturer, you can't do that with actor training." Because of the individual focus and limitations on space, McDermott thinks that with an average class size of 20 students the course is "pretty much at stretch point," and not until the intended move of DIT's Faculty of



GAETY SCHOOL

Applied Arts to Grangegorman will extra space materialise.

But space also carries more philosophical potential and social possibilities. While Bedrock's Jimmy Fay thinks that "wearing a cloak and a hat and graduating as an actor is not going to guarantee you work," he does recognise the value in assembling a community of like-minded people. "If you go to college you meet hundreds of people and if you're clever you set up your own company and you start developing it from there." If Rough Magic and Druid each represent an artistic nexus born out of a university drama society (Trinity's D.U. Players and UCG's Dramsoc respectively), broader drama degrees continue to yield up companies and, of course, actors from college campuses. Despite the highly competitive nature of acting programmes, there is enough creative coalescence to suggest that specialised courses now share the mantle of launching fledgling theatre companies. A case in point might be Fay's artistic relationship with fellow Bull Alley graduate and writer Alex Johnston which resulted in Bedrock Productions; the creation of Inis Theatre by Gaiety School alumni Iseult Golden and Carmel Stephens; or the impetus behind GSA alumnus Karl Shiels' site-specific work with his company Semper Fi.

But while such environments are undoubtedly fecund, concerns have been voiced over how these communities might be increasingly dominated by specific social groups — those who can afford the expense of actor training. "There isn't enough money and awards to help people, who aren't from middle class or affluent backgrounds, to pay for these courses," insists Paschal

TRAINING WRECK

Friel, also ex-GSA and member of Semper Fi. "I do think drama school is becoming more and more a middle class playground."

Merriman agrees. "Ultimately, what may well happen is that the sons and daughters of the comfortably-off will become the people who interpret the world as actors for everybody else, because they have the resources. And I think that would be a shame." For as long as the government continues its free fees scheme for third-level education, something that is currently in jeopardy, there is at least the opportunity of broadening the social base from which accredited schools can draw their students. Accredited courses also offer students the ability to avail of State grants.

"What we need to move towards is the idea that actor training is a graduate option, or at least a mature option," says Grant. "It seems pretty pointless sending an 18-year-old to spend three years in intensive study of how to convey life, when they've had very little life experience of their own."

For its part, Bull Alley's training course, subsidised and certified by FETAC and VEC, offers its two-year Performance Foundation/Development course for the startlingly low fees of €130 per student. With students ranging from school-leavers to 50-year-olds and encompassing every social stratum, Bull Alley's is a stringently economical but vigorously productive programme. "We spend 50% of the time in production," says Neville Carlisle-Style, the course director. "Every afternoon is in rehearsal and the mornings in classes. It's very intensive." One thing it isn't, though, is glamorous, as Carlisle-Style reveals that one rehearsal space is in a building condemned for health reasons, awaiting demolition.

An idea that won't be torn down is that some actors simply possess a natural talent, and no one is disingenuous enough to say that training is essential to enter the profession. "I have seen actors who have received no training," says McDermott, "but because of their constant interrogation of acting as an art form, the more they do it the better they get." He pauses. "Now it's a very rare animal that can achieve that."

Indeed, in the discussion over what actor training costs it's easy to lose sight of what it's worth. "Everybody differs about what they may need at a given time," says Derbhle Crotty, a graduate of Trinity's Diploma programme and one of Ireland's most accomplished actors, "but I'm confident my training was well worth all the hours I invested in it." For Crotty, a chief benefit of training was to galvanise her discipline, but another was to gain a "sense of entitlement to go out looking for work in this most personal of professions." Although skeptical of the merits of certain methodologies, Crotty considers that "the engagement with the mind, the emotions, and the body" provides an essential foundation, but also that "an education isn't the end of an exploration."

Nor should it be the beginning, according to Queens University head of drama David Grant. "What we need to move towards is the idea that actor training is a graduate option, or at

least a mature option," opines Grant. "It seems pretty pointless sending an 18-year-old to spend three years in intensive study of psychology and how to convey life, when they've had very little life experience of their own."

For one (untrained) actor, however, training represents little more than "a course in self-confidence," although it is a charge that most people involved in the training world vigorously deny. The Arts Council, for instance, has highlighted artist training as an imperative in the new Arts Plan. "I don't believe that training makes an actor," says Arts Council drama advisor Enid Reid-Whyte, "but I do believe that training makes a good actor better. Cream rises; there will always be good actors who don't go through training because genius — thank God — now and again exists. But by and large we all benefit from a little learning."

One thing that cannot be overlooked is the huge demand for such learning opportunities, where as many as 450 applicants audition for between 12 and 20 places in each full-time course. With different weightings of methodology, theory, and academics there is little duplication among programmes, allowing for a healthy competition. But in a chronically oversubscribed profession,

inevitably there will be more acting graduates than professional opportunities. This is a disconcerting development for Ireland's burgeoning actor training sector. Twenty years ago, anyone interested in professional training had no option other than to go abroad. Today the opportunities that have arisen are oversubscribed and under-funded, much like the precarious profession itself. Our stage needs intelligent, capable performers conversant in different styles, disciplines, and techniques in order to enrich it. That both training facilities and the profession should now find themselves in the same boat is of solace to no one. 



TCD'S KENNEDY



GSA'S SUTTON

Peter Crawley has a BA in English and Drama from Trinity College and an MA in Journalism from DIT, is news editor of this magazine, and writes on theatre and music for publications including The Irish Times.



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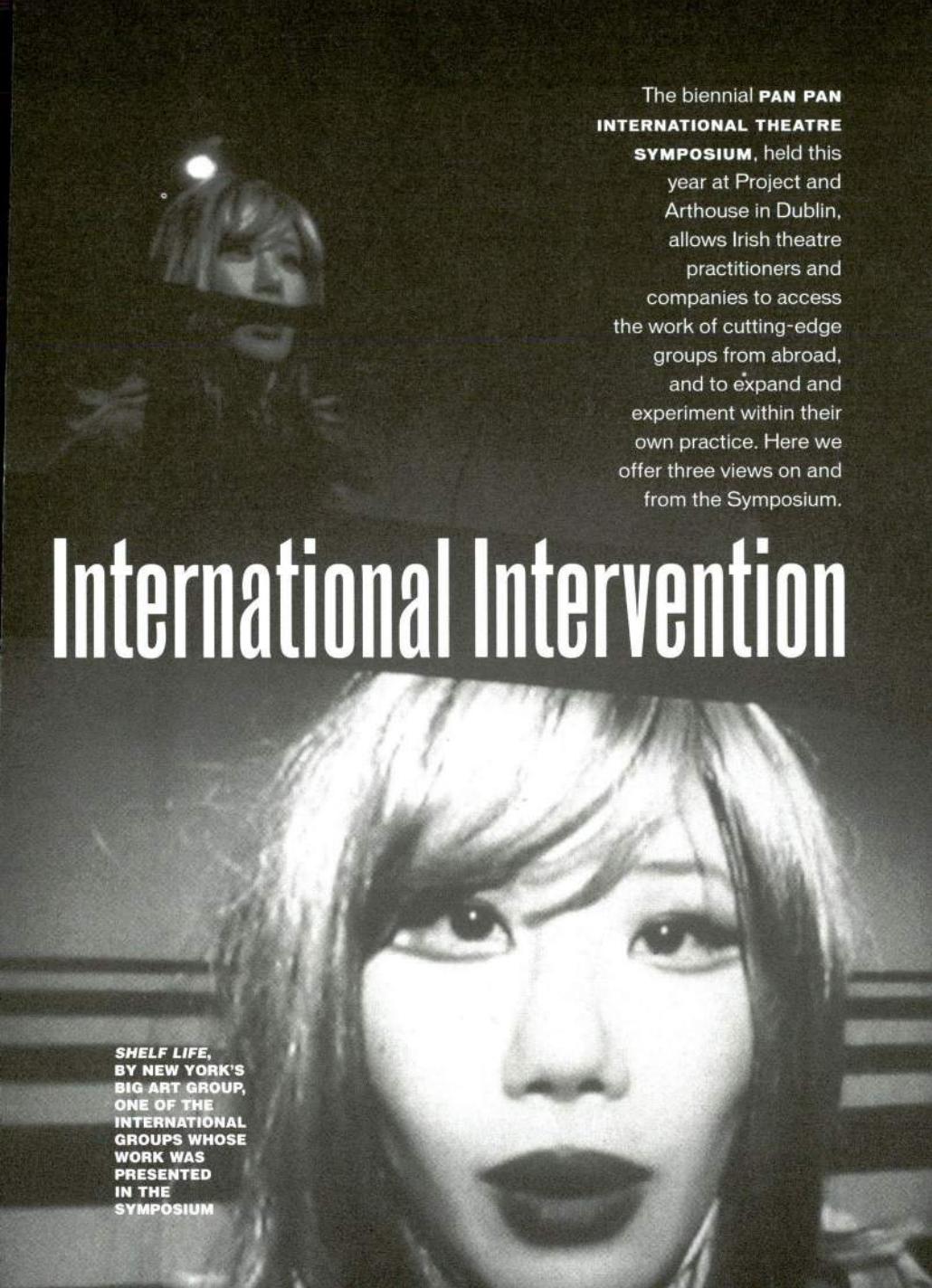
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The biennial **PAN PAN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE SYMPOSIUM**, held this year at Project and Arthouse in Dublin, allows Irish theatre practitioners and companies to access the work of cutting-edge groups from abroad, and to expand and experiment within their own practice. Here we offer three views on and from the Symposium.

International Intervention

SHELF LIFE,
BY NEW YORK'S
BIG ART GROUP,
ONE OF THE
INTERNATIONAL
GROUPS WHOSE
WORK WAS
PRESENTED
IN THE
SYMPOSIUM

Dutch Treat

Irish actor
ISEULT GOLDEN
 spent a
 day working
 with the
 Amsterdam-
 based ensemble
DOOD PAARD.
 Here are her
 thoughts on the
 experience.

THE DUTCH AVANT-GARDE THEATRE COMPANY, DOOD PAARD (translates as Dead Horse!?) held a day-long workshop, culminating in a 30-minute public performance, as part of the Pan Pan Symposium. The company was founded by three actors in 1993 and is known for a wide-ranging repertoire of both classic and new work and for its avant-garde style. I'd seen both of the shows they presented here and had been impressed by the simplicity and humour of *MedEia*, in particular. As a member of a company also founded by actors (Inis Theatre), I was curious to learn something about their process and the balance of their particular collective.

I arrived at 11 am in Arthouse to join the other workshoppees. We made up a fairly diverse group: a quota of actors, directors, drama students, a journalism student, a theatre administrator, and an ex-dancer. The company members, Kunno, Oscar, and Gillis, sloped in behind us (these Dutch men are very tall), with Steve Green, their DJ, but minus Manja Topper, the only woman of the group.

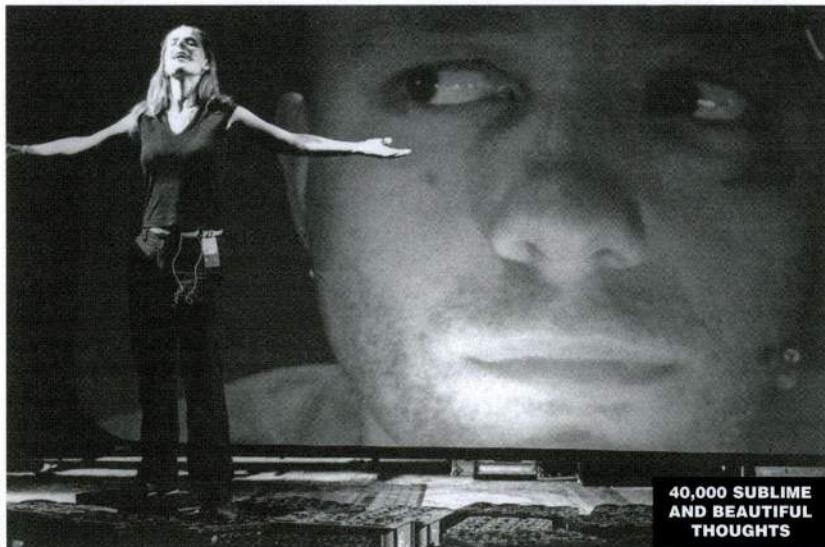
Because workshops are usually focused on teaching practical and physical theatre skills, you are likely to find yourself, quite quickly, lying on the floor thinking about your spine or playing a game with a ball. I'd worn my tracksuit bottoms and hoodie in preparation. Not a bit if it. We spent the best part of the day sitting around a table. Dood Paard don't give many workshops, which is possibly because their distinctive rehearsal process involves so much talk. Phrases you often hear in traditional theatre rehearsals include, "Don't tell me, show me," "Don't think about it, do it," also, "What's my activity here?," "What am I going to do with my hands?" and so on. I get the impression that you wouldn't hear any of these in Dood Paard's rehearsal room, even in Dutch.

The morning was spent discussing the company's working method, how it has evolved in the last ten years and its evidence in the two shows they presented in the Symposium. In contrast to a traditional four-week rehearsal, this company spends up to six weeks sitting around a table with a text and about four days putting the play on its feet. Also, they do not work with a director. (Incidentally, it was this fact that seemed to have sparked the interest of most of the actors present — directors, your days may be numbered!)

The company starts with a text. This may be a classic play or an original piece by company member Oscar van Woensel who

is a writer as well as performer. Over their rehearsal period they will investigate the different levels of meaning in the text, arrive collectively at an overall interpretation, decide who says what, and learn and speak their lines around the table. This is not an editing exercise; the script will change very little, if at all, over this time. In latter years, they have included a DJ in this process (Steve, who was there at our workshop), though no music is played until they begin to stage the script. A set design will be agreed on and constructed. It is clear that words, language, meaning, and the fluidity of meaning are the bedrock of Dood Paard's work.

I was pretty flabbergasted by this division of time — the lengthy discussion period with barely a nod to physically staging the play. But it triggered a sudden awareness about my own company's working methods. The focus of our rehearsal has, in fact, moved gradually from floor work to longer and longer script sessions. For *To Kill A Dead Man*, our third and most recent show, we spent considerably more time talking than acting. Of course, this is largely to be expected with a new work, but I believe it is also to do with a shift in our working practice. Clarity on the script has become a priority, with performance coming second (no snide remarks, please). As a group that works regularly together, there is a shorthand and a level of trust that the performances will come together fast, if



INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

they have to, which, inevitably, they do. But then, these two things are closely linked. Understanding of and close familiarity with the piece should lead to a characterisation that will best serve the story and style of the work. Perhaps, Dood Paard has had a similar journey. They, however, have pushed this balance to its extreme. Their incredibly short staging time is absolutely intentional (unlike ours!) and it is the key to one of their main aims as a company.

Without a doubt, the most entertaining part of the day for me was the hour I spent with four women riffing on the phrase "I can't believe." I note, in passing, that the line, "I can't believe how much time I spend thinking about food" came up more than once.

By spending so little time on the floor, the actors purposely prevent themselves from nailing down performance decisions. This means that their acting choices can be different every night and they constantly search for new layers of meaning within each performance. They celebrate the fallibility of live performance and welcome mistakes and stumbles as more real and engaging than a perfect recitation of text. Dood Paard is always looking for new ways to keep their work fresh and in the moment. The absence of a director makes perfect sense. With the company's collective vision of the text and their focus so clearly on the night-by-night work of the actor, the director becomes defunct. The responsibility of the performer is everything.

After the discussion of the morning, the afternoon was spent working from the blueprint of one of Dood Paard's recent productions, *Chinindrest Takeaway*. This involved improvising verbally with one limitation; each sentence had to begin with "I can't believe." We started in small groups. Without a doubt, the most entertaining part of the day for me was the hour I spent with four women riffing on this phrase. I note, in passing, that the line, "I can't believe how much time I spend thinking about food" came up more than once. Nothing else is fit to print. Next, the entire group of 12 came together for a larger improv, which involved the DJ. The challenge was to tune quickly into working as a group and to discover the dramatic and rhythmic possibilities of using the given phrase. Kunno, Oscar, and Gillis made some suggestions (not directives!) about listening and group dynamics, and through trial and error we discovered some do's and don'ts. We did about three rehearsal improvs before the public performance. These felt wonderful, and awful. There was, at times, a strong sense of working as a group and hitting a groove — wonderful. Then, there were whole sections when nothing seemed to work, no matter what we tried — awful. The music generally helped, giving us a sense of group dynamic and something to work either with or against.

It was interesting to feel the difference between the rehearsal improvs and the public event. Just when you think

you have enough on your plate, trying to work with eleven people, respond to a DJ, and say something (...anything!), add to this an audience. Then you find there is also room in your brain for a hypersensitive awareness of their response. Are they engaged or bored, laughing or shifting uncomfortably? Laughter is the most tangible reaction and there was a definite need in the performance run to try to be funny, which had not been such a driving force in the rehearsals. There was also the fear that what we were doing was coming across as incredibly pretentious. The fact that one of the group said "I can't believe how pretentious I feel" and was rewarded with a laugh of recognition didn't help to dispel this feeling. I found the experience of speaking in this environment to be alternatively one of power and terror. The addition of the audience has an effect on any piece of theatre, but a larger and more obvious effect on this kind of work. There is so little set in stone and, therefore, so much that can change in response to the crowd. And as the performer it's all your responsibility. It's definitely a rush, though to be honest, not one I want to have every day!

This improvisation was a glimpse of Dood Paard's performance experience, but at its most raw. They go on stage infinitely more prepared than we were, on every level, in terms of content, a finely-tuned group awareness, and a shared vision of the piece. Nonetheless, their performance style requires great courage. These actors purposely put themselves in front of an audience without some of the safety nets traditionally used by theatre; a set script, for example. They are in pursuit of performance that is fully alive. It is not easy. When someone tells a story once, they are fully engaged. When an actor tells a story on stage for the umpteenth time, the danger of falling into patterns is unavoidable and something is lost. Dood Paard is seeking to reclaim this immediacy and it is an ongoing search.

I was glad to spend the day with Dood Paard: they are intelligent, skillful and committed theatre practitioners who are endlessly curious about what they do. They have been working



DOOD DUDES

together for ten years. They continue to interrogate their own work and challenge themselves. That's impressive. By the by, they are also very charming (and cute — makes it all so worthwhile!). It's great to be around people like this — they shake you up.

Iseult Golden founded Inis Theatre Company with Carmel Stephens in 1999. Since then the company has undertaken two national tours and performed in a number of venues around Dublin. Their third show, To Kill A Dead Man, recently premiered in the Project Arts Centre.

The Power of Pessimism

Argentinian-born theatre artist **RODRIGO GARCIA**, who visited Dublin during the Pan Pan Symposium, offers his views on the role of theatre in contemporary society.

LA CARNICERÍA TEATRO (THE BUTCHER SHOP THEATRE)'s *I bought a Spade in Ikea to dig my own grave* gave Irish audiences a chance to see an example of some of the most provocative work to be seen in Europe today. Fusing form and content, moulding his piece from exactly those elements of mass culture he was attacking, writer/director Rodrigo Garcia's show confronted and taunted its audience towards an often uncomfortable examination of society's obsession with consumerism. Below is an edited version of a public discussion conducted by Garcia during the Symposium, translated and edited by **DYLAN TIGHE**.

RODRIGO GARCIA: After moving to Spain from Argentina, I started putting on my first productions between '87 and '92, all of which were very literary. Subsequently there was a moment of rupture in how I saw theatre, a moment in which I started to think that theatre was not part of literature, but rather had more to do with other elements that are of the theatre and of nothing else: physicality, time. My work changed as I began to write less and concern myself more with the actors. The substance of my theatre is not words, or literature, but rather the bodies of the actors.

Nevertheless, language is for me very important. I have simply reduced the amount of text in my work. I arrived at the conclusion that the more one talks the less force the words have, that by talking less, while taking more care of what was being said, every word would mean more.

As I abandoned literature, I started to work more with theatrical elements that have more in common with performance art, with actions. But the structure remains theatrical. I attempt not to make a representation of reality, but rather aim that every-

thing that happens, with the bodies of the actors, is real. The challenge is to find action which is real but that also has a symbolic dimension — to attempt to create a poetry from real actions.

I do not consider my work artistic in the same way as someone who wishes to transcend time. I believe that the best of theatre is ephemeral, and it is better to try to achieve something now. I don't care whether in 20 years time my work has a value or not. My political position is to make theatre *now*, in and of this moment, while still retaining a poetic value. The idea that, when we die, our work in the theatre lives on is useless. What we do is not going to last forever. The world is in such a terrible state that it is better to work in the most direct possible way, to leave aside metaphors.

Initially, I produced work which was much more individualistic. Now I base myself very much on the people I work with. If the substance of my work is actors I have to work *with* actors. People express their thoughts and you must listen to them. I make very clear proposals of what I want, but my proposals are very fragile. I depend very much on the actor who takes them and makes them his/her own. It is not important to me whether the actors are famous or not but that they are people with whom I am ideologically complicit. When we are in agreement about what we want to say, everything becomes easier after that.

A certain political conscience separates my old work from my new work. Now, I challenge myself that everything I put on the stage has to have a social link, a social dimension. My politics are not rooted in parties or ideologies. My sense of political discomfort has led me to become an artist.

There are themes that are constantly present in my work and have to do with the society in which I live; for example, consumerism. Unfortunately we all have to consume, but what I cannot understand is that buying and selling be allowed to form the basis of life. We have to enrich our lives in another



RODRIGO GARCIA

way. I attempt to work with those aspects of life which I dislike. But neither is my work obvious. Rather it is an energy in the work which deals with these elements.

I trust in the state of crisis to provoke unrest. I choose to work with the uncomfortable and with violence in a society where tremendous events occur but rarely to us. I come from a country used to a miserable existence [Argentina], and now I live in a country which is very comfortable [Spain]. I feel authorised to speak because I know both realities and cannot believe the disparity between the two is so great.

This is what I am trying to show in my work, to see if the two realities can better understand the other. My works are not understood in South America. It is a dialogue I wish to provoke with Europeans. I am questioning how we in Europe destroy other countries. My theatre is counter-propaganda.

I believe that when one endeavours, in the theatre, to show the ugliest parts of life this is ultimately an optimistic activity. You are trusting that you can change it. If we simply make nice, optimistic works, works for distraction, this is sending a clear political message: you are saying that the world is shit and we cannot change anything. Works that are apparently pessimistic contain a great optimistic power.

If we simply repeat the old the theatre will be dead. The theatre needs blasphemous artists.

Dylan Tighe is an actor and translator/literary manager with X-Bel-Air.

Artistic Armistice at Arthouse

The Symposium
afforded several
Irish companies
the chance
to spread their
formal wings.

PETER CRAWLEY
reports.

WHILE SPARKS OF INNOVATION AND PROVOCATION SHOT from the theatrical blast furnace that is Pan Pan's International Theatre Symposium, Irish contributors were steadily forging and reshaping their independent identities in the cool relief of Temple Bar's Arthouse. For these companies, the Symposium offered a respite from the forward march of artistic policy, a ceasefire from the regular offensive of pursuing one strategy, in which to attempt something new in a less pressured environment. The culmination of workshops in which participants had been indoctrinated in the ways of four different companies, public events ranged from a virtually-fully-staged production of a Heiner Müller play from Semper Fi (which illness prevented me from seeing), a demonstration of Loose Canon's

unique approach to physical and vocal training, Corcadourca's site-specific tour through a feverishly absurd office complex, and Bedrock's entertaining foray into dance installation.

In the past several years Loose Canon has shifted focus considerably, from a director-led company staging pared-back classics to an ensemble working full-time on movement-based practice. Audiences have had to work hard since this change in direction to fight the reflex to baulk from non-communicative acrobatics, confrontational exchanges of karate kicks and guttural shrieks, and to take such components of performance and construct them into a sturdy and supportive structure. This can be like assembling furniture after the instruction sheet has disappeared. Even Ikea might argue that there is not one true and authoritative coffee table, but the risk of complete collapse is off-putting in any case.

Utilising the workshop format to grant an audience to thoughts and techniques derived from Grotowski, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov ("guided by dead people" as director Jason Byrne puts it) Loose Canon seems to have understood the importance of bridging the gap between style and spectators, supplying an interpretive apparatus to the viewer so absent from performances of their recent *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Only the soft patter of bare feet on gym mats disturbs the silence of the demonstration, as partners trade slow kicks to each other's chests. Soon, though, it becomes ever more combative, a ducking, jumping, cartwheeling brawl. Even when reduced to the simple movement of just heads, or just shoulders, the movements inform and correspond, but always aggressively.

Discussing a fragile acrobatic routine, Byrne explains that performance must have a real and organic impulse if it is to communicate faithfully to an audience. It is easy to discern among the tumbling and crouching, or in the precarious balance of chest-stands, the total engagement of the body that is



LOOSE CANON

called for, but harder to see how it might serve an idea, an articulation, a feeling...

The real challenge remains in seeing such abstract notions through to a satisfying conclusion, where the limitless possibilities of an unhurried rehearsal room must conform to the finite demands of a drama. The actors seem stimulated by their exposure to Loose Canon's methods, the audience thaws through the seduction of focussed routine, but the dispiriting thing about the affably earnest group is that audiences are still engaged, stimulated, and moved by those learned conventions of narrative structure and a performer's artifice. Can they meet halfway?

The dispiriting thing about the affably earnest group is that audiences are still engaged, stimulated, and moved by those learned conventions of narrative structure and a performer's artifice. Can they meet halfway?

More engagingly playful was Corcadorca's entertaining trapeze through the hollow structure of Arthouse. Clearly relying on his company's forte for site-specific productions, Pat Kiernan's cast hacked a trail through contemporary office bric-a-brac, creating something that was by turns absurd and acerbic. Aided by writer Nancy Harris and scenographer Phil MacMahon, Corcadoca's exhibition snakes through the building, passing skewed information signs ("Do the minimum amount of work to get by"), various found objects, and a chatty secretary flapping in a tangle of telephone cord like a mackerel in a net. From room to room the audience are greeted with variations on a theme.

Of all the workshops, Corcadorca's seemed to make its actors the primary authors of their performance. Guided by Kiernan and his creative consultants, the performers possessed their space, originating and devising their sketches from the stray morsels not yet picked clean from the carcass of Arthouse. Beyond increasingly bizarre and frantic work-place depictions, a dispassionate indictment of the dormant building comes via a recital of unimpressed press cuttings, wondering from date to date what Arthouse represents and who it serves.

Without commenting any more incisively about the absurdity of office life, however, or connecting their ideas to the scathing diatribes against commercialism and globalisation that so dominated this year's Symposium, Corcadorca seemed to show up the limitations of Arthouse's merciless functionality even further — this was as much as the site could stimulate.

Following Corcadorca's workplace exposé, Jimmy Fay's foray into the world of installation dance performance might have had some thunder stolen from its promenade format, but there the similarities ended. Clamouring over the body of our fallen lift attendant en route to the first stage of Bedrock's dance exhibit was just the first human hurdle of this densely interactive performance.

Guiding us through a chalk-illustrated, colour co-ordinated explanation of the resurrection of Christ by a poorly briefed,

protocol-addled instructor ("Switch 'em off, please observe the nearest fire... I'm thinking Mary, I'm thinking blue") soon the dance acumen of the performers is briefly called into play, for a thrashing *Singin' in the Rain* routine.

As the role of the audience in Bedrock's creation becomes increasingly explicit (we are positioned, at one point, into living sculptures), our contribution seems no less vital than that of the cast or the director. Beyond the amusing distortions and contortions of the performers, their approach nurtures a communal huddle, where even creative and interpretive roles are consistently exchanged — in the rough-hewn *tableaux vivants*, it's us who become the art objects and the dancers who decide our titles.

The non-narrative progression crystallises into a series of individual or paired vignettes before a discomfiting sequence sees three dancers appear like dark apparitions, their opaque features pressed against the frosted glass of a locked door. Resolved by one final group effort in which the audience accompany the cast for a cathartic rendition of Atomic Kitten's seminal "You Can Make Me Whole Again," Bedrock (like the chart-toppers) seem to be buttressing their pop-cultural kudos, for the moment at the expense of the writer.

As they took full advantage of the artistic armistice of the Symposium, it is tempting to divine new directions from the established generals and emerging infantry of Irish independent theatre, to understand the motivation of defectors from theatrical convention, or simply to discern a pause for thought during more text-based strategies. Each understood and relished the opportunity that the Symposium afforded them. It was something that, by rights, but not always by practice, independent theatre should thrive on: the ability to try something different. 



CORCADCORCA

Short and Sweet



STELLA FEEHILY

FISHAMBLE'S LITERARY MANAGER GAVIN KOSTICK WRITES:

Often when we're working with new writers, Fishamble Theatre Company addresses the issue of what makes their play complete. Sometimes we suggest as an exercise in which writers attempt to write a complete work no longer than Beckett's *Come and Go*. As a result of the fascinating work that arose from these exercises, we decided to make an open invitation for submissions for a season of very short (10-minute) plays. The hundreds of writers who sent plays seemed to be thoroughly stimulated by the challenge, and the 14 writers we finally commis-

sioned all created whole, coherent, worlds. These plays will be presented in an evening called *Shorts*, from 6-17 May at Project's Space Upstairs. Here is an excerpt from one of the plays that will be presented in the *Shorts* evening: *Game*, by actor and writer Stella Feehily.

GAME

A wine bar. A woman sitting, looking out a window. She is drinking a large glass of red wine. She waits, looks at her watch, and drinks. A man at the bar is watching her. After some time he makes a decision to walk over. (A slash mark indicates overlapping dialogue.)

MAN May I? (*She looks up.*)

WOMAN Please yourself.

MAN Thank you. (*He sits.*)

MAN Would you / like a drink?
(*She looks at her watch.*)

WOMAN Twenty-three minutes.

MAN What?

WOMAN That's how long you've been
watching me for. (*Pause*)

MAN Are you sure?

WOMAN Quite sure.

MAN (*He laughs*) I'm sorry. I didn't
mean to stare, I wanted to..

WOMAN Yes?

MAN I wondered if you'd like...

WOMAN Do you speak in such quiet
tones as a form of torture or for effect?

MAN What?

WOMAN You could be saying all manner
of things to me but I can barely hear
you.

MAN I wasn't aware of it

WOMAN If you insist on talking to the
women you stare at, you should at least
speak up.

MAN I'm sorry, it was rude of me.

WOMAN Yes it was.

MAN This is a bad start.

WOMAN You could always begin again.
(Pause)

MAN May I?

WOMAN Please yourself. (*She laughs*)

MAN Would you like a drink? (Pause)

WOMAN No. Thank you.

(*They smile at one another.*)

MAN What's your name?

WOMAN Guess.

MAN What?

WOMAN You've stared for long enough, you must have an idea.

(*He laughs.*)

MAN Well I'll try. (*Silence*)

WOMAN I can't hear you.

MAN I haven't said anything.

(Pause. *They stare at one another.*)

MAN Rebecca.

WOMAN Rebecca. Biblical, interesting.

MAN Well?

WOMAN Wrong, try again.

MAN Angela?

WOMAN Angela... glacial — disappointed.

MAN Glacial? No, Angela — angel.

WOMAN I see, well you're wrong.

MAN Perhaps I'm not the right man for this game.

WOMAN You are. (*Silence*)

MAN Eva.

WOMAN Eva. I like it.

MAN Is it yours?

EVA I'll take it. Robert.

ROBERT How do you know my name?

EVA Your tag.

ROBERT My?... (*He looks down and unclips a security tag.*) Oh yes... I thought... For a minute..

EVA No. (Pause) Does anyone call you Bob?

ROBERT Just Robert. Not Robbie or Bert or... (Pause) Though I seem to remember my father...

EVA Yes?

ROBERT Calling me Bobby. Perhaps I misremember.

EVA He's dead?

ROBERT When I was small.

EVA Small?

ROBERT I was four, nearly five when he died.

EVA What did he die of?

ROBERT Kidney failure, dialysis etc,

EVA I used to save the rings.

ROBERT What's that?

EVA On the cans, coke tins etc, For dialysis, do they still do that?

ROBERT What?

EVA Collect?

ROBERT I don't know.

EVA I'm not sure how they use them. I've always imagined a large exercise bike made from aluminium.

ROBERT I doubt that's what /they're used for.

EVA Yes, doubtful. (*She smiles. Pause*)

ROBERT I'd like to take you home.

EVA Where's home?

ROBERT Not far from here, five minutes in a taxi. (*Silence*)

EVA I'm not sure.

ROBERT I'd like to get to know you. We could talk. You know so much about me already.

EVA You haven't called me by my name yet.

ROBERT Eva. (*Silence*)

EVA It's always nice to hear one's name for the first time.

ROBERT I'd like to take you home, Eva.

EVA You should stop saying home. You should say my house or a hotel or something. When you say "I'd like to take you home" I could almost believe I've been there before.

ROBERT Come with me now.

play excerpt

EVA Tell me more about your father.
(Silence)

ROBERT He was a doctor, he's dead, my mother remarried, I have a half sister.

EVA Do you love her?

ROBERT My sister?

EVA / Half.

ROBERT I'd like to get to know you, Eva.

EVA You're not trying very hard. You've spent the time talking about yourself and insisting I come home with you.

ROBERT You forgot to mention the staring.

EVA And the staring, which I have to say was disconcerting.

ROBERT I'm sorry about that but I noticed you were alone and...

EVA Yes?

ROBERT And I think lonely.

EVA Oh... lonely.

ROBERT And I would just perhaps like to...

EVA To?

ROBERT Come with me. Now.

EVA I think you should fuck off now.

(Silence)

ROBERT When I was watching you I made a decision.

EVA I thought as much.

ROBERT I'm going to follow you when you leave here and push my knife in your spine. *(She laughs.)*

ROBERT Why are you laughing?

EVA Where's your knife?

ROBERT It's in my briefcase.

EVA What kind of a knife is it?

ROBERT It's a bread knife and then I'm going to rape you, you fucking cocktease. *(She laughs.)*

EVA You have a way with women.

ROBERT Take off your jacket.

EVA I want to see the knife.

(He opens his brief case, she looks inside. He closes it. She takes off her jacket; she is wearing a silk shirt.)

ROBERT I've never told anyone about my father before.

EVA What about him?

ROBERT That he called me Bobby.

EVA Life is just full of surprises.

ROBERT Eva's not really your name, is it?

EVA You could always threaten me with the knife. I might tell you all sorts about myself.

ROBERT Tell me your name?

EVA You are not playing by the rules, Robert.

ROBERT What rules? You said my name. You know my name.

EVA You didn't refuse, that's not my problem.

ROBERT I want your name.

EVA You're starting to sound like Rumplestiltskin and very soon I will laugh, laugh my fucking head off at you.

ROBERT Don't laugh at me.

EVA And I am now imagining you doing your little dance and stamping your foot through the floor. *(She laughs.)*

ROBERT Don't laugh.

EVA Your bread knife is blunt. One should always have a decent bread knife in one's briefcase. Anything else is just plain rudeness.

ROBERT This is a bad start.

EVA There are no more beginnings allowed, Robert.

(The play continues...) 

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entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY reports on coming and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

TEERTH CHUNGH has been appointed to the new position of head of production at the Gate Theatre, having departed as director of Draiocht.

RORY O'BYRNE, the Fingal county arts officer, acts as caretaker manager of Draiocht while the position is advertised...

TONY McCLEANE-FAY, of Wexford's Bare Cheek Theatre Company, is the new artistic director of the Granary Theatre...

Project Arts Centre has appointed **DAIRNE O'SULLIVAN** its new marketing officer. She has previously work with Rough Magic and the International Dance Festival. Meanwhile **DOIREANN GILLAN**, formerly channel manager with Esat Telecommunications, is Project's new publicist... **SHONAGH HILL** has departed as administrator of Púca Puppets. Having lost its Arts Council funding, the company can no longer maintain the position... **BRENDAN GALVIN** is the new theatre manager of the Everyman Palace Theatre.

CIARA FLYNN has been appointed as general manager of Fishamble, having previously worked for the Gate, the Dublin Film Festival, and the Abbey. She succeeds **JO MANGAN** who will



DAVID HORAN



TONY McCLEANE-FAY

concentrate on her career as artistic director of Performance Corporation and as a freelance director... The City Arts Centre has appointed **ALEXA COYNE** as project programmer in visual arts, and **NICOLA SWANTON** as programmer in performing arts.

At the Abbey, **DAVID HORAN** of Peri-Talking Theatre Company and Inis Theatre has been named staff director. **JEAN O'DWYER** has become the director of the theatre's Outreach/Education Department. **IRMA GROTHUIS** joins that department as programme officer and **MICHELLE HOWE** has been appointed its administrator. Former Outreach/Education director **SHARON MURPHY** has been made Abbey centenary coordinator with **JOHN McCOLGAN** chairing a new Centenary Committee.

MARY McCARTHY, previously director of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork, has been appointed to the management team of Cork European Capital of Culture as deputy director & director of programme development. The poet **TOM McCARTHY** has been made assistant director & director of literary programme development... **SEAMUS CRIMMINS** is stepping down as director of Lyric FM to become arts policy director with the Arts Council. **DERMOT McLAUGHLIN**, formerly art form officer at the Arts Council, is the new director of Temple Bar Properties.

SCOTT WATSON has left as executive producer of the Dublin Fringe Festival. The position has been advertised... **LISA HEANEY** is the new general manager of TEAM Theatre Company, having departed as company manager of Dance Theatre of Ireland. Her former position will be advertised...

TRÍONA NÍ DHUIBHIR, previously production director of Daghda Dance Company, is the new general manager of Barabbas... the company... **SIMON MAGILL** has departed from Tinderbox as

artistic director to pursue a freelance directing career. The position will be advertised...

ROSS KEANE has been appointed commercial manager of the Dublin Theatre Festival, having worked previously for Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. This is a new position... **TARA JENKINS** has been appointed project co-ordinator / training development officer for Smashing Times Theatre Company's new creative training in community drama. **HELEN GIBB** has also joined the company as administrator. 



SHARON MURPHY



JEAN O'DWYER

Through the Leaves

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

AS THE ABBEY'S CENTENARY DRAWS closer, we can expect a greater level of activity in publishing about Irish theatre and the Revival. Oxford University Press is early into the fray with Ben Levitas' *Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916*. Exploring the relationship between the development of the Irish national theatre movement and the wider debate about independence in pre-revolutionary Ireland, Levitas emphasises the place of class, gender, race and geography. Importantly, he makes this point by looking at the national theatre movement not only at the Abbey but also in Ulster and Cork. Also covering the Abbey's early history is Susan Cannon Harris's *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Indiana University Press). In a thought-provoking study, Harris charts the developing status of gender in the work of the Revival's dramatists, describing how the emphasis on blood sacrifice in *The Countess Cathleen* constructed gender roles so restrictive that Irish dramatists would struggle with them for decades later.

There's plenty of work being done on contemporary dramatists too. Edited by Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan, *before rules were made* is the first collection of essays on Marina Carr — due from Carysfort Press in the summer. And Liffey Press promises a volume on Conor McPherson as part of its "Irish Writers and Filmmakers" series. Tentatively titled *Imaging Mischief*, and written by Gerald Wood, it should be available in

April, just in time for the release of McPherson's new film, *The Actors*.

With all of this activity, it can be easy to forget that writing about Irish drama remains excessively dominated by analysis of playscripts, so it's great to see Mike Wilcock's *Hamlet — The Shakespearean Director*, recently released by Carysfort. Describing the different approaches to Shakespeare by a series of major directors from Stanislavsky to Brook, the particular value of the book to the Irish reader is a brilliant chapter on Tyrone Guthrie's work on *Hamlet*.

It's a relatively quiet time for the publication of new scripts. Nick Hern continues to bring Owen McCafferty's work into print, with *Shoot the Crow* due in February, and *Scenes from the Big Picture* to look forward to in April. And Gallery Press have published Thomas Kilroy's *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche*. One of the earliest treatments of homosexuality on the Irish stage, the play generated controversy when it premiered at the 1968 Dublin Theatre Festival. As an aid to our understanding of recent Irish drama, it's essential; it's also a fine play that would be well worth another production.

Finally, the current issue of *The Irish Review*, dedicated to Irish drama, will be of wide interest. Edited by Adrian Frazier, the journal contains essays by many of the leading commentators on Irish theatre.

E-mail books news to:
patrick.lonergan@ireland.com

FISHAMBLE/PIGSBACK FIRST PLAYS**edited by Jim Cullen***New Island, 2002*

and

**WAY OUT IN THE COUNTRY: AN
ANTHOLOGY OF COMMUNITY PLAYS****edited by Declan Mallon****and Declan Gorman***Upstate Theatre, 2001***REVIEWED BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

UNTIL RECENTLY, THE BEST WAY FOR Irish dramatists to gain publication was to be successful abroad. This situation is slowly changing — as we saw when, remarkably, every Irish play that premiered in 2000 at the Abbey and the Gate was published. This development should be to everyone's benefit: publication provides a much-needed printed archive, as well as scripts of immediate relevance to amateur and professional groups throughout the country. And wider publication should improve the quality of critical debate about Irish drama, by offering a more accurate map of our theatre sector.

Despite these benefits, we need to be careful about welcoming publication unreservedly. Some plays just don't work, so there can be times when it's a good idea to delay or even avoid publication. Furthermore, the current practice of publishing before performances begin means that some printed plays differ considerably from the versions finally staged — which isn't in the interest of writers, readers, or scholars. And although there are now more Irish plays in print than ever before, we still haven't reached a stage where significant, high-quality Irish writing is assured publication.

Accordingly, although these anthologies from Fishamble and Upstate are welcome,

it's worth considering whether these plays are appearing in the right medium, at the right time — and whether the books represent the best work of each company. Given the unusual theme of each volume, this seemed initially unlikely.

Like New Island's 1999 *Rough Magic* collection, the Pigsback/Fishamble anthology comprises the first plays of six writers, most of whom are being published for the first time. Although Fishamble (which operated as Pigsback until 1996) has a tradition of nurturing new writers, the decision to use first plays as the collection's theme is questionable. First plays usually act as a writer's apprenticeship and are rarely wholly successful. This made me wonder if having their first plays in print was to these writers' benefit.

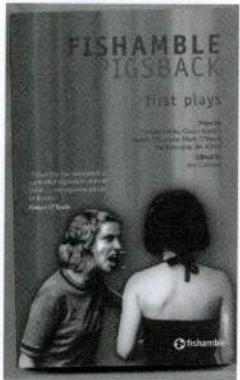
Way Out in the Country provoked similar concerns. Just as Fishamble's development of new writing is important, so too is Upstate's recent work with Macra na Feirme groups in Monaghan and Termonfeckin. However, community arts are a way for a locality to speak to itself, confronting issues that exist in specific times and places. Publication for a wide audience isn't necessarily the fairest way of representing such an activity: the printed page shows us all of its flaws, but nothing of its context or its long-term benefits.

In their introductions to these volumes, both editors tackle these apprehensions head-on. Fishamble's Jim Cullen writes that producing plays by first-time writers is "a particularly exciting and nerve-wracking experience" worthy of being recorded. And Declan Gorman asserts powerfully in *Way Out in the Country* that the collection's three plays are of merit, challenging the preju-

book reviews

dice that community theatre is little more than "therapy for the marginalised."

There is a tendency in some of the volume's plays to over-burden opening scenes with exposition, and evidence of the first-time writer's anxiety to tie up every loose end. We also veer too frequently into melodrama: three of the six plays involve people dying under mysterious circumstances, and this, frankly, gets a bit tiresome. But generally they are of a good quality. Gavin Kostick's *The Ash Fire*, about a family of Jewish refugees in 1930s Dublin, is more timely now than when it premiered, and might deserve another production. Joseph O'Connor's *Red Roses and Petrol* may deal with themes that are common on the Irish stage — the emigrant whose return home disrupts Irish life, and the funeral for a man who is not quite dead — but it does so in a light-handed and



inventive fashion. And Mark O'Rowe's description of the relationship between a guard and a gangster in *From Both Hips* is a hilarious consideration of how masculinity and morality can conflict.

The volume's three other plays are less successful, but have many merits, and provide an interesting record of recent Irish life. Ian Kilroy's *The Carnival King*, Deirdre Hines' *Howling*

Moon, Silent Sons and Pat Kineane's *The Nun's Wood* all feature characters haunted by ghosts from their past — and thereby exemplify the rarely-expressed but pervasive anxiety that lay beneath Celtic Tiger Ireland. The growth of Pigsback and Fishamble coincides with the development of both the peace process and social partnership in Ireland — so it's interesting to chart the declining status of politics in their repertoire. Hines' 1991 play deals interestingly with gender in relation to the Northern conflict, and *The Ash Fire*, from 1992, explores a family's competing allegiances to class, nationality, and religion — but the plays produced after 1995 ignore politics altogether. No feathers are ruffled here — and this, it must be said, is exactly what most Irish audiences have wanted in recent years. It's useful to have this so clearly illustrated.

Whereas Fishamble is notable for its activities throughout Ireland, the work recorded by Declan Gorman and Declan Mallon in *Way Out in the Country* affects only a small part of the island. But this is a book that deserves

to be read by anyone with an interest in Irish theatre. It collects three plays, all written by community groups. Two are firmly rooted in time and place: we have *Zoo Station*, a portrait of the commuter hell that Dublin's surrounding counties have become, and *Connected*, which describes a teenager's travails with alcohol and her overworked mother. The third play, *Tunnel of Love*, takes on a more universal theme, portraying a bride's discovery of her new husband's infidelity. Although many features of conventional drama are evident here, the plays also have that element of self-help we expect from community theatre, with one of them including a neatly contrived scene that allows the cast to promote the work of Aware and Alcoholics Anonymous.

It's debatable whether these plays have much artistic merit, as Gorman proposes. They are well-structured, bouncing through several settings in a way designed to show us the many facets of community life. And the society presented on stage will be recognisable to anyone who's lived in Ireland during the last five years, giving us a valuable record of our times. But while this makes clear that community theatre needs to be taken seriously, it's also evident from the simplistic moral structure of these tales, and the stereotypical presentation of their characters, that this work doesn't benefit from being judged against strictly artistic criteria.

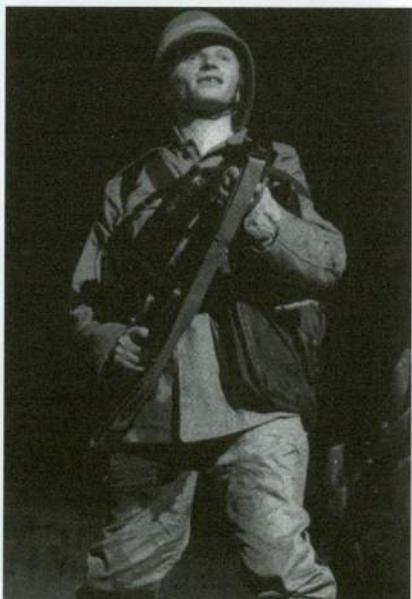
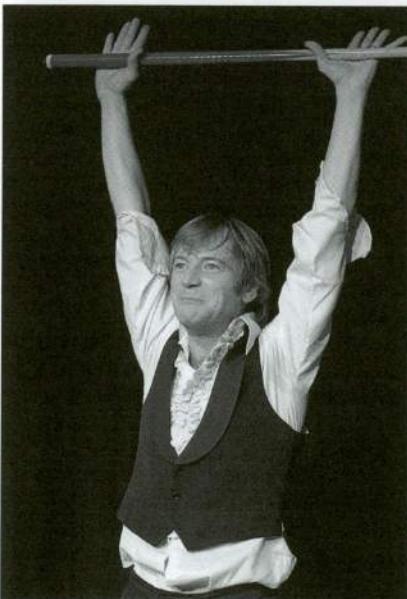
This is, however, much

more than "an anthology of community plays." With a fascinating introduction by Gorman and useful supplemental material from Anna McMullan and Declan Mallon, the book charts the way community theatre operates, before and after work is performed. This enables us to see the plays in context, making clear that they are part of a vibrant tradition that deserves to be recorded.

There is a "but" about these books, though. Although both comprise excellent material, it must be said that Fishamble have produced better work than many of the plays they collect — and that there are better, more significant community plays than those in the Upstate volume. Shouldn't the first criterion for inclusion in any anthology be excellence? Fishamble and Upstate seem to think not, instead asking us to make allowances for authorial inexperience, or special circumstances. These books prioritise sincerity of endeavour over quality of achievement, and I wonder whether this is something we need to be cautious about — even when the results are still very good. Without wishing to detract from either book, if we're going to have future anthologies of Irish plays, it might be more productive for them to avoid focusing on the many obstacles and limitations our companies have to face and overcome. That aside, these books are excellent — contributing very usefully to the published record of Irish theatre. 



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CAVALCADES AND HURRICANE: CHRIS HILL PHOTOGRAPHIC

**THE BELFAST FESTIVAL AT QUEEN'S
2002: REVIEWS OF SIX NORTHERN IRISH
PRODUCTIONS**

THE CAVALCADERS by Billy Roche

The Lyric Theatre
(25 Oct-23 Nov; reviewed 22 Nov);

MASSIVE by Maria Connolly

Tinderbox Theatre Company
The Errigle Bar (23 Oct-10 Nov;
reviewed 9 Nov);

**THE CHANCE by Peter Carey,
adapted by Jackie Doyle**

Prime Cut Productions
Stranmillis College Theatre
(31 Oct-9 Nov; reviewed 9 Nov)

BY ÚNA KEALY

SOLDIERS OF THE QUEEN

by Damian Smyth

Centre Stage Theatre Company
The Belfast Institute of
Further and Higher Education
(26 Oct-9 Nov, reviewed 4 Nov);

HURRICANE by Richard Dormer

Ransom Productions
The Old Museum Arts Centre
(18 Oct-26 Oct; reviewed 26 Oct.);

**THE BELFAST CARMEN by Martin Lynch
and Mark Dougherty**

Green Shoot Productions
The Grand Opera House
(6-9 Nov 2002, reviewed 9 Nov)
BY PAUL DEVLIN

BILLY ROCHE HAS DESCRIBED *THE Cavalcaders* as a modern-day version of the Arthurian epic, but even if we did not recognise Terry's shoe repair shop as Camelot, our experience of the play would not be lessened. The intensity and emotional power of the characters stand strong in their own uniqueness. Carol Moore's direction and Blaithín Sheerin's set and

costume design harmonised to present an Irish world recognisably past tense (the play is set in the 1980s) but, like Camelot, stifled by nostalgia and fantasy.

The play opens with new owner Rory tidying the shop in preparation for its renovation in conversation with Terry, the former owner. He is full of plans for its modernisation but, as he outlines his vision, Terry is haunted by the intensity of the events that have taken place there. Terry is psychologically and emotionally paralysed by the self-delusion that the era dominated by his uncle Eamon was almost idyllic; however, as the play progresses his fantasies break down and he painfully comes to the realization that to make-believe a golden age is ultimately destructive. The events of the present begin to replicate and recall the past, and this forces Terry to come to terms with reality, and we watch as dramatic events from past years unfold and start to overlap: Terry's affair with the younger, disturbed woman Nuala and his toying with the affections of his contemporary Breda; the love triangle that develops between Rory, Rory's wife, and their friend Ted; the older man Josie's battle with illness; and the ongoing exploits of the men's barbershop quartet, the Cavalcaders of the title. Terry is nostalgic for something that never existed and it is only with the disintegration of his fantasies that he is set free and in his struggle Roche indicates that "ordinary people" are capable

BFQ SCENES:
Garrett Keogh and Ruth McCabe in The Cavalcaders (top); Richard Dormer in Hurricane (bottom l.) and Paraic Duignan in Soldiers of the Queen (bottom r.).

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of heroic deeds of subtle magnitude and intensity.

Sheerin's set and costume design captured the era of the play perfectly, and the stage picture evoked an atmosphere that was somewhere between dingy and homely. The only problem with Sheerin's design was that, because John Lovett played the piano with his back to the audience, his character Ted (the weakest of all Roche's characters) was lost during the songs and this weakened the overall impact of his performance.

Moore assembled an excellent cast each of whom combined the intensity that their role required with the humour for which Roche is famous. The relationship shared by Garrett Keogh and Pauline Hutton as Terry and Nuala was superb, full of fire and ice, while the gentleness and vulnerability with which Damien Kearney played Rory was beautifully touching and humorously uplifting. John Hewitt as Josie, John Lovett as Ted, and Ruth McCabe as Breda never missed a beat and the cast listened to each other with a concentration that was impressive. Some of the Wexford accents were a bit ropey at times, but, otherwise, the performances were quite absorbing.

Pat Fitzpatrick's musical direction was sensitive to the actors' capabilities so that the songs came through as touchingly human rather than flawlessly slick. Moore highlighted the musical numbers with the help of Conleth White's lighting design, which lit the songs with a crisp white light that evoked the performances in the community centres and church halls. In a comic touch Moore added clichéd hand gestures that exaggerated and gently mocked the seriousness with which the men treated their performances.

Towards the close of the play Terry's

visions of the past become more intrusive, interrupting the present with disturbing images of the dead and Moore increased the visual stylisation to heighten the drama. Entrances and exits were very slick and tightly-focused lights created a distorted reality and a clammy nightmarish atmosphere. This section was particularly well-directed effectively intensifying the drama, giving it the epic, mythic quality that Roche intended to capture.

Massive is Maria Connolly's first professionally-produced play, and with it she demonstrates a flair for comic writing. She humorously makes the point that the Troubles are often regarded as Northern Ireland's only cultural distinction because people at home and abroad fuel the world's belief that everyone in the province is obsessed with the political struggle.

There was a serious side to *Massive*, but it failed to come through effectively because the script needed further development. There was too much comedy initially, which, in an instant, turned to tears and neither the plot nor the characters could cope with the emotional U-turn. Connolly portrays a generation for whom the Troubles initially seem irrelevant, but in fact we soon learn that the conflict has profoundly affected these young people through continuing sectarianism, punishment beatings, and enforced exile. The play deals with the attempts of the clubbers of today to free themselves from the disturbing consequences of being brought up in a war zone. Unfortunately, the characters did not have the depth to carry the storyline. They were cartoonish and larger than life in the opening section of the play, which made their sudden transforma-

tion into the voices of a fucked-up and pissed-off generation lack credibility.

The cast and director, because they had little to work with, tended to emphasise a single dominant trait in each character: Phelim (Packy Lee) was excited, Keith (Ruarí Tohill) was quiet, Snake (Brónagh Taggart) was angry, and Tarrot (Drew Thompson) was menacing. Consequently, the final section of the play failed to make the impact that the text seemed to demand. The only character able to demonstrate any emotional and psychological progress was Phelim's sidekick Keith whose music made no reference to the past but his character's lack of presence (through no fault of Tohill) during the final melodramatics between Snake, Phelim and Tarrot made this progress seem almost inconsequential.

The choice of venue and time of the performance (10:45pm) gave the atmosphere of the production a lightness of touch, and probably provided a novel theatrical experience for the young audience that the play was aimed at. The company performed in the smaller of two rooms that were made available for the production due to the larger room being unavailable on Saturday nights, consequently, there



TABLE DANCE
*Brónagh Taggart
in Massive*

were times when one felt that the action demanded a larger space.

Tinderbox's policy of prioritising new writing and supporting new authors is daring and commendable in times when venues and audiences seem to want only the "same old same old." The company has created many excellent pieces of innovative and original theatre, particularly in recent years, but unfortunately *Massive* did not work as well as it could. The production was less professional in its writing and production standards than audiences

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and supporters of *Tinderbox* have come to expect.

Peter Carey's *The Chance*, adapted and directed by Prime Cut's Jackie Doyle, tells the story of a futuristic society where humans live grubby and degraded lives dominated by the "Fastalogians," an alien race that controls the world by holding a genetic lottery in which the prize — called the Chance — is the opportunity to change one's genetic make-up. In the future that Carey has imagined, it is not money that paves the way to success and happiness, but eugenics: cinematic comparisons to *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* spring to mind.

The play opens in a café where the Fasta lottery show, cut through with American style commercials, is playing on the cyclorama upstage. The scale and volume of the TV images effectively created the impression of a society dominated by technology and overloaded with incessant and intrusive advertising. While the show blared on in the background, the characters downstage revealed the strangeness of their lives: people live mostly alone in boarding houses, friends often simply disappear, and it is considered acceptable to take and sell on their leftover belongings because it's certain they will never return.

In retrospect this first scene seemed superfluous, as it had little relation to the main story, which focused on would-be revolutionary Carla's relationship with her boyfriend Paul, and Carla's decision to take the Chance. Another weakness of the adaptation was that the characters had very little charisma and appeared quite flat. Doyle assembled an excellent cast, but throughout the play one felt that their roles did not give them enough

scope to show their talent.

Terry Loane had a serious challenge to make any set look substantial in the cavernous space that Stranmillis College presents, and succeeded in creating a set that not only filled the space but was beautifully designed. Constructed mainly of timber, it was built on three levels that Doyle utilised well; and the cyclorama, on to which a backdrop of images were projected, gave the space another dimension and created a very beautiful and interesting stage picture. On the whole the production triumphed in its visual qualities but unfortunately, the plot and characters often got lost amongst the "added extras."

Una Kealy is a research student in Drama at the University of Ulster.

THE SET-UP OF ULSTER POET DAMIAN Smyth's debut play *Soldiers of the Queen* has a pleasing theatricality. George Linton, an Inniskilling Fusilier from Downpatrick, has been shot in the gut and is trapped on Hart's Hill in South Africa. Across a ravine a Boer patriarch, who has seen his sons killed in the Boer War, has George in his sights and listens to the young soldier's ramblings as he slowly bleeds to death. The emotive possibilities in this dramatic locale, however, dissipate under the weight of Smyth's dense poetic prose, which, though it reaches for elegy, ends by grasping at cliché.

As George deteriorates, his mind wanders. The ghosts of his mother, his brother George Henry, and a future descendant, Harry Smyth (an IRA man), in turn populate the stage. George's be-shawled archetypal Northern Irish "Ma" triggers in his mind domestic memories

of his childhood. The ghost of his naïve brother, who also took the Queen's shilling and was killed in action in India, makes George question why successive generations of his family have been killed so far from home. Harry Smyth's presence, completing a past-present-future trinity, causes George to realise his family is locked into a cycle of historical conflict. Illuminated, George attempts to persuade Harry to learn from the deaths of his ancestors, to break the cycle.

It's difficult to see anything beyond platitudes on the futility of war and man's inhumanity to man in Smyth's treatment of this subject material. His ghosts, as dramatic devices, mask and try to compensate for a lack of internal conflict in the play's central character, George. Even when taken as manifestations of George's own personality, they are less engaging still because what they say is of no real interest beyond establishing the precise order of George's family genealogy. More than this, though, the "ghost" of Harry Smyth particularly feels like a theatrical appendage tacked on and designed to lend the play a false sense of historical resonance. Overall, *Soldiers of the Queen* suffers from an overlong first act that gives way to a crawling second half. In an attempt to suggest George's worsening state of mind, Smyth's characters in the second act repeat earlier snatches of dialogue over and over again. The effect of this is wholly undramatic, unnecessary, and irritatingly repetitive.

Of the individual performances in this troubled production Gordon Fulton, as the Boer, is the most consistent. His accent is strong and he provides some interest in a collection of largely vapid and unremarkable performances. Paraic Dignan, as George, has some innocent

charm, but his voice, projection, and stage presence lack the gravity Smyth's poetic dialogue hankers after. In contrast, the undemanding role of matriarchal ghost Bella Smyth, fails to challenge Roma Tomelty who handles the part with extreme ease. While costuming of the play's soldiers is very impressive, Kevin Elliott (who played Harry Smyth) suffers from being clothed in the theatrically clichéd uniform of the stage IRA man: a sub-Donnie Brasco-style leather jacket, jeans, and dodgy '70s mullet. Unfortunately, neither Elliott's performance, nor Smyth's script, did much to counter the caricature.

Colin Carnegie, who barely moves his actors for the majority of the play, hugely underdirects the cast of *Soldiers of the Queen*. Though arguably motivated by a desire to allow Smyth's word-heavy script to speak for itself, Carnegie's approach is miscalculated and inconsistent. While George's wound justifies his immobility, by electing to have him move freely about in other scenes, though desirable and welcome, Carnegie only succeeds in underlining the lack of movement in the rest of the production. Moreover, what little movement Carnegie does direct is poorly spaced, perfunctory, and inconsequential.

The first offering from newly established theatre company Ransom Productions, *Hurricane*, at the Old Museum Arts Centre, couldn't be further removed from the static physicality of *Soldiers of the Queen*. Written and performed by Richard Dormer, this one-man show charts the frenetic rise to fame of Alex "Hurricane" Higgins. Performed at breakneck speed, Dormer's highly physicalised and eerily accurate portrayal of the tempestuous snooker legend

DRUID

SIVE

John B Keane



Photograph: Ivan Kyne

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has a sinewy intensity and an anarchic quality akin to Higgins' own unpredictability.

Dormer's fondness for Higgins is palpable in his extremely well-written and tight script. An exhilarating narrative moves through Higgins' apprenticeship in the Belfast snooker halls of his youth; his chequered professional career and bitter struggles with the snooker establishment, via his passionate love affairs with women, booze, fags, and celebrity; to his eventual return to the bookie shops and bars of his native Belfast. From icon to pint-cadger, Dormer's reading of Higgins is laced with empathy, admiration, and a fair smattering of awe. *Hurricane* embraces Higgins' rebellious individualism in a pristine, green-felted, mock-gentleman world of waistcoats and bow ties. In many ways, this is Dormer's love song to Higgins, or at the very least a theatrical folk song celebrating the genius of a working class hero made good and bad.

Rachel O'Riordan's accomplished direction of *Hurricane* matches Dormer's skill in performance. Moving the action between large, set physical sequences, with Dormer's intensity being given full range to fly, O'Riordan paces the drama to allow Dormer to draw out Higgins' wry wit and quiet vulnerability in the play's more subdued scenes. Gary McCann's giant snooker table-shaped set works well in the Old Museum's limited acting space and, paradoxically, actually made the performance space seem much larger than it usually does. John Riddell's lighting design compliments this, but is also able to close the space down when the play requires a smaller more intimate feel.

For a first production it should be

acknowledged that Higgins' life story as subject material, given that the subject is still very much a living legend, was not an easy choice. Although Dormer's script (unsurprisingly given his obvious affection for Higgins) is careful to arrive at a conclusion which sees Higgins affirm his own continuing life, *Hurricane* does address, though it glosses over and easily forgives, the philandering and selfish aspects in Higgins' personality. In the end though, these sides to Higgins' character, for Dormer, are part of the man's genius and charm. It would have been interesting to gauge Higgins' own reactions to the play when he attended its opening night.

Specially commissioned as part of the Belfast Festival's 40th anniversary celebrations, *The Belfast Carmen* was an impressively large-scale production. Co-written by Martin Lynch and Mark Dougherty, the play draws together professional opera singers and actors, a 100-strong community cast, with musical accompaniment provided by the Ulster Orchestra. Staged in Belfast's Grand Opera House, the play was intended as an ambitious showcase and demonstration of the Festival's commitment to the promotion of local theatrical talent in 2002.

Set in present day Belfast, *The Belfast Carmen*'s central plotline revolves around a visiting English opera company's attempt to mount an adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* set in Belfast against a backdrop of the Troubles. Rehearsals grind to a halt when the local Belfast cast and crew raise concerns and object to yet another negative stereotypical representation of themselves and their city on stage. Sophie, the production's English prima donna, is sympathetic to the locals' case and joins

them in an attempt to at first convince and then coerce the opera's director to change his mind about the type of production he intends to stage. In tandem with this, a love triangle subplot mirrors Bizet's original *Don José-Escamillo-Carmen ménage à trois*. Brendan, a foreman overseeing the opera set's construction, is lured by Sophie's earthy sensuality and exoticism and competes for her promiscuous affections with the production's director, James.

The scenario of *The Belfast Carmen* is a cliché minefield and, unfortunately, Lynch and Dougherty's ineloquent script plants a foot on almost every grenade. Structurally the play is ploddingly formulaic. Large-scale scenes accommodate the community cast who, as a kind of Greek chorus, pass comment on the action as it unfolds with "typical" Belfast acerbity and humour. Intimate scenes move on the love story, and comic relief is provided by James Ellis and Conor Grimes, who play, respectively, Dessie, the Grand Opera House's wily old caretaker with a heart of gold, ably abetted by his hapless assistant, Hugo, a motorbike enthusiast without a motorbike. Characters are universally poorly drawn. The chorus consists of a too-familiar collection of bookie-loving and pub-obsessed men, while the play's female chorus members spend the majority of their time bitching about their domestic circumstances. The principal characters fare little better. Brendan has a paramilitary past and a deep-seeded desire to escape Belfast for a brighter future elsewhere. Sophie is a manipulative temptress characterised largely by the split in her skirt. Though some of this two-dimensionality may lie in Bizet's original characterisations, Lynch and

Dougherty's transposition of the characters to contemporary Belfast is deeply uninspired.

At the heart of this production is a problem born from Lynch and Dougherty's desire to marry the adaptation of Bizet's work to a critique of current issues, such as Holy Cross, troubling the North. The marriage is never satisfactorily consummated. Lynch and Dougherty's dramatic approach simply grafts these issues on to a skeletal version of Bizet's story. The result is a chunky melodrama punctuated with moments of slapstick and inorganic social commentary. This said, however, at a time when other Northern Irish playwrights seem to net praise simply by dint of their avoidance of anything remotely "Troubles-related," Lynch and Dougherty have attempted to grapple with important, albeit unfashionable, issues. Unfortunately, though the artistic and social intentions may have been worthy, the application was sadly lacking.

Paul Devlin is a research student with the University of Ulster's School of Media and Performing Arts.

THE BUDDHIST OF CASTLEKNOCK

by Jim O'Hanlon

Fishamble Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 7 Dec 2002

at The Helix, Dublin

BY HELEN MEANY

IT'S HARD TO CONTEMPLATE CHRISTMAS in spring; sometimes, it's hard to stomach it even in December. In the case of Jim O'Hanlon's dramatisation of a contemporary Dublin family's festive season, the sense of ennui sets in early: try as he might to find a new recipe for



turkey, it still tastes the same.

The house party or the annual gathering of far-flung family members under one roof, has been the stuff of drama — on stage, radio, film and TV screen — for decades. It's a highly determined form, with inbuilt conflicts, character studies, and emotional pressure points, amid heightened expectations of bonhomie and good will. What's added in O'Hanlon's play are references to current changes in Irish society as it slowly becomes semi-permeable to people from different races, cultures, and religions. The Christmas visit of a young, black, British woman who's a practising Buddhist is a catalyst for the exposure and release of tensions in a comfortable suburban family home in Dublin.

The problem — or one of the problems — is that the family members have plen-

HOLIDAY HEADACHE

Ruth Hegarty, Mary O'Driscoll, and John Olohan in Buddhist

ty of tensions of their own before Rai (Mojisola Adebayo) appears on the scene, and none of them are very far from the surface. The easy-going husband

and father, Sean (John Olohan) has just been diagnosed with a malignant tumour; his wife Edie (Ruth Hegarty) is an over-anxious control freak who is determined not to tell their children this important news so that it won't spoil what she fears will be their last Christmas together; their daughter Tara (Mary O'Driscoll) is separated from her husband and young child and has a serious drink problem; their youngest son, DJ (Johnny Ward) is an unmanageably hostile adolescent. Overloaded and overwritten, all of this is painted in lurid colours before the arrival of the two older sons, Edward (Conor Delaney) and John (Niall Cleary) with his new girlfriend Rai in tow.

From her first calm, unthreatening announcement that she is not going to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve to her attempts to teach Sean and Edward to meditate, Rai's presence brings out the worst in everyone. John's obvious attachment to her adds to the provocation, which is compounded by his confession, to his mother's horror ("our son is clearly deeply unhappy") that he has also become a Buddhist. These scenes, played against Fiona Cunningham's single, naturalistic set, are reminiscent of a television sitcom, perhaps influenced by playwright O'Hanlon's recent experience as a writer and director on *Casualty*, *Coronation Street*, and *Bad Girls*.

When Rai is badly mugged in the Phoenix Park, where she has gone to take refuge from Tara's hostile verbal volleys, the moral ground is heavily signposted. Add Uncle Jimmy (Des Nealon) with his nationalist songs and readiness to take offence and we're deep into melodrama. The quick-tongued Edward describes Jimmy as "a boor, a bore and a bigot," and he's got a point. Unfortunately, Rai is a bore too, who's not only a Buddhist but a relentlessly proselytising one, an unconvincing but convenient dramatic device representing multiculturalism and otherness, in capital letters.

Nothing in the way *The Buddhist of Castleknock* is written or directed suggests that it needs to be on a stage. The writing, although aspiring to humour, is often clichéd and compares unfavourably with Roddy Doyle's lighthearted treatment of a similar subject in *Guess Who's Coming For the Dinner* in 2001. Jim Culleton's direction doesn't manage to shake the script out of its predictable straightjacket, and has allowed performances, in the case of Ruth Hegarty and Johnny Ward, in par-

ticular, which are marred by over-acting.

While the matinee audience at the Helix seemed very comfortable with this seasonal fare delivered in a familiar form, it seems a disappointing production from a company such as Fishamble, whose *raison d'être* is to stage new Irish work, and which has certainly been adventurous in the past. With a changed economic climate affecting all aspects of cultural life and cutbacks in train for many theatre practitioners, this is not a time for playing safe. If theatre-making is to hold its position as a vibrant art form, it must surely be demonstrating its unique aspects and capacities, rather than disguising them.

Helen Meany is a freelance journalist and editor.

CHRISTMAS EVE CAN KILL YOU

by Marie Jones

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

6 Dec 2002-11 Jan 2003;

reviewed 18 Dec BY ÚNA KEALY

CHRISTMAS EVE CAN KILL YOU IS A much darker play than one might expect to see at holiday time. There were laughs aplenty, but as the production unwrapped itself, the lives of Jones' characters were exposed as being far from funny. First produced by the Lyric nine years ago, the play describes a time when Belfast was much more oppressed and less hopeful. Some of the circumstances of the play have altered — for example, soldiers are no longer such an obvious presence for the majority of city revellers — but poverty, alcoholism, family fights, loneliness and marriage break-ups are all still part of the fabric of many Christmases, and not just in Belfast.

The play tells of a particular night in the life of taxi driver Mackers (Peter



Ballance); the antics of his Christmas Eve fares are written in short episodic scenes, with all the actors bar Ballance playing multiple roles. Characters are collected and delivered and, as they appear and reappear in the back of the taxi, we learn a little more about them. Prior to the interval the play was stuffed with quick-fire gags, witty repartee, comedy turkeys, and great one-liners; but in the second half it was less successful simply because it demanded too much from its characters and not enough from its audience.

Since this play was written Jones' writing has gradually become more economical, and a sharp edit with the benefit of her increased experience would have improved this production. Her dependence on comedy, at times, also sabotaged her attempt to make serious points.

HOLIDAY HEADACHE

NO. 2 Ballance, Hutton, Jones and Tumelty in
Christmas Eve...

This was most marked in the scene where Dermot (Dan Gordon) and Eileen (Katie Tumelty)'s marriage breaks up as they argue over whether or not to

adopt a homeless dog. The dog (a real-life, and very cute, West Highland Terrier) is comic prop; we want it to wriggle and loll its tongue out so that we can laugh at it. It fulfilled this brief and, consequently, the sincerity of Eileen's speech was entirely lost. This and other dilutions of serious moments epitomised the play's essential problem: Jones could have trusted her actors and audience more in her instinct to be solemn instead of going for laughs and cheap sentimentality.

Karl Wallace assembled a cast that worked well together although at times they seemed unsure of their blocking, leading to moments when the pace and action was not as slick as others. Overall,

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however, Wallace's direction was in tune with, and sympathetic to, Jones's text. He worked to keep things from being too laboured or sentimental, and directed quick exits and entrances to oil the wheels of her comedy.

Stuart Marshall and John Riddell created simple and complimentary set and lighting designs that were imaginatively designed and well constructed. Marshall placed a car (with the roof and doors cut away so that the audience could see inside) in the centre of a stage that was otherwise bare but backed by a series of black flats. Riddell conveyed the sensation of the car's progress through the traffic by directing a moving light onto the bonnet; the light and shadow rose and receded gently as Mackers drove through the night-lit city. This gentle animation of the stage added great atmosphere to the production.

The point that Jones makes most successfully in the play is that if people could simply pause from their frantic attempt to appear to be enjoying themselves at Christmas, and take time to relax, they might just find the real meaning of peace and goodwill. To some, this point may appear trite and clichéd, but the wit and humour with which it was delivered made it refreshing rather than rehearsed.

DANCING AT LUGHNASA by Brian Friel

An Grianán Productions in association with

Cork Opera House

On tour; reviewed 25 Nov 2002 at the Civic
Theatre, Tallaght **BY SUSAN CONLEY**

BRIAN FRIEL'S 1990 PLAY IS VERITABLE stowpot of nostalgia, but these days, punters are less likely to wax reminiscent over the auld wireless or pagan bonfires in the hills, than to sigh, longingly:

remember when people in plays used to talk to one another? Remember when plays had more than one character, even more than two? Remember when the things that characters were unable to express to one another was actually the whole point of drama?

There's been a spate of monologues and duologues that have trotted regularly across this island's boards, and their mode of direct address leaves little to nothing to the audience's imagination, a kind of exposition that pales in comparison to what Friel has wrought via the Mundy sisters. Through them, he gives us full frontal human nature, five fantastic roles for that endangered species, the Irish actress, and most importantly, shows us a story as well as tells it to us.

In '30s Ballybeg, the vestiges of pagan Ireland rub up against the reality of Catholic Ireland via the festival of Lughnasa, generally falling in early August and celebrating the Celtic god of light, Lugh. It was a time of tribal meetings, of meting out justice, a time of arranging marriages, a last gasp of revelry and socialising before the cold of Samhain set in. The feast could take on a rather desperate air, encouraging revelers to take too much drink and perhaps, too many liberties.

Therefore, the fears that Kate expresses — that the Lughnasa carry-on is bordering on dangerous and that the Mundy sisters would be laughingstocks should they join in the festivities — is not unfounded. And the fact she's right makes "that dance" all the more poignant; if dance can be taken as an expression of sexuality (as anybody who's seen, much less danced, a tango knows) then the sisters' sexuality is trapped within their four walls: there are

no appropriate males available to witness their outburst of sensuality. Each dances a lonely dance that taken together are volatile mixes of anger and joy and frustration and rebellion and yearning that give us little hope that these lusty impulses will find an outlet.

And yet, despite the fact that we know what happens to these women, and that the future promises pain, we are not permitted to descend into despair. We are gripped by the way in which the story unfolds, as Friel goes back and forth through time. Through the character of Michael, and his framing monologues, we come to know the fate that lies in store for his family; through the action that represents the women's present, we come to know the family and the events that lead up to that fate. Their relationship as a family, and their relationships within that family, are portrayed through action, reaction, through the said and the unsaid, in a way that represents truthful human behaviour; as in life, the Mundy sisters don't always say what they mean. Additionally, the women don't tell us something if they can better show it to us, and show it to us imperfectly,

DECLAN DOHERTY



FAMILY PORTRAIT
Gallagher, Moran, and Quinn in Dancing at Lughnasa

through open conflict and physical reaction. The audience is left, happily, to make connections and discoveries themselves, in a way that encourages them to engage

fully with the story unfolding onstage.

The production itself is imbalanced as regards casting, with the three male players coming up short. Edward Tighe as Michael is far too young for the part, his late twenty-ish air the wrong fit for a part that needs to be played by a middle-aged man. As directed by Mairead McGrath,

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he stood with hands in pockets and delivered his lines with a casual air — Tighe seemed to be lazily reminiscing as opposed to re-experiencing the deep grief that his story inspires. Dessie Gallagher as Gerry was all that was exuberant, but his "Welsh" accent was disastrous, more like a German speaking English in a Cork accent. Jack Quinn as Fr. Jack lacked the desperate confusion that he finds himself in, back in Donegal after years "going native" on his mission in Africa.

As it should be, it was through the female roles that the play soars. Kate O'Toole as Kate and Eleanor Methven as Maggie provide the sisters' strong centre, as they stand in as father and mother figures, respectively. The younger siblings, Rose (Janet Moran), Agnes (Morna Regan), and Michael's mother Chris (Cathleen Bradley), create their own alliances within the frame of the five, and execute the complex, sometimes antagonistic, oftentimes high-spirited and loving atmosphere that makes the play one of the most moving pieces in the Irish canon.

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

FAITH HEALER by Brian Friel

Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, Inc.

On tour: reviewed 26 Oct 2002 at the
Playhouse Theatre, Derry BY ÚNA KEALY

HOME IS WHERE WE RETURN TO, TO TEST our mettle. There was the distinct sense from director Andrew Paul's programme note that Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre (PICT) felt that it had something to prove to itself and to Irish audiences with its production of *Faith Healer*. International touring is a major

feat for any theatre company, and PICT toured a professional production that captured the dialectical nature of homecoming.

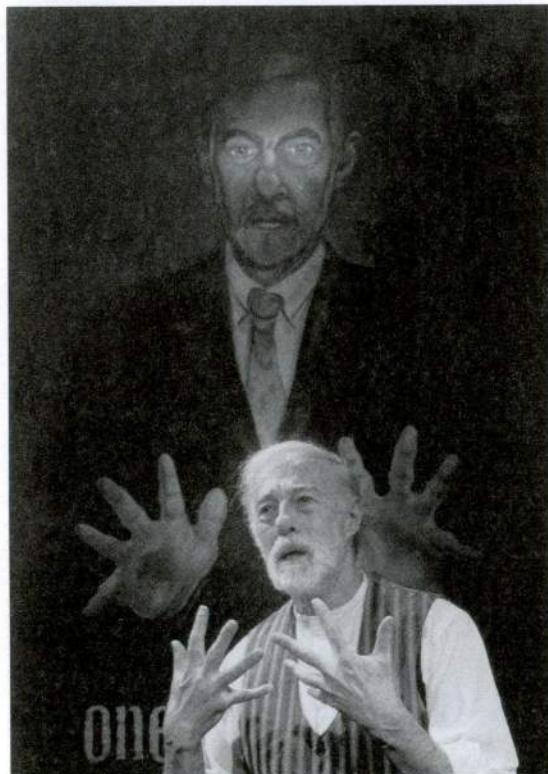
Faith Healer is comprised of four monologues by three characters: Frank Hardy, the faith healer of the title (Bingo O'Malley), whose monologues open and close the production; his partner Grace (Catherine Moore); and his manager Teddy (Roger Jerome). Each character ostensibly tells the same story, recounting their time touring the tiny villages of rural Scotland and Wales. Very quickly, though, we recognise that each character's account of the past is their unique impression of events, and that their "facts" are often merely self-constructed comforts that they cling to in an uncertain world.

Faith Healer explores the torture of having a talent that is unpredictable and unreliable, the exhilaration of fulfilment, and the desolation of loss. PICT's production realised the drama and poignancy of the individual monologues through absorbing performances, particularly those of Moore and Jerome. O'Malley's Frank Hardy was well-acted, but marred by the recurrent twangs of his own American accent. Also, O'Malley's physical appearance — in glowing health and dapper to the point of elegance — runs counter to the stage directions. There Friel describes a dishevelled Hardy: someone whose outward appearance shows the tortures of time and drink, someone who has been profoundly affected by the darkness and crises that constantly destabilize the play. As it was, it was difficult to appreciate that O'Malley's Hardy was tortured by drink and his own demons.

On the whole, Andrew Paul's direc-

tion of the play was sensitive and subtle, and his actors' physicality and presence increased the resonance of Friel's text. Paul used blocking to indicate the static or erratic nature of the characters' emotional states. His sensitivity to their complexity unlocked the powerful emotions within each monologue. At key moments during his monologues O'Malley stood downstage, static but with arms outstretched, his physical stasis embodying his emotional paralysis whereas, in contrast, Moore paced nervously around the stage. Her frantic movement physicalised her shattered mental and emotional state and emphasised her distraction and confusion. In Teddy's case, a pool of light was focused on his chair and he rarely moved outside it, suggesting that his character had found a sanctuary that he had no desire to leave or widen.

Michael Moricz added an unobtrusive but atmospheric sound design — bass notes reminiscent of a storm or thunder and alternating from threatening to sorrowful. The score was particularly effective in the moment when Grace recounted the birth of her still-born child, underlining the tragedy of the event. An echo of a heartbeat



HAUNTED Bingo
O'Malley in Faith Healer

accompanied Teddy's account of the same event, allowing a glimpse of the sorrow that was never acknowledged on that dreadful day.

The set design adhered rigidly to Friel's stage directions. The stage was sparsely furnished and dominated by a large poster announcing Frank's name and occupation in bright red letters and featuring his photograph. Andrew Ostrowski's lighting design created tightly lit spaces that confined the characters, emphasising their feelings of

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claustrophobic isolation. His use of a green wash on the backdrop at strategic moments in the play, most effectively during the incantation of Scottish place names the trio had visited during the last days before returning to Ireland, gave the stage a supernatural air and effectively complimented Moricz's haunting sound design.

On the whole PICT's *Faith Healer* was professional and captivating. It created a world that though dingy, was somehow magical, where fear and celebration went hand in hand and conveyed the sense of unfamiliar familiarity that homecoming often brings.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

**adapted from the Brothers Grimm story
by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy**

Storytellers Theatre Company

Project Space Upstairs, Dublin

13 Dec 2002—4 Jan 2003

Reviewed 14 Dec BY SUSAN CONLEY

IN 2001, STORYTELLERS MADE A BIG impact on children's holiday entertainment with what we might call an "anti-panto" approach to Christmas fare. *The Star Child and Other Stories*, based on the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, was a beautiful production that eschewed the rowdy aspects of pantomime and presented the stories in a creative and challenging way and didn't pander to the usual happy-clappy approach that is often taken when the punters are pee-wees.

This time out, the company chose to stage the Brothers' Grimm version of *Hansel and Gretel*, a tale of abandonment and despair that, in its literal and figurative grimness, was heavy going on many fronts, and despite the return of several key contributors from *The Star Child*,

resulted in a slow and disheartening outing. While this is correct conceptually, the result is so dark and gloomy that the pendulum swung too far to the side opposite, say the Gaiety's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Hansel (Fergal McElherron) and Gretel (Judith Roddy) live with their father the wood cutter (Barry Barnes) and mother (Bríd Ní Neachtain) in a little cottage in the woods. Theirs is an idyllic life, with plenty of food on the table, plenty of love to go around, and plenteous amounts of togetherness, until a famine breaks out through the land. When it reaches their little refuge in the woods, their mother finds it impossible to cope and falls into a depression. The children become little more than a nuisance in the early stages, and then a real threat to Mother's own sanity, as the stresses of poverty begin to take their toll. She hatches a plan to abandon the children in the woods, and carry on her life with her husband away from the cottage and all memories of the past. Twice the children find their way home, but the third time is the charm, and Hansel and Gretel are well and truly lost. This begins their true journey into self-preservation and self-determination as they fall into the hands of a witch intent upon boiling up their little bones for a meal.

The essence of the story is that the witch is the embodied shadow of Hansel and Gretel's own mother, and rather than expect the children to take on the extraordinarily difficult work of facing up to the evil in their own home, the authors locate the evil in a stranger, a stranger who feeds them, clothes them, and nurtures them in a way that had become lacking at their own fireside; however, her open desire to kill them allows them to respond in a way that



their mother's passive attempt to dispose of them did not.

Ní Neachtain plays both the mother and the witch, a handy way of portraying the psychological subtext and staging this difficult idea. Unfortunately, the mother's "badness" is disproportionately weighted — there is no comment on the father's behaviour, which is hopelessly passive; he comes out clean as a whistle because he "loves" his children. The fact that he colludes in their demise goes unexamined, and gives the adaptation a sour, mommy-bashing tone that comes across as extremely heavy-handed.

The production itself is quite literal-

BUNDLED UP
McElherron and Roddy in Hansel and Gretel

ly dark. A scrim hung midway across the Space Upstairs' stage, bisecting the playing area so that John McCormack's shadow puppetry could create the dark

and threatening wood. This decision seems to have limited Paul Keogan's lighting design, which wasn't up to his usual standard; in order for the shadow puppets to "read," a general flat wash of light bathed the stage for the majority of the performance. Director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh's staging of the piece was also limited by the sequence of the plot, in which lots of journeying into and out of the woods was executed via running around and around this scrim. After the

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third time, one began hoping that the children would fail to find their way back, simply to allow something else to happen.

This leads to the problem that crops up due to the storytelling format, that of the handling of exposition: Burke-Kennedy's script tells us what's happening to the detriment of showing us. Hansel and Gretel shiver in the forest, and tell us they're shivering in the forest... or they run through the forest while they're telling us they're running through the forest... McElherron and Roddy played young very convincingly, but the adaptation placed quite a lot of emphasis on their suffering, resulting in rather whiney performances. Ní Neachtain was slightly more interesting in the role of the witch, her portrayal of the mother lacking any sort of deeper investigation of the idea of depression as an illness, and Barnes was suitably bland as the "perfect" father. While the story kept ticking along, it wasn't the feast of expression that *The Star Child* had been, lacking in variety and perhaps adhering too religiously to its original text.

THE LILLY LALLY SHOW by Hugh Leonard

Bewley's Café Theatre
7 Jan-8 Feb 2003; reviewed 9 Jan
BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

MARY MOONE, "IRELAND'S QUEEN OF Comedy," stares into the sea of faces beyond the footlights asking "Do I get the part?" Sometimes she does it with a robust Dublin accent, crying out for complicit belly laughs which recognise and celebrate the layers of performance and irony. She mugs and winks, tells stories of the tricks of the trade like taking a fall, delivering a punchline, and holding a



pause. Other times there is no irony: she seems nervous and uncomfortable and feels compelled to explain that she is not used to auditions.

Mary tells her story of a life on the Irish variety stage. It is a familiar tale; a mixture of showbiz clichés and whispers of a world of expectation and disappointment unique to her upbringing in a smaller, more parochial Ireland. It is also the story of a fall from grace, of a performer who came close to immortality but whose hunger died just before her biggest opportunity — as host of a TV comedy revue to be called "The Lilly

QUEEN OF COMEDY
Brennan in The Lilly Lally Show

KELLY CAMPBELL

Lally Show." A life lived in denial, hiding from a past filled with disappointment, misunderstanding, and unrealistic expectations was also a life lived in the public eye, and, in the setting of her audition for some unknown gig or simply for our understanding, she tells of how it ended in sadness.

The Lilly Lally Show is another slippery mixture of satire and sentimentality from Hugh Leonard. Though written with his characteristic ear for flavourful one liners and evocative anecdotes illustrating the peculiarities of a bygone era, the show works best when at its most subversive. Underlying a relatively conventional confessional/reminiscence monologue is an intimate psychological profile of a character whose need for affirmation has driven her to the stage. There she has created psychological and emotional spaces entirely her own yet insufficient to shield her from herself. All comedy is about subversion, but usually the comedian is the antagonist. In subjecting his central character to such an unrelenting evaluation, Leonard not only subtly parodies the conventions of acting and of the theatre itself, he reappropriates the blarney. The play makes demands upon the audience in exchange for self-indulgent laughter.

The play also makes demands upon its lone performer. The actor must integrate the demagoguery of nostalgic witticism with the nuances of a portrayal of emotional fragility without lapsing into mawkishness. There are many shifts in tone and a number of intentionally empty spaces; moments of pause where the audience is left to ponder how to respond to the expressions of loneliness and desperation on the actor's face. The piece demands dramatic and comic skills which alternate

and affect the rhythm of delivery. It takes terrific timing to get away with glib observation alongside more penetrative revelation, and Barbara Brennan (as directed by Mark O'Halloran) does enough in the relatively intimate space at Bewley's Café Theatre to connect with the crowd. Certainly their response to her final plea of "Do I get the part?" seems to have been an overwhelming round of applause.

Harvey O'Brien teaches film studies at UCD and NYU/Tisch Dublin. He reviews theatre for culturevulture.net.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

by William Shakespeare

Rattlebag Theatre Company

Civic Theatre, Tallaght

30 Oct–23 Nov 2002; reviewed 16 Nov
and

HENRY IV, PART I

by William Shakespeare

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

26 Nov 2002–11 Jan 2003; reviewed 12 Dec
BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ALMOST EVERY EUROPEAN COUNTRY that gained independence after the First World War had one thing in common: with only one exception, they all tried to stimulate the growth of a national literature by commissioning translations of two key texts — the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. There's an interesting implication in this: that, for a nation to form an identity, it has to come to terms with God first, and then Shakespeare. The one exception to this trend was, of course, Ireland which (leaving aside our troublesome attitudes to God), found itself in a strange relationship with Shakespeare: too familiar to be translated, his work was also too English to be

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comfortably assimilated into our culture.

Eighty years later, the place of Shakespeare in Irish theatre remains complicated, still characterised by a strange unease. We've had Irish versions of Chekhov, Ibsen, Sophocles, and every other giant of world theatre, but we've had few successful productions of Shakespeare. This situation may have something to do with colonialism — but, in recent years, the compulsory status of Shakespeare's works in our school curriculum probably accounts for a greater part of Irish audiences' ambivalence towards him. And this ambivalence is intensifying, with a growing perception among producers that audiences aren't willing to watch Shakespeare without added inducements — celebrities in leading roles, extensive cuts, or gimmicky, gender-bending casting.

These recent productions of *Measure for Measure* and the first part of *Henry IV* show that Irish theatres are attempting to overcome this situation — but that they're also still suffering from it. The production of two of Shakespeare's least performed plays is another example of how, despite the doom and gloom, Irish companies are setting off in encouraging new directions — in this case, by courageously exploring the murkier parts of the Shakespearean canon. However, they also exemplify the lack of confidence Irish producers have in the viability of Shakespearean productions, with



NUN ON THE RUN
Claffey, Murphy, and
Delaney in *Measure
for Measure*

both companies emphasising that their work is more than just "typical" Shakespeare. So from Rattlebag we have a *Measure for Measure* set in 1930s Ireland, and from the Peacock a *Henry IV* edited by Mark O'Rowe.

Of the two, *Henry IV* is the more successful. Within minutes of the performance's commencement, it's clear that we're watching something far superior to the average Irish Shakespeare. Directed by Jimmy Fay, this production has an unusually strong cast, with standout performances from Declan Conlon as a quietly determined Hotspur, Nick Dunning as an impressively regal Henry,

MAURICE NOBLE



and Sean Kearns as a show-stealing Falstaff. The production values are high: we have a sparse set (designed by Ferdia Murphy) that uses only a small number of props very well, and nicely understated lighting and costume design (Ian Scott and Catherine Fay respectively). Presented in the round, and making full use of the Peacock's wings and backstage, the action envelops the audience, rushing around us at a furious pace.

It's difficult to decide whether this success justifies the decision to edit the text. Although not noted for restraint, Mark O'Rowe is a disciplined writer who has an instinct for rhythmic language, and a

ROYAL FAMILY
*Dunning, Murphy,
and Kearns in
Henry IV*

decidedly Shakespearean sense of how to use violence on stage. These skills are evident in the quality of his edition of the text. But although O'Rowe does his job well, the success of the production left me wanting more, not less, of the play.

The action begins with Henry IV's regret that, rather than the courageous Hotspur, fate has given him the feckless Prince Hal for a son. The source of the play's dramatic power is Hal's subsequent development from the vapid, irresponsible youth who spends his time joking with Falstaff, to the warrior who can not only match Hotspur, but defeat him. This movement from the tavern to the battlefield should be dramatic and carefully layered — but with this edit the role is so diminished that, despite the best efforts of Tom Murphy, Hal's development seems more like a capricious change of mind than growth of character.

The edit brings formal problems too. We have an hour-long gallop through three-quarters of the play, an interval, and then twenty minutes of swordplay — creating an imbalance in the action. The final act Shakespearean battle always works as a release of tensions built up throughout the play, but here we've had such little time to engage with the characters that it's difficult to care about their fate, or to tune into the action's rhythm.

And I missed the relevance of the play to Ireland. The Welsh rebel

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Glendower was probably based on Hugh O'Neill, whose own rebellions dominated the period in which the play was first performed. It's not that this should have been emphasised over other elements of the production, but it's a shame that an aspect of the play that can speak directly to an Irish audience was almost entirely cut.

Hibernicising Shakespeare can be taken too far, however, and that's the difficulty with Rattlebag's *Measure for Measure*, which moves the action from Vienna to a loose version of 1930s Dublin. Aesthetically, this proves a good choice, allowing Sonia Haccius to give us fine costumes and a set that moves fluidly from prison cell to convent. It's also a good technical choice: if only some of your cast can convincingly deliver verse, you might as well accept the inevitable and have them all speak in Irish accents. The problem is that, although the transposition to our country's past is handled with creativity and occasional wit, it creates an expectation that the action will be relevant to our present. The production doesn't match that expectation.

In the Shakespearean canon, *Measure for Measure* is problematic, because it poses a moral conundrum without resolving it. Isabella is asked to decide whether she should sacrifice her chastity to save her brother's life but, rather than answering this question, she sidesteps it, instead using trickery to prevent his death. She does so under the influence of the disguised Duke, who manipulates events to ensure that a kind of order is restored by the play's conclusion. But it's a strange order, which involves the union of characters who would be better off apart: Shakespeare leaves us pondering the value of marriage, as well as the

motivations of his characters — without giving any indication of what we ought to think. The play's brilliance lies in the fact that it says nothing clearly.

So although, as director Joe Devlin points out, there are parallels between Shakespeare's Vienna and 1930s Dublin, it's difficult to see what the value of the move to Dublin might be — if you're trying to make a statement, it's not a great idea to use a play that makes a virtue of ambivalence. If the intention is to state that sexual suppression was a part of recent Irish history, then that statement is banal and excessively simplistic. Do we really need another Irish production that panders to our pathological desire to laugh at our grandparents' generation? That hammers home the stereotype that, unlike the audience, the pre-1960s Irish were sexually repressed, insular, priest-ridden, too much in awe of De Valera? Perhaps there's no harm in this, but we might be better served by work that invites us to question our own social and sexual mores, not to mention our need for reassurance about our distance from the past.

In any case, the move to Dublin robs the play of much of its power. This is a play that's intentionally unclear in its treatment of themes like sexuality, authority or religion — forcing us to ask questions. Placing those themes in an Irish context does nothing to elucidate our past, instead offering us a perspective of the play that is parochial and reductive. We can't ask questions here; we can only evaluate one interpretation of the text.

Notwithstanding this problem, this was a generally enjoyable production, directed in an easy-going manner, to which the audience responded posi-

tively. Isabel Claffey was well cast as a resourceful and assertive Isabella and, as Angelo, Aidan Condron gave the sleaziest performance I've seen in some time. And there were promising performances throughout the cast. So there was much to enjoy here — but all of it would have been possible without moving the play into the narrow Irish context, despite the aesthetic and technical benefits of doing so.

Both *Henry IV* and *Measure for Measure* might have benefited from avoiding compromises made to attract audiences. But it's important that, with these productions, we're seeing two companies trying to move away from Irish norms, producing rarely performed, difficult plays with conviction and style. Neither company's production was entirely successful, but they indicate a good starting point for any Irish engagement with Shakespeare: the best way of Hibernicising the Bard is not by interpolating superfluous Irish elements into an already rich text, but for Irish theatres to produce Shakespeare excellently.

MIX IT UP by Raymond Scannell
and

AMY THE VAMPIRE (AND HER SISTER MARTINA) by Gavin Quinn
Corcadorca Theatre Company
Triskel Arts Centre, Cork
Mix it Up played 11-23 Nov 2002 (reviewed 22 Nov), and *Amy the Vampire* played 25 Nov-7 Dec (reviewed 6 Dec)
BY BERNADETTE SWEENEY

CORCADORCA DESCRIBES ITSELF AS "a text-based theatre company committed to creating theatre of the highest quality for Cork and beyond." The company maintains a commitment to new

writing, site-specific work and to local audiences and practitioners. In the quiet of post-Jazz Festival Cork, Corcadorca staged two "Lunch Specials" at the Triskel Arts Centre, with evening performances each Thursday to Saturday.

Raymond Scannell's *Mix it Up*, directed by Corcadorca's artistic director Pat Kiernan, follows two DJs, Bounce and Scrape, as they bounce and scrape through the last days — and nights — of their dominance of the local dance scene. The set was simple, a scaffold structure with attached ladders took up the centre of the stage with mixing decks on the top level to suggest the club called "Manic." The actors moved over, inside and outside this structure as it came to suggest, variously, the counter of a record shop, Bounce's wardrobe, the waiting area of the dole office and a caravan at a nearby travellers' camp.

The play opens with the pair at the end of a night, failing to raise the enthusiasm of a crowd "seven hundred short of a thousand." As the play progresses it becomes obvious that Bounce is driven to reassert his and Scrape's perceived position as top DJs, while Scrape is becoming increasingly distanced from the dance scene and the people in it. In one of the play's key scenes Scrape describes having disenchanted sex with his faithless lover Louise while Bounce recounts a fight outside the club in vivid detail. These coincided in performance as Myles Horgan as Scrape and Mike Carbery as Bounce, speaking directly to the audience, built both descriptions to a rhythmic climax.

Horgan and Carbery worked very well together, and rose to the challenge of playing a number of other characters in the piece: rival young DJs, a laconic



record seller and, most memorably, Carbery as a young itinerant woman, the new object of Scrape's desires. Bounce is set on facting off their young rivals with a prized new recording, and when Scrape is given a record of a traveller singing a traditional tune, the end becomes inevitable. It was here that *Mix it Up* stretched a little too far. While I appreciate that the real world was closing in on the characters, if this was a play on "old Ireland meets new Ireland" I would have liked to see it go a little further. Nonetheless, there were strong moments in *Mix it Up*, which was at its best when working within its own specific scene.

Amy the Vampire (and Her Sister Martina), written and directed by Gavin Quinn, was frenetic, chaotic and — literally — messy. It seems difficult here to make a distinction between the play text

ALL HANDS ON DECK
Horgan and Carbery in Mix it Up

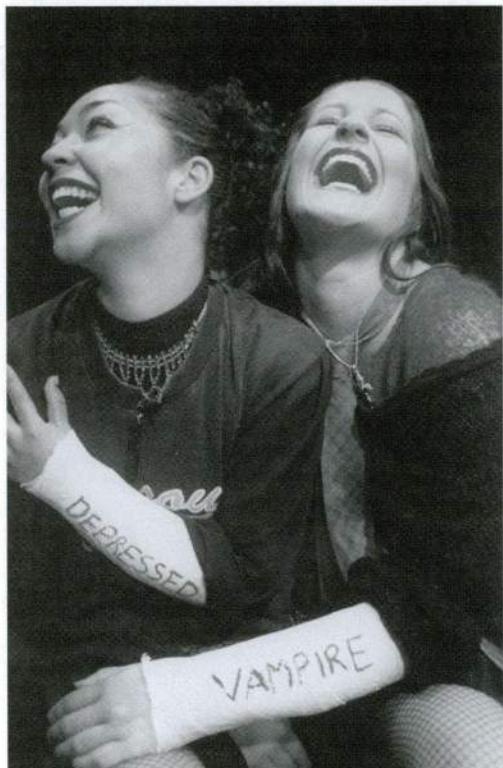
and the performance text — but perhaps that's just my way of letting myself off the hook. I can describe the action of *Amy the Vampire* but, in the end, I still don't know what it was all about — so much was going on onstage that it was hard to see what was happening. The first words of the *Amy the Vampire*'s programme note are "Not all relationships are deep and meaningful": maybe that's the spirit in which I should read *Amy the Vampire*'s relationship to its audience, and maybe there's nothing wrong with that.

The stage area was hugely busy: A number of tables enclosed the playing area centre-stage. At times the actors climbed onto the tables, but did not move outside them during the performance. There was stuff everywhere — televisions, a blender, a jug with a huge syringe inside, a microwave, blender,

synthesizer, sound system, candles, cornflakes, and ominous looking arrangements of tubes and Bunsen burners.

Amy the Vampire seemed to be playing a tug-of-war with its audience: while we were viscerally engaged by the mess of beer, ketchup, sugar, Ribena, and Sudafed that the actors smeared on themselves and each other, we were distanced by the effective barrier of the tables between us and the action. We were challenged by the various versions of *Amy the Vampire* as presented to us by the bodies of the actors, by the live images filmed by the actors themselves at points throughout, by video footage of fang-toothed characters clubbing or crossing the street, by photographs of children shown by Martina and filmed so as to appear on the televisions too.

But as these versions of the action were presented the actors negotiated the slippery and cable-strewn space in high white stilettos, I began to watch their feet — Amy and Martina were lost on me as I worried for actors Katy Davis and Ruth Negga. They faced the huge challenge of the performance well, giving focused performances while climbing up on tables, filming, microwaving a toy rabbit, downing beer, smashing eggs, and drilling tomatoes (this done by Negga



GIRL TALK
*Negga and Davis
in Amy the
Vampire...*

against the side of Davis' head!)

There were moments of wit in *Amy the Vampire* such as when the sisters brushed and picked at their plastic fangs, and the audience laughed loudly when Martina squirted ketchup over Amy after driving a wooden stake through her heart while Amy, obligingly, held the stake in place. But what was *Amy the Vampire* about? Cloning? Dysfunction? Appetite? Suicide? The plight of children who, in the play's words, "live in the

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world that adults create for them"? On the afternoon I saw *Amy the Vampire* an accompanying adult (their teacher I presumed) continuously shushed a small group of adolescent boys, who managed to stay relatively quiet until the line "Fuck you, stupid cunt" — they seemed to enjoy that one.

Mix it Up and *Amy the Vampire*, although comprising a light "Lunch Special," were staged and performed with playfulness and nerve, and were deserving of bigger audience numbers than they drew.

Bernadette Sweeney is a practitioner and lectures in Drama and Theatre Studies at University College Cork.

NEVER THE SINNER by John Logan

Purple Heart Theatre Company
Project Cube
12-28 Nov 2002; reviewed 19 Nov
BY BRIAN LAVERY

IN 1924, TWO TEENAGE INTELLECTUALS in Chicago read too much Nietzsche, got intoxicated with youthful egotism, and convinced themselves that they were the supermen the philosopher had envisaged. To prove it, they had to commit the perfect crime. They would murder a young boy from a wealthy family, stage the crime as a kidnapping, and claim a generous ransom. And so, they abducted their victim, on his way home from a Little League baseball game, killed him with a chisel in the back of their car, and left his body doused with hydrochloric acid in a ditch outside the city.

They nearly got away with it. One of the teen geniuses — law student and amateur ornithologist Nathan Leopold Jr. — dropped his unique set of specta-

cles near the corpse. Even then, Leopold and his partner, Richard Loeb, looked set to escape prosecution until a bumbling chauffeur unwittingly contradicted their alibis.

The psychological interplay between the murderers — and a simmering, unrequited homosexual romance — would make this a compelling tale under any circumstances. Add one of 20th-century America's greatest legal minds for the boys' defense attorney, a vindictive state prosecutor, and mobs crying for blood in the streets of Chicago, and spectacular courtroom drama is guaranteed. The lawyer, Clarence Darrow, persuaded Leopold and Loeb to plead guilty, and then prompted America's first real soul-searching about the death penalty with his arguments about the mercy inherent in modern justice. (Darrow later argued against laws that banned the teaching of evolution in schools, in the famous Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925.)

As part of his 12-hour summation speech, which left the judge and spectators weeping openly, Darrow said that when he saw evil in the world, he knew enough to hate the sin, and never the sinner. Hence the title of John Logan's play, one of many creative works inspired by the case. Unfortunately, this fertile ground did not bear fruit for Purple Heart Theatre Company, whose amateurish rendition rarely summoned up the fire that the story and the play demand. The play's programme notes that this was Dublin Youth Theatre veteran Alan King's first time directing adult actors, and in that light, audiences should not have been surprised by the preponderance of contrived and immature devices that obscured the production's few tolerable performances.



Paul Nugent's bookish, bird-loving Leopold and Stephen Kelly's charismatic, flighty Loeb effectively appear as cocky kids who only just shook off the awkwardness of adolescence. Nugent wears his bow-tie with aplomb, and stands appropriately aloof while delivering an impromptu treatise on the predatory nature of falcons. Kelly's Loeb, in a white suit, bounds around the stage with a childish fascination for the idea of committing murder, matched only by his fascination with himself.

The purported sexual tension between them, however, is uncomfortable for all the wrong reasons: during the rare moments when they embrace or come close to kissing, it is the actors who seem ill at ease, not the teen killers. Like their American accents and 1920s slang — "Hey bub," "Old chum," etc. — the

MAN AND SUPERMAN
*Kelly and Nugent in
Never the Sinner*

performances feel stilted and artificial.

King keeps all seven actors in view at all times, sitting quietly at the sides or back of the stage, and occasionally chiming in to clumsily chant short phrases in unison between scenes, like the full legal name of the court case. Until the very end of the first act, poor Gerry O'Brien (playing Darrow) is stuck on a bench, motionless and impassive except for those distracting chanting sessions. When he finally rises to his feet to meet Leopold and Loeb for the first time, he redefines flat dialogue.

"Did you boys kill Bobby Franks?" he asks, and Loeb responds "yes." "My God," says Darrow, with as much emotion as someone who has run out of chewing gum. When Darrow does battle with prosecutor Robert Crowe (Stewart Roche), it is clear that the two men

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respect and hate each other, but like Leopold's limp love for Loeb, nothing appears to be truly at stake.

Three more actors play a handful of minor characters, including an irritating Greek chorus of newspaper reporters in fedoras and trench-coats. They pose together as if in a vaudeville production, pulling faces and leaning over each other's shoulders to shout out headlines that explain the plot. To simulate paparazzi cameras outside the courtroom — an anachronism for 1924 — lighting designer Kevin Smith flashes a blinding strobe light at the audience.

Before the murder, Leopold and Loeb imagined it in almost cinematic terms, and Loeb later fantasized about a film career if released from prison. They achieved that fame and notoriety, but with little thanks to productions like this.

Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for The New York Times.

THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS by Sean O'Casey

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

16 Nov 2002-1 Feb 2003; reviewed 23 Nov

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

IT IS ELEVEN AND HALF YEARS SINCE the Abbey's now-infamous, but inarguably groundbreaking last production of *The Plough and the Stars*, directed by Garry Hynes, stripped the play of 75 years of the accretions of paddywhackery, and exposed the failure of national politics to cope with social realities. There has only been one major revival of the play in Ireland to date, directed by Stephen Rea at the Gaiety Theatre in 2000, with a very young and excruciatingly inexperienced cast. Ben Barnes'

revival could only ever lurk in the shadow of Hynes' greatest theatrical triumph (and the most controversial production of the late 20th century). Her stark expressionism, her deletion of sentimentality for the proletariat, and her remorseless exposure of a revolution which achieved nothing in terms of social policy and equality, had rocked the theatrical establishment.

A naturalistic tenement slum, which up to 1991 had been the template for the *Plough's* appearance, was replaced in Hynes' production with a white stage stripped bare. Francis O'Connor's set seemed to hark back to the previous production: the Clitheroes' tenement flat was surrounded by a steely expressionist collection of rubble and detritus, relics of both an inner-city poverty and an ongoing revolution. It clearly signified that the once-ruling Ascendancy classes had departed and had been replaced by the petit-bourgeois aspirations of many of O'Casey's characters.

Into this environment teemed a motley collection of cameo characterisations, some of which were the result of some very strange casting choices, headed by Mark O'Regan, whose Uriah Heap voice sent up his character Peter Flynn to the point of ridicule. Derbhle Crotty just wasn't big enough for Mrs. Gogan, and for the first 20 minutes was inaudible. Michael FitzGerald needed more accent coaching to play English Corporal Stoddart; the Barman might have been at home more in the Gresham restaurant than in a working man's pub; and Laura Murphy was just far too healthy to play dying consumptive Mollser. But there were some fine cameo performances, too, not least by Owen Roe as Fluther, whose bombast also had a ring of truth-



fulness; and Cathy Belton's Rosie Redmond, whose self-defence speech elicited much sympathy.

The reason why these cameos either worked or did not, it seems to me, is that they were placed in set-piece stage pictures which worked like a filmic storyboard. Static within the picture, characters made sense, but once the actors began to move within the pictures they appeared awkward and out of place. For instance, Peter Flynn had a complete lack of motivation for his multiple entrances and exits in the first act. It is not enough to move: we have to know why the move exists. Even within non-realistic forms of theatre, such as expressionism, each movement and choice by an actor must have its own logic, however non-real it might be. Not to

HEY BIG MAN

Cathy Belton and Simon O'Gorman in The Plough and the Stars

have a logic at all simply confuses. That such stage picture frames exist became obvious at the end of each act as the action was freeze-framed momentarily, before the actors stepped out of it, locating self-consciously the revolution in the past. This production was a reassembly of the past, but did not operate within it. Thus characters were nothing but characters. Humanity and truth for the most part eluded them.

One moment of expressionist framing really worked, however. In Act Two the Speaker did not simply appear at a window; he was magnified into a towering shadow which hovered over the set, dwarfed the humans below him and became a "big brother," as large and shadowy as his rhetoric was vacuous. But if the direction worked according to big pictures, the smaller pictures were sacrificed, most notably with the excision of the

Woman from Rathmines. Excise her at your peril! Of course the origin of the character is legendary, but dramaturgically she is crucial to an understanding of the looting scene. Without her we see the looting simply as sheer opportunistic greed. With her we see fear — fear for her life and of her displacement. Most of all we see that this "riot" is about class, not about national politics.

Overall, the picture frame convention was far too overriding, in that the real human drama within the acts became secondary. The production attempted to

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swing between the revolutionary big picture and the small domestic drama. Bessie Burgess' demise sums up how the approach did not work. In order to see out of the tenement window in the final act she climbed onto a table. Thus when shot, her death fall seemed melodramatic. But as she clambered onto the table I wanted to roar out, "He's behind you!" Her move to the table was unmotivated, had no internal logic of the staging's spatialisation, and was totally unprepared. Thus, the production displayed the design-effect of expressionistic staging but sacrificed a truthfulness of characterisation within it.

Brian Singleton is senior lecturer at the School of Drama, Trinity College.

PORIA COUGHLAN and KATTENMOERAS [BY THE BOG OF CATS...] by Marina Carr

RO Theater, Rotterdam

2 Nov-22 Dec 2002; reviewed 2 Nov

BY CATHY LEENEY

RO THEATER ROTTERDAM IS A CONFIDENT, lively company, dominated by Alize Zandwijk and Guy Cassiers, the spirited directors of contemporary re-stagings of *The Lower Depths*, *Macbeth*, *Leonce and Lena*, and Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. On 2 November 2002, amidst a palpable sense of excitement and occasion, RO daringly introduced Marina Carr's work to a Dutch audience for the first time. Their production of *Portia Coughlan* had already been performed in Vienna, in co-production with the Wiener Festwochen in June; it was here performed in repertory with *Kattenmoeras* (*By the Bog of Cats...*), both directed by Zandwijk. Peter Nijmeijer has translated the plays into

Dutch, spoken by most of the cast (so I was reliably informed) with a southern accent, the nearest Dutch equivalent to the tribal dialect of Carr's Offaly.

At the opening of *Portia Coughlan*, we are faced with a level, rectangular stage space, fenced by high flats. The few bits of furniture, a stainless steel counter and sink, some bar stools, seem to cling to the edges. Bursting through the kitsch woodland scene on the stage left wall, the massive trunk of a felled tree sprawls across the space, the stumps of its branches like truncated limbs. On a high shallow shelf sits Gabriel, singing like an asthmatic angel. Portia listens with ferocious concentration, standing on the steel counter, bare feet, bare legs, loose jumper drooping from her shoulders. Designer Thomas Rupert's work has the feel of an installation about it. It is unbalanced, unbeautiful, a deliberately awkward mix of the functional and the abstract.

Placing *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats...* next to one another invites connection between the two. The casts of the two performances overlap, pointing up Carr's theatre of ghosts and hauntings. But Zandwijk was way ahead of the posse when it comes to linking the plays. She re-figures Fintan Goolan (Rogier Philipoom), the slimeball barman from *Portia Coughlan*, to embody the racial hatred and the swaggering but disintegrating misogyny present in both plays, and keeps him on stage almost throughout the double bill, starting in full cowboy regalia, fooling with his pistols and quoting western clichés. Progressively, he falls apart as the first play progresses, crying uncontrollably during Portia's (Sanneke Bos) post-funeral wake, as he



fries eggs for the mourners.

At the start of *By the Bog of Cats...* Fintan is back, still pathetic, but vicious too, and now down to his underwear, mouthing the posturing rhetoric of George W. Bush and his dad: "read my lips," and moving from there into virulent racist talk of "gypsy bitch." Throughout he is an uneasy and disturbing presence, even spitting at Hester and siding with Mrs. Kilbride. Fintan Goolan's extra-textual role exemplifies an aspect of Zandwijk's directing approach, where the focus of the audience is constantly split, and the mood of a scene is counterpointed by action elsewhere on the stage. So, when Portia's parents (Sylvia Poorta and Paul R. Kooij) visit her on her birthday, the father Sly enters carrying his own mother, Blaize, and roughly deposits

**FRACTURED
MADNESS** *The
RO company in
Portia Coughlan*

her on a branch of the dead tree. In the kitchen, an extraordinary silence is held as parents and grown-up child stare intently at the kettle, waiting for it to boil. Then, while Portia and her father slug it out over Gabriel's memory, Blaize lights a cigarette, and living up to her name, somehow manages to set fire to her handbag in the process. The emotional temperature rises between parents and daughter, but the audience is distracted by the hilarious scene on the tree: a flaming handbag and the dismayed efforts of Blaize on her perch, trying to extinguish it. The effect is strangely liberating; the depth of Portia's distress is deepened by the absurd comic framing. Our empathy is won at a higher price; we offer it rather than being coerced into it.

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Grotesque aspects of both plays are reflected in the way objects are de-familiarised, and actions made strange. When Damus (Tom Van Bauwel) brings flowers for Portia, he is bent double under the weight of a heart-shaped wreath, hauling it on his back like Christ with the cross.

Each act ends in chaos. Act One closes with a bacchanalian mess over Portia's birthday cake. Latin dance music swells; Fintan Goolan lies stomach down across a bar stool and twirls faster and faster. What in Garry Hynes' 1996 production at the Peacock Theatre was an unforgettable painterly image, the raising up of Portia's drowned body from the river, is replaced by a seamless transition into Act Two, with Gabriel carrying in the dead Portia in his arms and dumping her upstage. She is later carried off as the microwave in her kitchen bleeps on. During Portia's wake, Raphael (Herman Gilis) systematically drinks himself into a stupor, working his way through glass after glass in a ritual of despair and desolation. Gilis brilliantly paces Raphael's loss of physical control, challenging Irish performers' pre-eminence in the art of acting drunk. *Portia Coughlan* ends with a flashback to the High Chaparaal bar. Amidst the country and western soundtrack, Sly comes out with a chain saw and hacks brutally into the tree. It's an unbearable image of obliteration, and the other characters have covered their heads in shame, grief, and surrender of self.

Overall, this production stripped the play of its rhetorical power; the Dutch audience did not experience the language as many of the Peacock audience did: as a visceral, intoxicating, some-

times shocking emotional rollercoaster. The play's obsessive intensities were extended in the ritual stage actions, and counterpointed by comic absurdities and playfullness, sourced in Carr's black sense of humour. *Portia Coughlan* accommodated this directorial interpretation with robust ease, revealing itself as a sinuous, original, and absorbing theatrical masterpiece.

Hester Swane, the central figure in *By the Bog of Cats...* is in love with the landscape she occupies. The bog represents her sense of wholeness and identity, even insofar as it is the dreamed-of scene of re-connection with her lost mother. The RO Theater design (both plays were designed by Thomas Rupert), however, does not attempt to represent this space of abandoned beauty. As a result, the setting reflects more of the sense of perilous instability and provisionality in Hester's existence and compromises her power as the central consciousness of the play.

The shape of the stage remains unchanged from *Portia Coughlan*, but the floor is now deep in wood chip, uneven, and edged with cold, resistant surfaces. A pale grey plastic curtain hangs next to the simple entrance to Hester's caravan. The flats at the back are fissured by light showing through, and upstage right there is an area of bog which shifts and squelches unnervingly as characters pick their way over it. The blind Catwoman (Sylvia Poorta) falls down a lot, but is unfazed. Even the furniture is unstable. Cardboard boxes, used as tables, topple and give way; plastic chairs bend, tilt, and crack under the weight of their occupants. Elsewhere are puddles covered in floating wood chip; these lie in wait for the

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- **CAROUSEL:** 18-22 March, 3pm/8pm

Tickets: €16 / €12

- **ALONE IT STANDS:** 25-29 March, 8pm

Tickets: €16.50 / €12

APRIL

- **PIPPIN:** Tues 1-Sat 5 April 8pm

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- **THE WIZ:** Wed 23-Sat 26 April, 3pm and 8pm

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unsuspecting, like Xavier Cassidy (Jack Wouterse), who, distracted by his mobile phone, stumbles in up to his ankles, ruining his wedding shoes. Anneke Blok plays Hester at a high emotional pitch. She is electric with frustration and powerlessness. Her love for her small daughter, Josie (Nadia Dijkstra) has an almost disturbing intensity.

Her alienation from the status quo is embodied in Fintan Goolan, stalking her like some rabies-infested beast, pathetic and dangerous. Again, the audience's focus is fractured by contrasting stage actions. This, however, diminishes the power of the second act, Carthage's (Paul R. Kooij) and Caroline's (Fania Sorel) wedding party, which is such an effective contrast with the arc of tragedy before and after. Here the scene is dominated by a proliferation not only of white dresses, but of white plastic cups and plastic chairs piled up in leaning stacks. A Wagnerian duet between Father Willow (Marc de Corte) and the Catwoman prefaces Xavier's speech as father of the bride, which is interrupted by his mobile ringing. After Hester's arrival the scene descends further into chaos. Waltz music is backed by a huge rumbling noise. The bridegroom discards his clothes and belts around in a frenzied circle, grabbing his daughter under his arm as he goes.

Seamlessly we are into Act Three, and Hester's wedding dress has turned witch-black. Fintan Goolan throws burning boxes on stage and then disappears. He is replaced by the ghost of Hester's dead brother, Joseph (Eelco Smits, also Gabriel in *Portia Coughlan*). The action is unrelenting, although

finally the audience is free to concentrate on Hester as she confronts Carthage. The closing moments of the play are cut short. Hester is killed in her dance with the Ghost Fancier (also played by Eelco Smits) and the final words of Monica Murray (Sanneke Bos), describing her heart "like some dark feathered bird" had more of pathos than of gothic glory.

It was revealing and exhilarating to see Zandwijk's directorial style in full flight. It revealed both plays as parallel, imaginative worlds, bearing a powerful metaphorical and ritual relationship to lived experience, over-reaching a limited realist interpretation, and accommodating contemporary performance styles that are not commonly seen in Ireland. *Portia Coughlan* felt deeper, more intense, maybe because its form is less classical, it is less modulated, and more absolute in its vision.

Cathy Leeney lectures in the Drama Studies Centre at UCD.

THE QUIET MOMENT by Mike Finn

Island Theatre Company

Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

30 Oct-16 Nov 2002; reviewed 31 Oct

BY MARY COLL

IN RECENT YEARS A NUMBER OF attempts have been made in literature and film to address the harrowing nature of Alzheimer's disease, the extent to which it destroys the mind of the sufferer while simultaneously wreaking havoc on the relationships that once formed the basis of their everyday life. Generally these works offer a bleak and unsentimental vision of this destruction, with a relentless

sense of hopelessness which can be rather tough going for an audience. Having just recently sobbed my way through the video of *Iris*, I was a little reluctant approaching *The Quiet Moment*, Mike Finn's new play for Island Theatre Company, which addresses the effects of Alzheimer's on a Limerick shoe repairman. However, while Finn is not afraid to allude to the darker aspects of life in his writing, as was seen sometimes in the vision of Limerick he presented in *Pigtown*, generally he favours optimism as an approach to life, and in *The Quiet Moment* strives to make this emotion triumph over the adversity of Alzheimer's.

There is a price to be paid for choosing a soft landing; what it lost is an edge of harsh reality, an extra tension running through the lives of all the characters which would have lifted this play beyond its tentative gentleness. Instead the need for resolution and forgiveness become the driving force behind the action, when perhaps the impossibility of achieving these is what is waiting in the wings for a voice with which to speak.

In *The Quiet Moment* the central character is Eddie Conway, played with both subtlety and fiery assurance by Des Keogh. Retired from his shoe repair job and suffering from Alzheimer's, he now lives in a nursing home where his daughter Deirdre (Regan O'Brien) works as a nurse, and is therefore able to



FATHER AND

DAUGHTER

O'Brien and
Keogh in *The
Quiet Moment*

take care of him. After an absence of almost a decade his son Peter (Seán Rocks) arrives home to visit from California seeking to assuage his guilt at absconding from his filial responsibilities. As Peter,

Rocks has all the bumbling over-eagerness of a man trying to prove too much in too little time; he is both naïve and brash, and initially O'Brien's Deirdre holds him in the disdain he deserves. Out of touch with his life at every level — with his wife and children in America as well as his family in Ireland — in a sense he is as disconnected to reality as his father. Primed to ignite in the volatile climate of their father's illness, the relationship between sister and brother

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should be a war zone, with no holds barred and no prisoners taken, in the struggle for each to achieve primacy in their father's affections.

But both Finn and director Terry Devlin avoid engaging with such conflict, choosing to focus instead on the warm glow that comes from those rare moments of nostalgic lucidity between father and son. Emotionally this makes the play more uplifting — it keeps the heartbreaking sadness of Alzheimer's at bay, as does the real humour which is delicately wrought from the comic circumstances that arise in the chaos of blurred memory and mental confusion. Yet one can't help feeling that in going for a soft focus something has been taken from the power of this work, and an opportunity to lift the lid off a family at a time of intense redefinition has passed. Where it should be falling apart at the seams, this family deviates from the norm without any credible justification. The cracks are pasted over too quickly and with far too much ease, with Deirdre all too ready to let a decade of Peter's neglect be wiped away by nothing more substantial than the gift of a bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey.

There are very fine and sensitive performances at all times from the cast of four and a respectful restraint in the direction by Devlin when dealing with the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Deserving particular mention is Seán Colgan's dignified interpretation of Michael, Eddie's shadow-like companion in the nursing home, a challenging cameo role beautifully underplayed on this occasion.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based poet, critic, and broadcaster.

STAINED GLASS AT SAMHAIN

by Patricia Burke Brogan

Town Hall Productions

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

29 Oct-2 Nov 2002; reviewed 2 Nov

BY R.B. FLYNN AND HEATHER MAREK

IN A PERIOD OF DECLINING BUDGETS AND rising costs, how will new work for the theatre see the light of day? Druid Theatre Company tried the Debut series (now defunct) of rehearsed readings with top-flight actors. Other companies have run competitions leading to a debut for the winner. Mike Diskin, general manager of Town Hall Theatre, recently introduced a new wrinkle: the low-budget, short-run trial of play, with a short rehearsal period, using a top-class director and one star.

Stained Glass at Samhain is the work of Patricia Burke Brogan, whose earlier play, *Eclipsed* caused a sensation in 1992 through its exposure of the treatment of unwed mothers made to work as penitents in church-run laundries. Over the decades, nearly 30,000 women disappeared into these laundries, effectively work-slaves for life. Before the washing machine, most people wore clothes washed by such women. When Punchbag first staged *Eclipsed*, the author was barraged by telephone calls from audience members who had seen the show and found the content to be offensive because of its exposure of Church corruption. But Brogan's voice turned out to be a prescient one. She is one of the first people to speak out and expose the abuse suffered by Irish women in institutions run by the Catholic Church. The play won a prize at the Edinburgh Festival, was translated into many languages, and has been revived nearly fifty times.



The issues clearly still inflame Brogan, and she has returned to them in this new play, which poses the question: who is to blame for what happened to those unwed mothers? Is it just the religious orders running the laundries, or, in addition, both the parents who signed away their daughters and the general population who left their dirty laundry at the door?

At lights up, strains of the *Benedictus* from Mozart's *Requiem* are heard. It's appropriate. Brogan is an author with a kind word for the dead. Sister Luke takes the stage (played beautifully by Geraldine Plunkett), an elderly nun, benevolent, irreverent, and perhaps a little demented; gradually, we realise what we are seeing is her ghost, haunting her past habitation on the night of Samhain

SPIRITUAL

Geraldine
Plunkett in
Stained Glass at
Samhain

(also known as Hallowe'en). That habitation is a convent and former day laundry, which is being demolished as part of Galway's urban renewal. Sister Luke's monologue makes audible those memoirs she has written on starched guimpes (the cloth covering the neck and shoulders of a nun's habit) with soot from the laundry chimney. These monologues poetically juxtapose past with present, the living with the dead. "Hundreds and hundreds of worn out boots, torn aprons, all holding their own pain...." Brogan has a real ability to paint a landscape with words: "Words already written in the earth, on the surfaces of the Bog of Allen, in the gykes of the Burren, the flight of birds over Black Head, on drumlins near Monaghan. I catch them, make them visible, and write them all down with the soot from the laundry chimney."

Sister Luke is deeply spiritual. She accepts the life of a nun, but rejects the hypocrisy of the hierarchy. She takes on the cloak of madness in order to gain liberty to follow her own spiritual path: "Deo Gratias! Don't forget to mix toast into my porridge!" Interspersed with Sister Luke's storytelling, the daily routine of the convent proceeds, and is briefly dramatised in a fluid succession of scenes. Elaborate preparations are made for the Bishop's breakfast, supervised by the tight-lipped Mother Victoire. The young Sister Benedict — an excellent teacher, and thus convent moneymaker — suffers doubts about her own vocation. The tubercular Father James is the devoted new chaplain, a handsome, holy, and good man, with "A deep voice like a cello. No! More like a double bass."

This production was put together with

reviews

a drastically slim budget, and as a result director Caroline Fitzgerald only had two weeks to rehearse. The audience members' reactions were mixed as they exited the theatre. Many were dissatisfied by the set design — the large stained-glass window was not a good replica. The Town Hall stage proved too large for the piece; a more intimate venue would be more suited for the play. The acting suffered from lack of rehearsal time (some lines were blown), and the awkward blocking and positioning of characters made one doubt there was sufficient rehearsal on the Town Hall stage. The lighting was neither precise nor complex in its schemes. In the 80 minutes, there was either one scene or 21 scenes, depending on your degree of familiarity with the text.

Despite these problems the play was worth putting on, and is worth developing further for another production. Brogan is a beautiful writer who takes on moral issues that need to be addressed.

The writers are students in the MA programme in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway.

TASTE by David Parnell

Gúna Nua Theatre Company

Andrew's Lane Theatre

4-16 Nov 2002; reviewed 6 Nov

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

IT IS TO GÚNA NUÁ'S CREDIT THAT *Taste* is clever and pacy enough to distract you from the fact that it is a two-character monologue. David Parnell's

As part of the restructuring of the **ARTS COUNCIL**, the roles of arts policy advice and grant administration formerly undertaken by Artform Officers has been re-assigned to Arts Specialists and Grant Programme Managers respectively.



Gaye Tanham, formerly the Arts Council's Dance Officer, will move into a new cross-disciplinary developmental role in Arts Participation and Education.

The Arts Council now wishes to retain a **DANCE SPECIALIST** on a part-time, consulting basis, and wishes to invite tender/expressions of interest from suitably qualified individuals. The deadline for tender will be the 28th March, 2003. For further information contact **SHEILA GORMAN**, Human Resources Executive, sheila@artscouncil.ie, **01-6180246**.



script unobtrusively blends speeches with dialogue, Paul Meade's direction keeps the uncluttered stage busy, and Peter Hanly's nervous energy is harnessed well in conjunction with Karen Ardiff's lusty intensity. The play takes place in the home of an affluent young Irish couple, Declan and Susan. Their dinner guests for the evening are the audience, to whom the bulk of the speeches are directed. Barely communicating directly with each other in the present, the characters exchange dialogue only in the past, where the story of their meeting and courtship gradually takes a sinister direction. Their expensive and hard-won house is being renovated, you see, and there seems to be some suggestion that a great evil may lie at its literal and figurative foundations.

The road to power and influence is a

KEEPING SECRETS

Karen Ardiff and Peter Hanly in Taste

twisted one, especially in Irish culture newly driven by greed and desire. It takes some time before the audience realises that Parnell has used a classic map to follow that road. *Taste* is not likely to appear on the Leaving Certificate syllabus anytime soon, but it is essentially a reworking of *Macbeth*. This is the story of a weak-willed man compelled by his desire for a powerful woman into committing acts of personal and political transgression. The setting is different, the stakes are lower insofar as these are not the deeds of kings and princes, but the drama is much the same. That this is not instantly recognizable is again to Gúna Nua's credit. Much of the action takes the form of a prequel, and the latter scenes play around with some of the specifics of how guilt gnaws away at both Declan and Susan. Its resolution is also less cathartic, positing fis-

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sures in the contemporary Irish psyche which cannot be healed by the conventions of classical tragedy.

Declan and Susan's story is a fairly ordinary one at first, detailing the seductions and promises with which the boy initially gets the attention of the girl of his dreams. Susan, for her part, seeks a strong provider who will work towards a common goal on terms she defines. After awkward fumbling at student parties, Declan pursues Susan to Paris where she agrees to leave a promising career abroad and return home. Her terms are that he will take his destiny into his own hands and rise in his law firm quickly and decisively and that he will stop at nothing to satisfy her. Alarm bells of misogyny and caricature begin to sound at this point, but there is something arresting in the interplay between Hanly and Ardiff which suggests there is a reason for the excess.

The climate of greed which informs much of the action is evoked through sparsely but effectively written accounts of corporate politics and human indiscretion which Declan stands to profit from if only he will take his wife's advice. The wrangling is not confined to the boardrooms however, and the play insists on a less than subtle dialectical interplay between husband and wife and between husband and the world outside. As Declan and Susan squabble over the possibility of having a baby, an eerily wordless child lurks in their garden like a Shakespearian spectre, haunting Declan's waking moments and marking his decisions. As the personal and the political are consistently and inherently interlinked, the net of guilt is spread ever wider, eventually encompassing the whole of contempo-

rary upper middle-class Ireland.

The play is obviously a critique of moral values, and the standard by which it judges those values is set by a combination of personal and social complicity. Invited to share the salubrious surroundings of the couple's "kingdom," the audience feels surprisingly little outrage as the revelations of wrongdoing begin to mount. Susan's need to feel in control of her own life seems entirely justified by the gauges of contemporary social expectation, and Declan's desire for a family seems reasonable enough. The audience finds itself using the yardstick of high villainy which runs through classic theatre to judge the insidious banality of these characters' lives. It is not an original notion, but one which Parnell, Meade, and the cast get good mileage from. In a sense the play's lack of indignation is part of its effectiveness, though not everyone will find so muted a polemic a satisfying one.

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

by Edward Albee

Plush Productions

The Crypt, Dublin

4-30 Nov 2002; reviewed 22 Nov and

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

adapted by Dale Wasserman

from Ken Kesey's novel

Lane Productions

Andrew's Lane Theatre

19 Nov 2002-15 Mar 2003;

reviewed 9 Dec BY PETER CRAWLEY

THERE IS AN ABSENCE AT THE HEART of Edward Albee's most famous play that cannot be concealed. It is a deeper absence than that of the off-stage character, a much-discussed son whose fluid identity holds his parents together



through a bitter war of attrition. Rather, the void in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the hollowness of the once-unimpeachable American dream, the arrested opportunities of the hallowed institution of marriage, and, just as unsettling, the ever-elusive meaning behind the whole play. Symbols, speeches, and stunning revelations may skit through the opaque plot; tantalising clues might lace through character names or extraneous details such as the titles of each act and gossipy anecdotes behind its writing; but that fascinating gap persists like a riotous joke that doesn't make sense.

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Get it? This intelligent, ornately decorated emptiness continues to fascinate audiences 40 years on, oceans apart. And it's

HE'S NOT AFRAID
Lovett and Cullen
in *Virginia Woolf*

the deceptively simple challenge of containing it that scuppers Plush Productions' staging here. If the Focus Theatre's production of *A Delicate Balance* earlier last year suggested the necessary conditions for Albee were a handful of actors, a pokey stage, and any available drinks trolley, Alice Barry's production here again provides the frayed accoutrements of shoestring Americana. A fading sofa, a worn carpet, an attentively stocked drinks tray. Buoyed by expectations for such a celebrated work, you make allowances for the no-frills setting. It's like being handed a paper plate and told to wait for the caviar.

But as soon as Fidelma Cullen's Martha harrumphs her way through the front door followed by Brendan

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Conroy's slouching George, something already feels amiss. Returning late from a faculty party at the college of New Carthage, twisting through an acid dialogue of perky Bette Davis quotes, repeated stale jokes, passive-aggressive recriminations, and wicked surprises, the central couple fulfill their roles but miss the specifics. Cullen, one of the best things about Focus' Albee production, soon loses her U.S. accent but aptly portrays Martha as a wild force of nature. It is doubtless a fun part, but Cullen simply enjoys Martha too much to unearth the unnerving swings of her psyche.

When young couple Honey and Nick arrive on the simmering scene, everything is in place for a slightly compromised enactment of the fun and games of the playwright's design. The bickering bubbles on cue, the rules of engagement are stated ("Don't do the bit about the kid"), but as Honey and Nick are exposed to the older couple's power games, a few punches are pulled along the way. In truth it must be hard to find a shotgun that fires a parasol, or to procure a steady supply of breakaway bottles for some significant smashing, but the toy gun substitute ("Bang!") is dispensed with too quickly for George's act to be anything more threatening than a joke, while the drink he throws in Martha's face represents an unwise projection of his self-contained rage.

As more and more booze, barbed witticisms, and bizarre rituals are decanted, several of the play's memorable scenes are well served. George's "Bergin" story may coast by on Albee's careful words, but soon after it Conroy's glasses come off and a vicious competitiveness enlivens his performance. When he hiss-

es, "She's actually sucking her thumb," of the collapsed, infantile Honey, the venom of a wounded serpent sprays out at Nick, the next of Martha's unwitting prey. For his part, Louis Lovett's Nick is a not-quite-real portrayal of an earnest academic, strawberry-blonde athlete, and morally equivocal husband, complimenting Albee's synthesis of naturalism and expressionism in a way that the functional staging and lighting never threaten to. Indeed the vigour of his participation in the game of Hump the Hostess, all buttock-kneading and deep-French kissing, is startling, buffing much of the tarnish away from a familiar shock, although Cullen's attention is too divided, her concern for George's calculated lack of interest allowing the moment to hastily collapse.

Conversely the time between the games seems to drag, leaving Barry with the no-win decision of where to place an interval in a three act play. The consequence is that the final act, with its momentous exorcism and the drama's flitting moments of epiphany, suffers under a weary pace and ultimately plodding delivery.

A shame, for this is an important American play. A significant fork in the road of Broadway's mainstream thoroughfare, it was the first major work by a singular talent and a skeptical exploration of American institutions that had remained largely untroubled in the preceding decade. If George and Martha represent the first couple of the country, the Washingtons, here the nation was envisaged as a superpower ready to crumble, like the old empire of Carthage.

Whatever its weaknesses, Plush Productions' staging of *Woolf* was extended a full week, suggesting that



Albee's brand of the absurd may fast become a staple of the independent theatre circuit, where scant resources are no hindrance to the delivery of cannily chosen texts which withstand the test of time.

A concomitant production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in Andrew's Lane Theatre added to the fascination for 1960s American art. Arguably the last successful period of challenging the status quo, it was a time where the accepted standards of patriarchal authority, ordered society, heterosexual happiness, and other "legitimately" American values were called into question. Suddenly the contents of Mom's Apple Pie weren't quite so trusted. In staging Ken Kesey's allegorical tale, Moggie Douglas' set design backs itself into a corner, and Terry Byrne's production of Dale Wasserman's adapt-

THE FACE OF AUTHORITY

Hanley and Schwarz in Cuckoo's Nest

cannot help but do the same. Just as the asylum ward stretches back from barred windows and spotless bathrooms, passing an elaborately designed nurses' station and narrowing by numerous exits and utility closets, the realistic cross-section denotes the limiting realism of Byrne's approach. Here, while the Chief's quasi-schizoid voiceovers bookend several scenes and suggests a genocidal guilt underlying the nation, a cinematic staging barely attempts to escape the familiarity of Milos Foreman's infinitely memorable film.

One natural consequence is that Joe Hanley's Randle P. McMurphy, though laudably free of impersonation, is never allowed to deviate much from the emblazoned archetype of Jack Nicholson, either in appearance, behav-

reviews

iour, or inflection. Even his costume might have been dispatched from asseenonscreen.com. Newly committed to a State mental hospital in the mid-'50s, McMurphy aggressively pursues the mantle of "Bull Goose Loony" in a ward of henpecked and institutionalised patients.

It doesn't take a degree in semiotics to pick up on the implicit questioning of society mounted by Kesey (whose wild-child shenanigans continued with *The Merry Pranksters*). In this microcosm of society, a totalitarian oppressor operates behind an illusory democracy of powerless councils. The persistent challenges of an earthy outsider fond of nudie playing cards, unsavoury gambling, dubious company, and mind-altering substances (mainly alcohol in this case), leave *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* intoxicated with its own sense of rebellion. However, like *Twelve Angry Men* before it, Lane Productions' male-heavy choice of vintage Americana won't shake the dust from the relevance of the production. As the inmates and orderlies secretly rage against Nurse Ratched's authority, and even McMurphy and Patrick J. Byrne's Dr. Spivey enjoy a heavy-handed back-slapping camaraderie, it's hard not to rally up some sympathy for the ultra-demonised woman.

Thankfully Liz Schwarz prevents any possible identification by matching a distracting drawl to a wild-eyed stare, holding a fixed smile that comes off as a grimace. The drawl suggests not so much that Ratched hails from the South, more that she has been snaffling the medication. The more serious fault, though, is that it denies the character any subtlety, her motivations always as transparent as the pristine windows of her office, so

when McMurphy calls her probing group therapy (with all its sign-posted maliciousness) a "pecking party," it devalues his acuity into a moment of "well-duh"-proportioned obviousness.

Standing out from the competitive lunacy of their fellow inmates, Paul Bennett's fatherly Dale Harding and Michael Merritt's efficiently catatonic Ruckleyne confidently refrain from attention-seeking in the crowded ward. Still, Declan Mills darts around assuredly as Martini while Liam O'Brien withstands that most thankless of tasks — the stage stutter — to pull off the doomed kid Billy. And though Titos Menchaca, of Choctaw descent, certainly looks the part of Chief Bromden, his paranoid voiceovers are overplayed, troubled eyes darting towards the voices, so his eventual transformation lacks the necessary surprise.

Moreover, so does the audience's experience, where both Kesey's source novel and the film overshadow Wasserman's stage version. To compound matters, our fascination with American culture and policy is more urgent and complex than these close encounters with lapsed '60s radicalism.

Watching either of these classics of U.S. counterculture at a time when U.S. culture can barely be countered is intriguing. The works themselves are dated but arresting, still thriving on the passionate articulation of their authors. The productions aren't, though, caught in lip service to modern classics. Whether it's Albee's labyrinthine excoriation of American values, or Kesey's beatnik optimism of bucking the system, the pitfalls of brittle staging seem to be reflected by the psychiatric patients of *Cuckoo's Nest*, when such productions are more confined than committed. 

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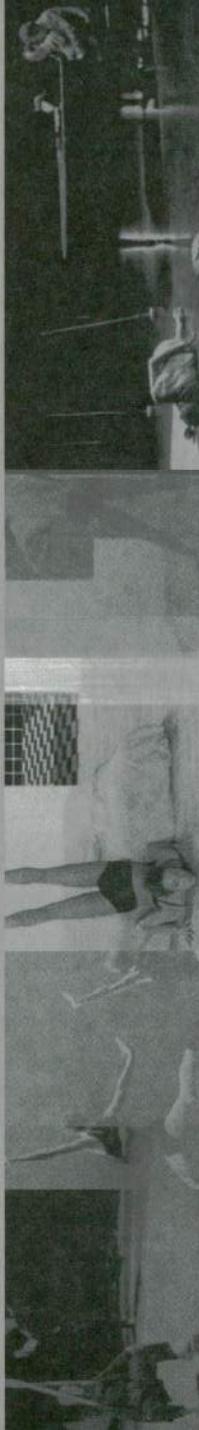


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