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MAGAZINE



Eileen Walsh on hating
and loving performing

Staging Shakespeare
Can we ever have too much?

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THEATRE COMPANY

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The Third Policeman

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Irish Theatre Magazine

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inside



4 WHAT'S NEWS? Peter Crawley reports.

14 OPENING NIGHTS Spring dates to take note of.

20 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Tanya Dean keeps track.

22 SOUNDING BOARD Lorelei Harris argues that radio drama is a magnificent and misunderstood medium.

28 MINDING YOUR HEART During the past year, Eileen Walsh has shown the range of her acting talent in a series of indelibly affecting performances in Dublin, New York and on screen. She talks to Belinda McKeon.

36 THINKTANK Are We All Critics Now? Even in the crowded blogosphere, the critic has an important role to play in our culture, writes Rónán McDonald.

42 NEW WRITING IN BITE SIZES No-one could complain about a dearth of new writing in March, when audiences were shown new works in miniature form. Short did not mean short-changed, writes Lisa Mahony.

50 SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES With Macbeths breaking out all over, Shakespeare productions have swept the stage in recent months. Rachel Andrews talks to directors about their approach to these works – and why we return to them again and again.

60 BOOK REVIEWS Clare Wallace reads a collection of essays focusing on The Abbey centenary, and Fíona Ní Chinnéide picks the best of recent publications.

66 REVIEWS See overleaf for listing.

ON THE COVER: Eileen Walsh in *Terminus* by Mark O'Rowe. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.



reviews

PRODUCTION

68	The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger	TANYA DEAN
70	Falling Out of Love.....	DEREK WEST
72	Bleeding Poets	SUSAN CONLEY
75	Stuck.....	IAN R. WALSH
77	Unravelling the Ribbon.....	IAN R. WALSH
79	Beware of the Storybook Wolves.....	SUSAN CONLEY
81	Alice in Wonderland.....	VICTORIA WHITE
83	Great Expectations	SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN
86	The Heights.....	PATRICK LONERGAN
89	The Maids	MATTHEW HARRISON
91	Miss Julie.....	HARVEY O'BRIEN
93	The Glass Menagerie	TANYA DEAN
96	Fool For Love.....	TANYA DEAN
98	Problem Child	MATTHEW HARRISON
100	Bug	FINTAN WALSH
103	Dead Man Walking.....	ÁINE SHIELS
106	The Coming World.....	SARA KEATING
109	Philadelphia, Here I Come!	EMILIE PINE
111	Conversations on a Homcoming.....	SARA KEATING
114	Romeo and Juliet	COLIN MURPHY
117	Macbeth.....	MATTHEW HARRISON
119	Macbeth	SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN
123	The Recruiting Officer	HARVEY O'BRIEN
125	Turandot	ÁINE SHIELS

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Theatre of the Unoppressed

ALL THEATRE IS POLITICAL.' Brazilian director Augusto Boal received another cheer for this heartfelt statement, as he stood on The Abbey stage two weeks ago. There were no empty seats in the entire auditorium at lunchtime, and the audience laughed and clapped after every good-humoured, self-deprecating comment Boal made. Most of them were under twenty-five, and many were students of drama and of literature, to whom the seventy-eight year-old author of *The Theatre of the Oppressed* was evidently a hero. In the light of prevailing pessimism about cultural and political engagement, it was a striking moment. At a time when the 'political' in Irish theatre seems to consist of the routine inclusion in productions of soldiers with Kaloshnikovs and TV reporters with roving cameras and microphones, this was a jolt from the wider

Many members of the packed audience at The Abbey were students, to whom the author of *Theatre of the Oppressed* was evidently a hero.

world – a reminder that being allowed to write, to speak, to perform, to create art freely in any form, is a privilege that has often been hard won. Boal's own history of proscription and torture testifies to this, as does the current

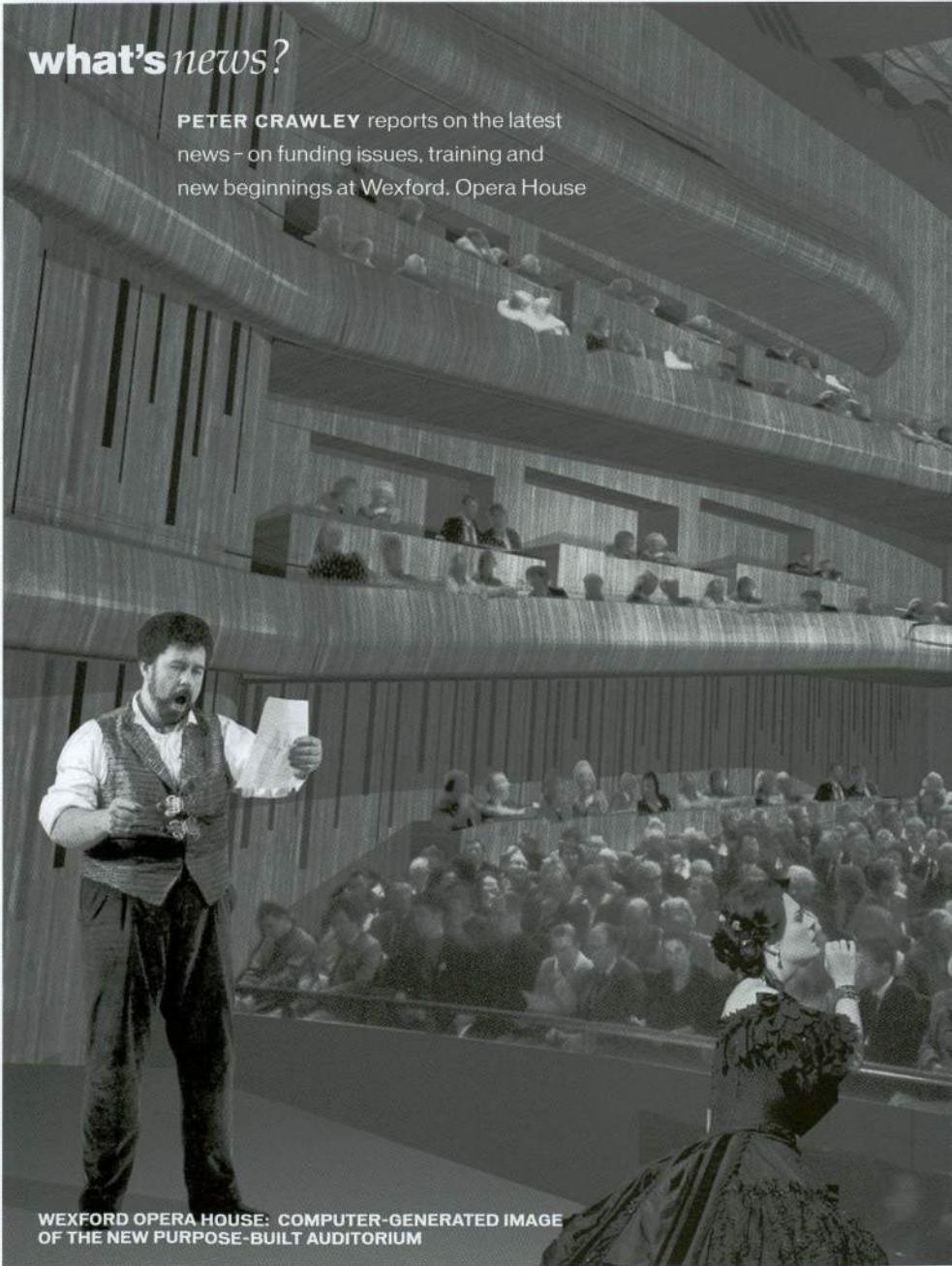
experience of groups such as The Free Theatre of Belarus, who visited Dublin recently, and have been nominated by Harold Pinter and others for a special tribute at this month's Europe Theatre Prize

2008. How to use that privilege responsibly; how to harness the energy of Boal's Abbey audience and create a theatre that speaks to our time – and to them?

Finally, we'd appreciate if you filled in our online Readers' Survey: a few questions to give us feedback on the magazine. Comments on anything in this issue may be sent to admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie.

what's news?

PETER CRAWLEY reports on the latest news - on funding issues, training and new beginnings at Wexford Opera House



WEXFORD OPERA HOUSE: COMPUTER-GENERATED IMAGE OF THE NEW PURPOSE-BUILT AUDITORIUM



Conservative Estimates

WITH MATTERS OF FUNDING IT CAN BE IMPORTANT TO preserve a sense of humour. In March, the Arts Council held a series of meetings, dividing the seventy-seven RFO (Regularly Funded Organisation) companies into small groups, to give clients a briefing on how to apply for their next grant instalment under the scheme. No indication was given of the budget the Arts Council has allocated to the RFO programme, but it was explained that while last year's decisions - which gave a less-than-inflationary-rate increase to the majority of RFO clients - were characterised as "prudent", this year's would be "conservative". "If 3.4 per cent was prudent," said one client, "I hate to think what conservative might be."

Against increasingly pessimistic forecasts for the economy, and a concern that RFO clients might all suffer

equally if there is a shortfall of funding to the Arts Council, speculation had grown that some clients might seek to opt out of the scheme. So far, membership has remained unaltered, however. A more optimistic reading is that if arts funding is affected by an economic downturn, the RFO clients may be insulated against further cuts. By June, when the next round of decisions will be announced, they will know for sure.

In certain respects the RFO scheme still offers its clients strong benefits: its schedule, which allows companies to apply for the following year's funding in March and learn of the Arts Council's grant decision midway through the year, has enabled companies to plan better for the year ahead – whether the funding decision is favourable or disappointing. But while companies had nursed hopes for "top-up" grants last year, the additional €845,000 in Arts Council grants announced in late January, shared between twenty-five organisations (RFOs and otherwise) could only go so far.

Reactions to these additional grants were mixed among RFO clients. On the one hand these allocations were made without application or explanation – those chosen were favoured without a broadly discernible reason, and, in some meetings, disgruntled companies let their grievances be known. If, however, the RFO clients who did receive additional funds – such as Druid (which netted an extra €20,000), Project Arts Centre (€25,000) or Wexford Festival Opera (€200,000) – represent more deserving cases than others, such competition may bring clarity to where the RFOs stand.

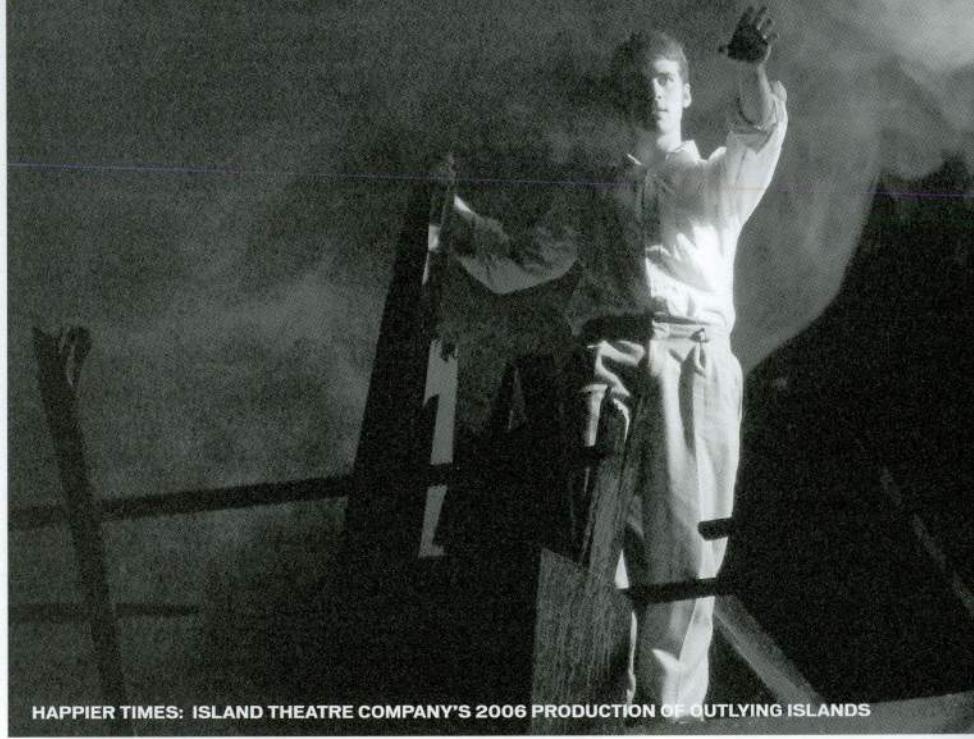
Against the threat of diminishing funds for all, more companies may be keen to have their applications judged on their merits. "The feeling

was that to give everybody a blanket decision across the board [provided RFOs with no context]," Willie White of Project Arts Centre told ITM. "I would welcome having our applications assessed in a competitive context."

ROUGH WATERS AROUND ISLAND

With the annual revenue grant decisions for 2008 came one high-profile casualty when Island Theatre Company failed to receive funding for the year of its twentieth anniversary. In a nebulous position following the departure of its artistic director and chief executive, Alice Kennelly, last October, Island had expected to advertise for her successor at the start of the year, but learned of the Arts Council's withdrawal of funding in early January. Currently engaged in what the company's General Manager Gillian Fenton described as an "appeal process", Island were still waiting to hear whether they had grounds to appeal the decision as ITM went to press. "We're in limbo until then," said Fenton, who has since left the running of the company in the hands of the board while she takes maternity leave.

Island has had little consistency in its funding level for several years now. Severely cut during the downturn of 2003 – from €273,000 to €200,000 – it has never been restored to that level since; its 2007 grant



HAPPIER TIMES: ISLAND THEATRE COMPANY'S 2006 PRODUCTION OF OUTLYING ISLANDS

amounting to just €190,000. It had been thought, however, that the Arts Council had regained some faith in the company following its 2006 production of *Outlying Islands*, when Kennelly took over from founding director Terry Devlin, and followed in a similar artistic – not to mention, Scottish – vein with *Gagarin Way* last year. While the company may have expected a further cut in funding, it had not received any indication of a complete withdrawal.

Whatever the tenability of the company, the potential loss of Island leaves a gaping hole in the theatre infrastructure of Limerick, which, with the company's current state of uncertainty, is now reduced to one functioning professional theatre company, Im-

pact, and a street theatre group, Umbrella Project. To mark Island's twentieth anniversary, they held a staged reading of Mike Finn's *Pigtown* in early March. First performed in 1999, the performance reunited its original cast with director Terry Devlin. "It was a hugely positive event," Fenton says, and the anniversary reading and its strong attendance demonstrated local support for the company. Whether a revival of a decade-old play can bolster confidence for a company's future, however, remains to be seen. Without funding or a functioning executive, Island is currently at sea.

WEST GOES EAST

Compared to RFO grants, or the vagaries of annual revenue funding, the

Arts Council's Once-Off Project grants scheme seems a relatively sturdy method for a company to move forward. In recent years these grants, which now have a ceiling of €100,000 for large scale productions from established companies, have funded productions from Landmark Productions, B*Spoke and Purple Heart Theatre Company, among others, all of which operate without annual revenue funding.

RAW, the company of freelance director Rachel West, had also benefited from Once-Off Project grants, resulting in its recent co-productions with Project Arts Centre, Abi Morgan's *Splendour*, staged last year, and 2006's *The System Parts I and II* by Falk Richter.

However, her proposed project for 2008, a mini-festival of post-dramatic works, lectures and workshops, with contributions from Hans-Thies Lehmann and René Pollesch (again mooted as a co-production with Project Arts Centre), will not go ahead due to an insufficient award for RAW's last application for project funding. West applied for €64,000 for the two-week event – a step up from the €55,000 allocated to *Splendour* – but received just €15,000 towards the translation of one play, Gesine

Dankwart's *Daily Bread*, which West had hoped to stage in Project Cube.

"Project funding suits me," West says, "because it's just me and I don't have an administrator. When I'm in production, the relationship with Project Arts Centre saves me from all of that." Although she is disappointed with her own shortfall, West still thinks that Project grants, coupled with the resources of a "production hub" such as Project Arts Centre represent "a much

cheaper way to benefit a wider range of artists", while the traditional company structure and funding relationships involve "a huge amount of waste".

"There is so much possibility for arranging this differently, and I think the one-off grants could be better utilised," she says. "In

Holland there are loads of different companies [whose work is solely] artistic, but when they go into production they plug into a hub, a production house... basically it means you don't have a whole load of artists doing bad book-keeping, and the director isn't responsible for getting the entire production crew together."

West is reluctant to reapply for funding for the post-dramatic festival, aiming to produce another work instead – the recipient of a Once-off



WEST

Project grant for new work.

In the meantime, with freelance directing opportunities thin on the ground – “I’ve found that I’m doing a show every year and a half” – West has decided to spend some time in Germany, where she lived for almost six years, and is now hoping to “bi-locate” between Berlin and Dublin.

“I don’t know what I can bring to the German scene,” she says, “but I know that I can continue to be inspired by it. It’s a real industry, artists are protected and get health insurance and pensions and their children’s health insurance is paid for. I think we’ve lost all sense of that here. I’m delighted to have done *Splendour* last year and to have been nominated [for best director in the Irish Times Theatre Awards]. That’s a really good way for me to start a new chapter, where I have to cast the net further afield – very unwillingly.”

LOOKING FOR HOUSEMATES

Wanted: Professional theatre company to share Opera House with resident opera company and dance company. Rooms available: Main Auditorium (up to 864 seats) and black box space (170). Must be willing to relocate to Wexford.

As Wexford Festival Opera prepares to take up residence in the purpose-built Wexford Opera House (representing an investment of €26 million from the Department of Arts and

€7 million raised from the private sector), the task of shifting from a two-week, annual opera festival to running a cultural venue of year-round activity demands some cohabitation.

The festival has been quietly courting two existing companies – one theatre and one dance. The new premises will have administration facilities to serve three separate companies within the building and plenty of free evenings to fill between its two performance spaces. Although talks with a dance company are at an early stage, negotiations with one theatre company have been underway since last year and it now looks as though the new Wexford Opera House may have found its first production partner.

Alan Stanford confirmed to ITM that Second Age is currently in negotiations with Wexford Festival Opera. “At present the plans are advancing steadily for a residence from the end of 2008 or early in 2009,” the company’s Artistic Director wrote by email. Asked what the relocation and resources of the new Opera House would mean for his Dublin-based company, Stanford responded, “It would give Second Age the opportunity it wants to expand from its present programme into a fully fledged ensemble-based, national touring theatre company, concentrating on the classic texts.”

He added, though, that these plans



MINISTER SEAMUS BRENNAN WATCHES WEXFORD'S NEW OPERA HOUSE TAKING SHAPE

depend "largely on a commitment from the Arts Council to fund such a move."

The arrangements with Wexford Opera House would mean that all three companies would be permanently based in the building, premiering their work on its stages before touring nationally.

Given the size of the building, not to mention the investment in it, there is some pressure on the venue to be used as much as possible throughout the year. "We're very conscious of the fact that we have an obligation, more than anything else, to ensure that the building is open twelve months of the year and featuring live performances for as many nights as possible," says

McLoughlin. New jobs at the venue include a programme manager, responsible for promoting the new building as a destination venue for touring productions and to schedule all artistic activity outside of the activities of the resident companies. A business development manager will have the difficult task of ensuring there are enough audiences to go round.

"There's no doubt about it," says McLoughlin, "we accept that it's a challenge to try to attract an audience on a continual basis for productions of all different sorts. But we're relatively confident that the venue will be of a high enough standard to attract an audience. And we feel that by attracting a well-respected, high-quali-

ty theatre company and dance company, and by having their productions premiered in the Opera House, that's a strong basis for building up an audience. Wexford certainly isn't a metropolis, but we feel there's a good tradition there to build on."

Second Age was the only theatre organisation the Festival approached to consider residency. "It's not as if there was a wide trawl of companies," McLoughlin says, adding that the desired company would need to be capable of producing work for the main auditorium and the smaller studio. Second Age have already had meetings with Wexford County Council and local arts officers. "So I think they're quite comfortable that there'd be a lot of encouragement for them to move," says McLoughlin.

WAITING IN THE WINGS

More than a year after its first meeting, Trinity College Dublin's forum on actors' training is expected to publish its report later this month. Set up in the wake of the decision, taken at the beginning of 2007, to axe the prestigious but underfunded Bachelor in Acting Studies, the forum initially expected to make its recommendations early last summer.

The report, which the forum's chairperson Prof Nicholas Grene describes as "all but complete", must first be approved by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism and the

Arts Council, which may still make an April publication date optimistic.

While the initial decision to suspend the course was leaked to the media and provoked a howl of protest from the theatre sector, the progress of the forum has been a closely guarded affair. Its enquiries have been directed into models of actor training at home and abroad, how such training might be structured and funded, and, more pertinently, where it might best be located – within a university setting or on a conservatory model akin to RADA.

Meeting five or six times over the last year, the forum received submissions and heard presentations on various models of actor training from forum members and outside parties. The process seems to have been considered and thorough, evaluating international experiences and assessing their possible efficacy in Ireland's political and financial climate.

The forum – a panel of theatre directors, academics and actors – may have seemed over-powered, with Fiach Mac Conghail, Garry Hynes, Michael Colgan and Fintan O'Toole representing interested institutions among the thirteen members, but the meetings were characterised as harmonious. "After a while it became clear that everyone was talking in the same general terms," said a source close to proceedings. "It was a matter of *how* it was going to be achieved

rather than what was going to be achieved."

ITM understands that the forum's report will make "strong recommendations" about the way the actor training course should proceed, having narrowed down options to specific proposals – ones that will depend on a favourable response from funders. Whatever its recommendations, it is not thought that an alternative model of actor training would prove any less costly. "If the recommendations that are made are not backed up by the Department [of Arts, Sports and Tourism] or the Government," said the source, "then certainly what we're talking about will be difficult for Trinity to achieve alone."

ANOTHER CAREER HIGHLIGHT

After almost thirty years with The Gate you might have thought that Marie Rooney was entitled to take some time off. "I thought about it," she told ITM, "and then decided not to. It's my personality. I'd prefer to get straight into it." So it is that Highlight Productions, her new independent marketing, PR and production company, is already in operation. "When I was preparing to leave The Gate I got quite a few offers of work," she says, and has already transformed her rolodex into a respectable roster of clients. Rooney had nursed an ambition to set up her own company for a while, but was committed

to The Gate, where her most recent position was Deputy Director. "Then I realised that if I didn't do it now it would never happen," she says. "There's always a reason to stay on. There's always another project."

Highlight Productions' agenda is certainly broad; a diversity that stems from Rooney's varied work at The Gate. "I have a terrible fear of getting bored," she says. "In a way, the marketing and the PR is the most easily transferable across the arts. But I would like to produce as well." Reluctant to draw comparisons between Highlight and Anne Clarke's Landmark Productions – another independent company formed by another former deputy director of The Gate – Rooney does not see independent producing as the core of her business. "With Landmark, they're producing all the time. With me, it will only be if I get the right production, the right people and elements in place." Nor is Highlight aiming to be a theatre-specific company, but will conduct marketing and PR across a broad spectrum of art forms.

The first of Highlight's PR and marketing projects is the Irish Theatre Artists' database, the latest online resource created by Irish Theatre Institute, on which theatre and dance professionals can upload their profiles for the perusal of prospective employers. (See www.irishtheatreinstitute.ie for more details.)

opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks key diary dates for the spring season.

Smashing Times presents **TESTIMONIES** at The New Theatre, Dublin from 1 – 5 April.

PurpleHeart Theatre Company presents **ON AN AVERAGE DAY** by John Kolvenbach at The Mill Theatre, Dundrum until 12 April.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE BURIAL AT THEBES**, a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* by Seamus Heaney, from 4 April – 3 May.

The Gate Theatre presents **THE DEEP BLUE SEA** by Terence Rattigan from 10 April – 17 May.

Livin' Dred Theatre Company presents **SHOOT THE CROW** by Owen McCafferty, at the Ramor Theatre, Virginia, from 12 – 26 April, then touring Dundalk, Roscommon and Longford.

Barnstorm Theatre Company continues to tour **THE BUS** by Maeve Ingoldsby and Philip Hardy, until 24

April, finishing at The Dean Crowe Theatre, Athlone.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE SEA-FARER** by Conor McPherson from 26 April – 7 June, then at Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 10 – 14 June; Cork Opera House, 17 – 21 June; An Grianán Theatre, Letterkenny, 24 – 28 June.

Gare St Lazare Players Ireland continue to tour with **FIRST LOVE** by Samuel Beckett until 3 May, finishing at The Helix, Dublin.

Bruiser Theatre Company presents **CANDIDE**, adapted from Voltaire by Patrick J. O'Reilly, on tour around Ireland, North and South, until 4 May, opening at Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast and finishing at Waterfront Hall Studio, Belfast.

Ballet Ireland presents **WILDE EXTRAVAGANZA**, choreographed by Gunther Falusy, Morgann Runacre-Temple



Barnstorm's touring production of **THE BUS**

and Rain Francis, on tour from 16 April – 7 May, opening at the Solstice Arts Centre, Navan and finishing at Burnavon Arts Centre, Cookstown.

Lyric Theatre and Rough Magic Theatre Company present **THE PARKER PROJECT, (SPOKESONG and PENTECOST)** by Stewart Parker, running in rep), performing in the Old Northern Bank, Belfast from 22 April – 17 May as part of the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, before transferring to The Empty Space, Smock Alley,

Dublin for three weeks.

Upstate Live presents **SUBMARINE MAN: THE LITTLE-KNOWN LIFE OF JOHN P HOLLOWAY** by Aidan Harney, touring from 29 April-9 May from Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda; finishing at Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun 8 – 9 May.

Storytellers Theatre Company presents **THE TURN OF THE SCREW** by Henry James (adapted by Liam Halligan), on tour from 11 April – 10 May, opening at Garter Lane, Waterford and

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finishing at Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray.

Fishamble will tour **THE PRIDE OF PARNELL STREET** by Sebastian Barry, from 29 April – 7 June, opening at Cork Opera House, and finishing at Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire.

Cahoots NI presents **THE SNAIL AND THE WHALE** by Paul Bosco Mc Eneaney, on tour from 30 April – 29 May, opening at The Alley Theatre, Strabane and finishing at Cavan Town Hall Theatre, Cavan.

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company tours **THE THIRD POLICEMAN** by Flann O'Brien (adapted by Jocelyn Clarke) from 3 – 31 May, opening at Strule Arts Centre, Omagh, and finishing at The Hawks Well Theatre, Sligo.

The Performance Lab presents **SCENES FROM FAMILY LIFE** by Mark Ravenhill at the Riverbank Theatre, Newbridge from 4 – 5 May.

The **DUBLIN GAY THEATRE FESTIVAL** takes place in various venues around Dublin from 5 – 18 May. See www.gaytheatre.ie for information.

Sole Purpose Productions presents **SNOW WHITE - THE REMIX** by Patricia Byrne, on tour from 14 – 22 May, opening at St Columbs Hall, Derry and finishing at The Sean

Hollywood Arts Centre, Newry.

The Peacock Theatre presents **THE BROTHERS SIZE** by Tarell Alvin McCraney (a production of the Foundry Theatre in association with the Public Theater, New York) from 16 May – 14 June.

Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **MELODY** by Deirdre Kinahan on tour from 3 May, opening at Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda and finishing at Listowel Writers' Week on 29 May.

Cartway Productions presents **FIVE NIGHTS** by David Gilna and Simon Hubbard at The New Theatre, Dublin from 27 – 31 May.

The Gate Theatre presents **THE WEIR** by Conor McPherson from 5 June.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THREE SISTERS** by Anton Chekhov (in a version by Brian Friel) from 18 June – 2 August.

Meridian Theatre Company presents **THE LOST FIELD**, with **RACCOON** (written by Tom Hall) and **THE EXIT WOUND** (written by Johnny Hanrahan) at the Roscommon Arts Centre on 20 June.

Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **CHANCE** – a collection of new short plays by Maeve Ingoldsby, Jennifer Mooney, Elaine Murphy, Jody O'Neil

and Lisa Keogh at the Solstice Arts Centre, Navan on 21 June.

Corcadorka presents **THE HAIRY APE** by Eugene O'Neill at Cork City Docklands from 23 June – 5 July.

Big Telly Theatre Company presents **SINBAD** (a pool-based show), created by Zoe Seaton and Paul Boyd, on tour from 27 May – 22 June, from Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn to Cascades Leisure Centre, Portadown.



Jenny Roche in **SOLO 3**

DUBLIN DANCE FESTIVAL

IRISH PRODUCTIONS

Current Dublin Dance Festival Artist in Residence Jenny Roche presents **SOLO 3**, a series of three solo pieces at the Project Arts Centre, Temple Bar from 24 – 25 April.

Colin Dunne presents **OUT OF TIME**, a solo performance at Project Arts Centre, Temple Bar from 26 – 28 April.

Risa Jaroslow in association with Crash Ensemble presents **RE-SIST/SURRENDER** at the O'Reilly Theatre, Great Denmark Street from 1 – 2 May.

Jean Butler presents her solo performance piece, **DOES SHE TAKE SUGAR?** at Project Arts Centre, Temple Bar on 25, 27 and 28 April.

Dublin Dance Festival and Dance Ireland (supported by Culture Ireland) present **RE-PRESENTING IRELAND**, a showcase of Irish dance work.

MIXED BILL 1 – Ponydance Theatre Co presents **PUT YOUR LEFT LEG IN** alongside Myriad Dance Company's **BEHINDTHEEYESLIESBONE** at Dancehouse on 25 – 26 April and 2 – 3 May.

MIXED BILL 2 – Liz Roche and Katherine O'Malley present **UNTITLED**, Mary Wycherley and Jürgen Simpson present **RECEIVING SYSTEMS** and Mairead Vaughan and Dara O'Brien present **BEING NO WHERE ELSE** at Dancehouse from 25 – 26 April and 2 – 3 May.

Catapult Dance presents **WALK DON'T RUN** (film), co-directed by Rebecca Walter and Mark Linnane in Project Cube, Temple Bar from 25 – 26 April.

Dance Theatre Of Ireland presents **BLOCK PARTY**, an outdoor performance in Grand Canal Square from 25 – 26 April.

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entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN tracks the latest backstage movements in Irish theatre.

DAVID PARNELL has joined The Arts Council as the new Head of Theatre. Previously, David was the Co-Artistic Director of Gúna Nua Theatre Company. Former joint Artistic Director **PAUL MEADE** is now sole Artistic Director. Former Company Manager **TARA FURLONG** is now Company Stage Manager with The Abbey, and Gúna Nua will be appointing a Company Manager shortly.

PADRAIG HENEGHAN (pictured) has been appointed as the new Deputy Director of The Gate Theatre, following the departure of **MARIE ROONEY** (who has set up her own company, Highlight Productions). **HENEIGHAN** has been The Gate's Financial Controller and Head of Touring, having joined the theatre in 2001.

WOLFGANG HOFFMAN will be stepping down as Artistic Director of the Dublin Fringe Festival in September. The position will be advertised.

MAUREEN WHITE is the new Literary Manager with Rough Magic Theatre

Company, replacing **CHRISTINE MADDEN** who has joined The Abbey Theatre's Literary Department as Literary Reader. **JESSICA TRAYNOR** has taken the position of Literary Assistant at The Abbey, replacing **AOIFE HABENICHT**.

The Abbey Theatre has named sound designer **DENIS CLOHESSY** and actor

STEPHEN REA as its two newest Associate Artists. Following the departure of **CATHERINE CAREY** last November, The Abbey has appointed **SALLY ANN TYE** as Director of Public Affairs. Sally was previously Head of Marketing and Communications at the

Nottingham Playhouse.

The Performance Corporation has promoted **KELLY PHELAN** to Programme Manager, and appointed **IRENE O'MARA** as Project Coordinator.

LISA KRUGEL has been appointed Theatre Manager of The New Theatre, Dublin. Lisa has been associated with The New Theatre in various capacities for some years.



HENEIGHAN



draíocht

NEW SEASON NOW BOOKING



| THE IRISH SOPRANOS | ANDY IRVINE & DONAL LUNNY |
| OVER THE RAINBOW WITH FAYE TOZER |
| COOLMINE MUSICAL SOCIETY | BALLET IRELAND |
| FUNNY WOMEN IRISH HEATS | FREDDIE WHITE |
| FISHAMBLE THEATRE COMPANY - FORGOTTEN |
| FINGAL COUNTY YOUTH ORCHESTRA |
| CITY THEATRE DUBLIN - LOVE LETTERS |
| CLASSIC REVIVAL - INHERIT THE WIND |
JULIET TURNER	SONNY KNOWLES	OIRFIA TRIO
LIAM CLANCY	LANE PRODUCTIONS - OVER AND OUT	
GOODBYE MR MUFFIN	GALUMPHA	
THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES	CIRCUS INCOGNITUS	
DORTHE'S HEART	SWINGING BANANAS	
FAMILY DAYS	EXHIBITIONS	YOUTH DANCE



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A Misunderstood Medium

Radio drama is a magnificent form in its own right, rather than a diminished 'poor man's theatre', writes broadcaster **LORELEI HARRIS**.

EVERY SUNDAY EVENING THE curtain goes up on an arena that provides drama to an audience that exceeds the collective audience of all the theatres in Ireland on any given night. This audience is fully national, drawing its members from every corner of the island of Ireland. It's also international, as people around the globe make an appointment to partake of its wares. It is a forum that provides employment to actors, writers and directors; that seeks out, nurtures and develops new talent in all of these spheres. It is radio drama on RTÉ Radio 1 and its primary platform is *The Sunday Playhouse*.

These claims are not aspirational. They are a matter of fact. The audience for *The Sunday Playhouse* each Sunday

evening is in and around 12,000 people. Last year, it offered forty new plays by thirty-five writers and employed 142 actors. This year, in addition to the work undertaken by RTÉ drama producers, we are collaborating with ten independent directors in delivering a new range of work. We are seeking fresh ears, fresh eyes, a new dynamic. A creative outlet, work and a large audience: these are good things for the theatre fraternity. They are also things that we, as radio-makers, are proud to facilitate.

Radio drama presents a certain conundrum. It draws on fictive textual sources. It employs directors to bring the text off the page in conjunction with actors. However, by definition, it is drama and not theatre. The reason



for this is straightforward: radio drama is a non-visual medium. We do not use a stage. We do not use lighting. We very rarely have an audience sitting before us absorbing our offerings collectively. These factors impose constraints, but they are also liberating.

Radio drama is best understood as a form in its own right. It attempts, through dramatisation, to transport the listener into worlds, lives, stories, sensibilities and issues removed from their everyday reality. In the case of RTÉ Radio Drama at the moment, we do this through the medium of radio production using the full spectrum of tools at our disposal as radio producers and melding these with aspects of the theatre practitioner's art.

It is a delicate balancing act which starts on the page with the writer and the dramaturg. How does one get the right arc into a one-hour piece so that the listener is permitted to move through a full range of emotional zones with the actors, to grasp and hold onto the reality that is in their ears but not in front of their eyes? How is the tension of the play to be rendered in such a way that the absence of collective consumption does not become an impediment to the individual listener's potential concentration span? How is the language/action tailored to transport the listener from scene to scene without visual prompts? How are characters developed to allow for their materialisation without physical gesture, appar-

el or appearance mediating the message of the voice? These are some of the questions with which, whether implicitly or explicitly, every piece of radio drama has to begin. After all, it is easier to turn off the radio than walk out of a theatre.

In this pre-production phase, another point is worthy of remark. Radio is our delivery platform and medium. As such, it is culturally constructed and imbued with meaning at a whole series of levels. What we elect to produce and the ways in which we choose to deliver this work are in part determined by the culture, ethos and place of this platform within the wider social context. RTÉ Radio is the Irish public service broadcaster and our drama commissioning process follows the lines of our remit.

So, for example, each year we take one of the Shakespearean texts on the Leaving Certificate syllabus and, using the good offices of Alan Stanford of Second Age Theatre Company, bring together schools in a given county to workshop their way through the play. This process is recorded, then edited and mixed for broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 over a four-week period. In doing this, we fulfil part of our remit in relation to young adults and education. Similarly, we have a responsibility to reflect the changing demography of Ireland and to give voice to the whole population. Last year, we invited immigrant actors to come and work with



Alan Stanford (left) and Veronica Coburn: bringing Shakespeare and new devised work to the airwaves.

director Veronica Coburn for a week. Gavin Corbett was charged to observe the sessions and write a play. The result, *Between Storeys*, is due for broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 shortly. Then there is always the regional question: how do we reach out and bring material to our audience that is relevant to their lives and experience? Well, we are about to start recording a series called *Parlour Plays* in which we have asked four writers to write plays that can be performed in front of live audiences in four living rooms in different locations around the country. Yemi Adenuga has written a play to be performed in Navan. Dermot Bolger has written for Tallaght. Mikel Murfi will be devising in Sligo and Vincent Higgins has written a piece for Belfast.

Each year, we also produce a Human Rights Season in which we ask well known Irish writers to write plays on issues of international concern. Even in our New Irish Writing seasons we commission with an eye to our public service remit, Veronica Coburn's devised piece, *Mayday*, which was produced by Kevin Reynolds and won the coveted Prix Europa for Radio Drama in 2007, cast a critical eye on modern Ireland at election time. Garret Baker's play, *The Shepherd*, directed by Sean Rocks and featuring Stephen Rea, dealt with the underbelly of avarice and corruption that have accompanied newfound wealth in Irish society. Gary Mitchell's violent and uncompromising play, *Just 'Cause*, directed on location in Belfast by

Conall Morrison, depicts a world of anomie and dysfunctionality as a group of UDA members discuss whether to disband their paramilitary activities. The list could go on. The point is that the main thrust of radio drama in Ireland cannot really be separated from its context: public service broadcasting.

Against this, Patrick Lonergan's article in the last issue of ITM on RTÉ's 2007 Human Rights Season makes for pretty strange reading. The Human Rights Season is packaged each week as a half-hour play followed by a half-hour discussion of the specific human rights abuse explored in the play. These programmes were not constructed as some order of "theatre of sound". They were intended to highlight an ongoing abuse of diverse types of human rights. The fact that these forms of abuse are known and understood by many does not make their examination any less germane.

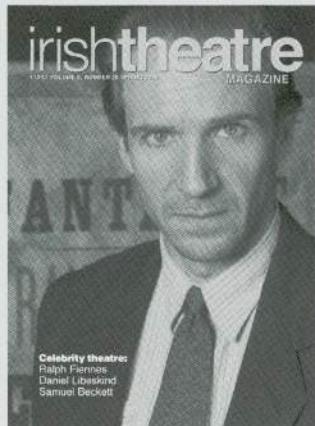
Lonergan's assertion that "good drama usually arises from our interest in a conflict that has an unpredictable outcome" misses the point. For surely the drama of human rights abuse lies precisely in its predictability, while the conflict resides in the macro situation of global politics. In the face of their content, the idea that the public service broadcaster would include a discussion of the theatricality or otherwise of these plays in post-show discussion programmes seems irrelevant.

The absence of the visual is not un-

derstood as an obstacle by radio drama practitioners. We do not see ourselves as doing some kind of "poor man's theatre" but as contributing to a medium that is magnificent in its own right. Radio is the medium par excellence of ideas and concepts. It has a fluidity and flexibility that allows one to play in an intellectually gymnastic manner. When this process is brought to bear at its best on radio drama, it is really quite something. We can move through time and place in a way that is not possible in theatre. We can construct and interrogate character both externally and internally. We can blend and even conflate levels of actuality to create something new and sharp. With the technologies at our command, we can use sound to generate sub-texts and contexts, not merely illustratively or as a bridge or an elaboration, as is often the case in theatre.

Radio drama has been around for a long, long time. The moment has come to give it its place and to approach it for what it is. It is radio and it is drama. If this seems to be stating the obvious, a plea to approach it in these terms would be unnecessary. This would not, however, appear to be the case. Radio drama is not theatre. Perhaps the starting point for a new perception is to think of it as the theatre of nothing. We can only go upwards from there. 

Lorelei Harris is the editor of Arts, Features and Drama for RTÉ Radio 1.



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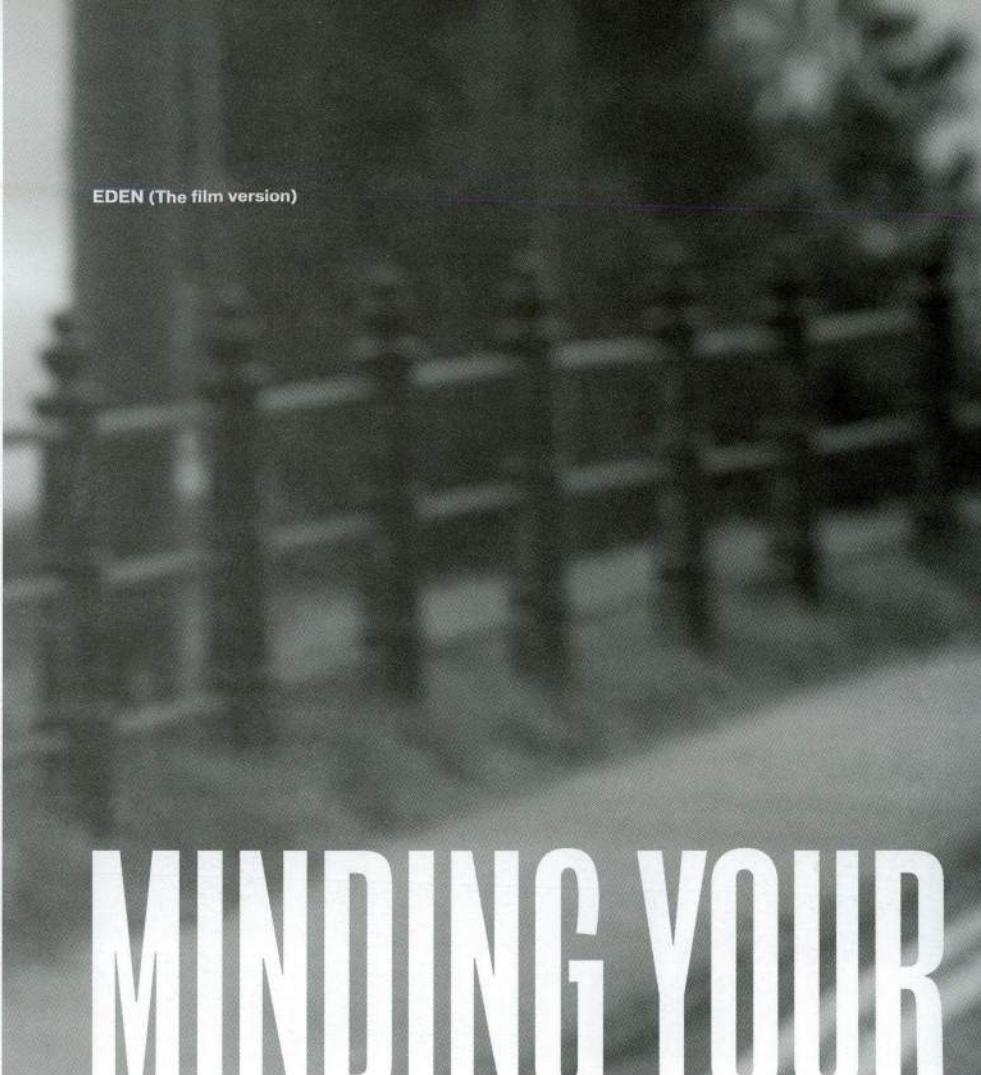
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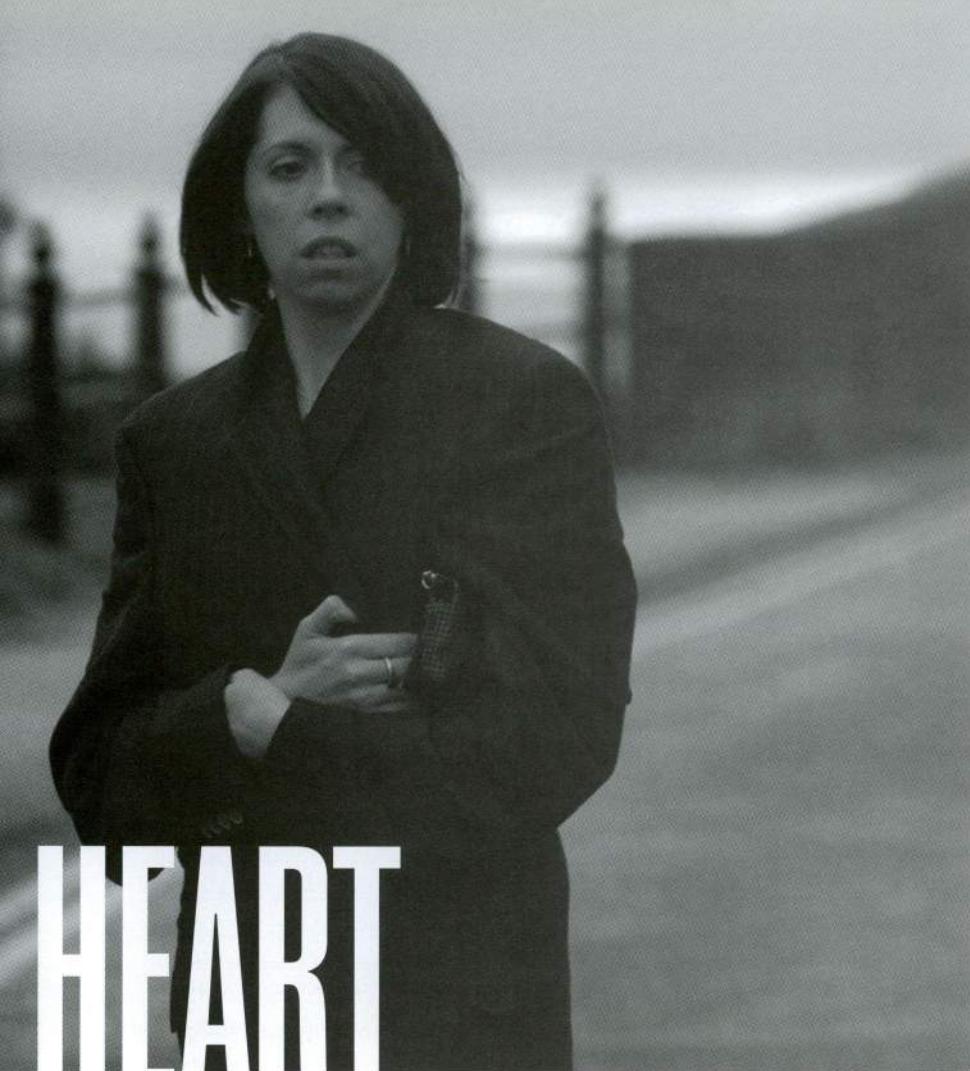
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EDEN (The film version)

MINDING YOUR

In the past year Eileen Walsh has shown the range and depth of her acting talent, in a series of indelibly affecting performances in Dublin, New York and on screen. She talks to **BELINDA MCKEON** about life after the whirlwind.



AFTER THE FIRST TIME SHE SAW EUGENE O'BRIEN'S *EDEN*, in the Peacock Theatre in January 2001, Eileen Walsh walked out onto Abbey Street and cried. Certainly, she was moved by O'Brien's play. Certainly, she was sad for his characters, Breda and Billy Farrell, for their pummeled hearts, for their worn out hopes. But she was crying for something else, something closer to her own life. "I said to Catherine: two of us in the same family, and

obviously it's you're the one who's meant to be doing this, not me." Catherine is the actress Catherine Walsh, who played opposite Don Wycherley in O'Brien's drama of a midlands marriage gone bleakly wrong. Catherine told her younger sister to calm down, to get a hold of herself. And Catherine knew, no doubt, that in a couple of months things would be the other way around, because that has

always been the way these sisters have done things, going to see one another's plays. "We take it in turns to have those moments to go, oh my God, you're so much better than me!" says Walsh. "To say, why am I doing this?"

The daughter of a builder's labourer in Cork, Walsh grew up watching her sisters Catherine and Bernadette in school plays, and began at thirteen to take Saturday morning workshops in the Crawford Gallery.

What Walsh is doing, and what she has been doing since the age of seventeen, when she appeared as Dolores in the 1995 Rough Magic production of Gina Moxley's *Danti-Dan*, is a superb job as perhaps one of the most affecting actresses of her generation. The daughter of a builder's labourer in Cork, Walsh grew up watching her sisters Catherine and Bernadette in school plays, and began at thirteen to take Saturday morning workshops in the Crawford Gallery. Her improvs, she says with a self-deprecating grin, "were always about people dying" until a visiting teacher told the students to act like washing machines.

"I was like, sorry, I don't do washing machine. I do cancer/AIDS," Walsh says, in an exaggerated Cork accent. "But then I thought, God, this is brilliant. That helped lighten me and open me up, helped me not be afraid of people seeing something fragile and small, and made me realise it could mean an awful lot to people. That's how I felt driven towards it, I think." By the time Walsh began her acting studies at Trinity College, she had already toured the country with *Danti-Dan*, and in her first year, she played Runt to Cillian Murphy's Pig in the Corcadorca production of Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*.

Now aged thirty, Walsh has just had an extraordinary year, her talent and her range showcased in a rapid succession of acclaimed performances. Since May 2007, she has played lead roles in Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus*, Edward Bond's *Saved* and in the Roddy Doyle/Bisi Adigun adaptation of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* – all Abbey Theatre productions – and in the film adaptation (Samson Films/RTÉ) of another Abbey production, Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*. (Yes, the same *Eden*, and indeed the same character, which in the hands of her older sister once made her cry.)

TERMINUS

ROS KAVANAGH



For her role in *Terminus*, which took her to New York's Public Theater in January, Walsh won the Irish Times Theatre Award for Best Actress. When her name was announced at the awards ceremony in February, she looked as shocked as if she had never heard of this thing called acting. All she can remember of the night is forgetting to thank her husband, the Scottish artist Stuart McCaffer, who, she says, had spent the last two nights taking in her dress. Not to mention the past year looking after their child, two-year-old Tippi. Walsh was so frequently on the Abbey stage, and shooting *Eden* in Tullamore – "the parts were so good," she says, "you couldn't turn them down" - they moved to Dublin temporarily from their Edinburgh base, and McCaffer became "the full-time mammy".

It's clear that the UK is home for Walsh now, but clear, also, that she has been offered much better work in Ireland. In Scotland and England her parts have been smaller and "quirkier", she says, and when offers come they often bear too strong a resemblance to the parts for which she is best known – as Runt in *Disco Pigs*, and as the damaged Crispina in Peter Mullan's 2003 film *The Magdalene Sisters* – and she needs "to grow beyond that now". Walsh is very conscious that directors are drawn to her for what she calls her "wonky look", which might be described as her unconventional beauty. She has a face at once starkly open and deeply watchful, strong-browed and strong-mouthed, a face that has in it something of the faces, all at once, of children and mothers and grandmothers staring out from photographs from an Ireland of a long time ago. It's a face that brings with it the risk of being typecast, and not in the kindest of ways.

"You get tired of people saying: we need someone really ugly who can play a retard," says Walsh, half-laughing but half not. "You need to be careful; you





SAVED

can't just go up for any audition. Because you have to mind your soul, you have to mind your heart, you have to mind yourself within it all."

Yet Walsh wants to work in the Britain, and knows that she may need to take a number of such parts, to get beyond smaller roles. In the wake of this brilliant year, she seems not quite certain about the future. There is no five-year plan. But nor is there any sense of her resting on her laurels. She just wants to get "quality work", she says; she's not looking to make it big. What's also possible is that she

still can't quite believe the year that she has just had, the parts she has played, the praise she has won. Not that the praise is anything new – Walsh has always been an actress capable of carrying an entire production – but this whirlwind of a year was preceded by a period so fallow, so painfully devoid of work, that she seriously considered her career as an actress to be over, at one stage calling to

her local NHS branch to enquire about returning to college to study midwifery.

Terminus was her first time to work with Mark O'Rowe as director, but she had acted in one of his plays before – in *Crestfall at the Gate* in 2003. "If Mark asked me to start another job on Monday without reading a script, I'd do it. I think his writing is amazing, and I trust him."

Her agent never called. She was pregnant, and then she was a mother, and very little money was coming in, and she was soon to turn thirty. There were moments,

she says, that were "so dark and so lonely and very, very tough".

Which was where her sister Catherine again made an appearance to talk her out of her anxious depths. "Catherine was like, Eileen, thirty is the crisis age for all actresses," she says. "Because it's a do it or die age. And if you actually get past that, lots of other people filter off and the work comes through again." Which was what happened. One thing that came through was the role of Breda in the film version of *Eden*, adapted by O'Brien himself and directed by Declan Recks. When the call from her agent first came, Walsh refused. She had a very firm reason for doing so. "It was because of me having been passed over on *Disco Pigs* when that became a film," she says.

Walsh starred in the original production of Enda Walsh's play, opposite Cillian Murphy, at the Triskel Arts Centre in 1996. She remembers first reading the script and not understanding a word. But the play came alive in rehearsal, and it became, she says, a life-changing experience, working with Walsh and Murphy and with the director, Pat Kiernan of Corcadurca. "I have, very, very fond memories of that time," she says. "Sort of a rose-tinted long, hot summer, real growing-up time for all of us, really. And just boys that you'd marry in the morning." It didn't surprise her, she says, to see Murphy's star rise and rise; that was clear from the very beginning. Like Anne-Marie Duff, Murphy remains a good friend, and someone she sees often – she'd love to work with him again, she says, and with "any of the Corcadurca boys", but the memory of having been passed over in favour of Eileen Cassidy for the part of Runt in Kirsten Sheridan's film of *Disco Pigs*, clearly still smarts, and it was the first thing on her mind when the film of *Eden* came up.

"If you do the play, I think, you should be allowed to see it through to fruition," she says. "Because it's your baby, and it's so hard to let that baby go." But her sister Catherine ordered her to go for the part. "She was brilliant about it. She said, look, it was never going to be me, so I'd rather it was you than anybody else."

Walsh had gone to see *Eden* on stage over twenty times. Knowing the character so intimately helped hugely in creating her own Breda, as had the experience of playing another harried young midlands woman, Therese Farrell (opposite Gary Lydon) in O'Brien's superb television drama, *Pure Mule*, in 2005.

In the film of *Eden*, she plays opposite Aidan Kelly, with whom she worked on *Terminus*. There's a "comfort level", she says, in working with former colleagues, such as Kelly and Recks, or Jimmy Fay, who directed her in both *Saved* and *Playboy*; an immediate shorthand instead of the usual getting-to-know-you patter of the first week in the rehearsal room.

Terminus was her first time to work with Mark O'Rowe as director, but she had acted in one of his plays before – in *Crestfall* at the Gate in 2003. "If Mark asked me to start another job on Monday without reading a script, I'd do it. I think his writing is amazing, and I trust him." And this in spite of the fact that the experience of playing B in *Terminus* was, she says, one of the toughest jobs she has ever done. The play puts huge pressure on its performers, requiring them to sit onstage listening to one another's monologues as they wait to perform their own, and for Walsh, there were times when the pressure almost became too much, especially when the show came to New York. Back in 1998, when *Disco Pigs* toured to Toronto, the enormity of playing to a major international audience hit the young Walsh hard and slammed her into a wall of stage fright, which recurred every night for the show's entire run. Swimming one evening in the hotel pool, she found herself thinking that it would be safer never to resurface, safer underwater, far from the stage. To her horror, the New York run of *Terminus* brought her perilously close to that same wall. "I cried on the way to work, and I cried after work, and I remember thinking, I don't want to be here, this isn't enjoyable, this isn't why I got into the business," she says. "And I've never hated a piece and loved a piece and hated a piece so much. If I'm honest."

She laughs; she may be being too honest, she knows, for her own good. But, you get the sense: she doesn't know how else to be.

Belinda McKeon is a journalist and critic, currently based in New York.



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Are

We All Critics Now?

RÓNÁN MCDONALD argues that even in the crowded blogosphere, the critic has an important role to play in our culture.

CRITICS ARE LIKE EUNUCHS IN A HAREM," Brendan Behan once remarked. "They know how it is done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves." They are often seen as parasites, not creating art themselves but capable of ruining others' reputations with the stroke of a pen. Scorned for this creative impotence, they are at the same time seen as having too much power. The *New York Times* theatre critic Frank Rich, the "Butcher of Broadway" was said to be able to close a New York show with a single bad review.

Little wonder, then, that some playwrights like to mock the reviewers. In Conor McPherson's play *St Nicholas* (1999) the protagonist, a much-feared, middle-aged theatre critic, falls in with a coven of vampires. The identification between the reviewer and the blood-sucker is hard to miss. The film and stage play, *Theatre of Blood* (1973), dramatises in comic detail the revenge of a Shakespearean actor on under-appreciative critics, murdering them in styles inspired by Shakespeare plays. Many actors and playwrights might savour the fantasy.

The critic ranks low in public affection also. When I was writing my recent book *The Death of the Critic*, I frequently encountered people who assumed from the title that I was bidding good riddance to

this hoary old elitist. The prevailing view is that we are now in an age of critical democratisation, when we can evaluate our own cultural consumption, without so-called "arbiters of taste".

Yet the critic has performed a vital function, which we overlook or abandon at our peril. Yes, the history of drama criticism reveals many a blemished

record, with reviewers frequently failing to understand or appreciate experiment or innovation. They have often pilloried or ridiculed plays that later achieve lasting importance.

George Bernard Shaw, him-

it was precisely through the offices of critics, in the form of Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson, that *Waiting for Godot* came to be hailed as the most important play of the twentieth century.

self a greatly talented critic and reviewer, once remarked pithily that a "drama critic is a man who leaves no turn unstoned". But for all the unimaginative and staid reviewers, hostile to the inventive, there are also critics without whom our literary and dramatic landscape would be far more barren and banal. Historically speaking the critic has played a key role in elaborating, appreciating and immortalising the shock of the new in the theatre.

Take the case of Samuel Beckett, a playwright who once described literary criticism, with mordant vividness, as "hysterectomies with a trowel". He makes the word 'Critic!' the most grievous insult that can be hurled between Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Perhaps anticipating some of the scornful notices that this play would initially receive, Beckett got his retaliation in first. When *Godot* was first produced on the London stage in 1955, it was indeed greeted with bemused hostility. Catcalls came from the early audiences and half the theatre emptied by the second act. But it was precisely through the offices of critics, in the form of Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson, that *Waiting for Godot* came to be hailed as the most important play of the twentieth century. The favourable judgements of these respected Sunday broadsheet reviewers eclipsed the scornful notices that had already appeared in the London dailies. Beckett's reputation was created by theatre critics like these and subsequently, like so many of the modernists, by leading academic critics, in his case Hugh Kenner, Ruby Cohn and Harold Bloom. In this way the history of theatre, not least Irish theatre, was changed irrevocably.

Playwrights, in other words, have often got by with a little help from the critics. Harold Pinter was brought to the notice of a resistant public by Harold Hobson; Ronald Bryden championed Tom Stoppard, having encountered Rosen-





Waiting For Godot with Alan Stanford, Johnny Murphy and Barry McGovern in The Gate production.

crantz and Guildenstern are Dead on the Edinburgh fringe. The high profile of Tom Murphy's work in Ireland is partly down to the coherent and eloquent advocacy of Fintan O'Toole. It may be an exaggeration to say that behind *every* great playwright is a great critic. But behind some of them, there certainly is.

This should come as no surprise. The rich history of Irish theatre in the twentieth century has been partly enabled by advocates writing in prose. The early Abbey Theatre articulated its aims through the essays of W.B. Yeats. Field Day Theatre Company in the 1980s published intellectual pamphlets that were in dialogue with its theatrical productions. It is not simply the critic who is the 'parasite'. Theatre feeds off criticism too.

Looked at from this point of view, the loss of eminent critics seems less of a cause of celebration. But, one might counter, on what possible basis might criticism be declared to be "dead"? There are more people writing reviews now than ever. Pages of comment and opinion fill the daily Arts and Sunday supplements and, with the rise of the internet, critical response is no longer confined to the printed word. Everyone has an opinion and one opinion is, it is sometimes assumed, as good as another. Television programmes and newspapers are full

of phone-ins and You-Decide polls, in which the media make a show of consulting the public and eliciting their views and opinions. Interactive media comes swaddled in the rhetoric of popular enfranchisement. If academic criticism, with its armoury of theoretical language, has retreated into the universities, a reciprocal, centrifugal force has meant that we are all critics now.

By "evaluation" I mean the capacity and confidence to judge the quality and the success of an artwork in a way that is communal and consensual and therefore open to agreement, persuasion and the scrutiny of expertise.

Suaged and confirmed is one that plays into the hands of unreflective consumerism, which thrives on shallow novelty and instant gratification. When Scott Pack, the Chief Buyer of Waterstones announced in 2005 that newspaper reviewing was irrelevant, he did not mean that it was badly written or had changed. Just that, as he put it, Sarah Jessica Parker's views mattered much more to book sales than the pronouncement of critics in the *Observer*.

We can witness the same trend in theatre criticism. In British newspapers theatre reviewing is increasingly undertaken by columnists, parliamentary sketch writers and superannuated politicians. The idea that a critic should have spent a lifetime steeped in theatre history is losing credibility. Theatre reviewing is becoming more like restaurant reviewing: you should know a bit about the subject, but ultimately it is a job in which to dabble, to record one's impressions and enthusiasms, rather than a specialised vocation requiring intense familiarity with dramatic form. Part of the reason for this relativist attitude, in which beauty is axiomatically in the eye of the beholder and no judgement of artistic quality is any better than another, is because both academic criticism and reviewing have tended to shrink from the notion of evaluation. By "evaluation" I mean the capacity and confidence to judge the quality and the success of an artwork in a way that is communal and consensual, and therefore open to agreement, persuasion and the scrutiny of expertise.

The rapid expansion of critical outlets via the Internet and elsewhere may not always be in the interests of vital art. There is undoubtedly fine critical writing on the Internet but it is often drowned out by the profusion of mediocrity. Newspaper arts coverage in Ireland and the UK is still fairly robust and widespread, but the shifts in cultural capital away from specialised critics may be

But, what gets lost in a culture where everyone is a critic is the value of critical authority. If everyone is speaking then fewer people are listening. An environment in which individual likes and dislikes are as-

eating away at the foundations in a manner that is not yet visible. Arts criticism is increasingly ceding space to PR-driven promotional pieces written in advance of the event. Downgrading the value of the critic means that reviewing is being substituted by previewing, which, for many non-arts newspaper editors, might look like the same thing: it's all arts coverage. But it seriously devalues the role of the critic within the newspaper and plays into the hands of an entertainment industry interested only in the bottom line.

Things are worse in the US, where there has been widespread thinning of the arts and theatre coverage and reviewing throughout the mainstream press. This has led to much soul-searching and recrimination, but editors shrug their shoulders and point at the realities of the market. There are no shortage of venues for reviewing in specialised magazines and the blogosphere, they claim. However quirky your cultural interests – from anime to body piercing – there are sure to be websites devoted to it. Why give over precious column inches to minority interests, especially when surveys are showing that younger people are going in their droves to user-based websites to make entertainment decisions?

Critics of the critic often claim that they would rather get recommendations from someone they know, someone with similar tastes. One problem with this is it encourages a reviewing system that confirms and assuages prejudices rather than challenges them. Critics of stature could once lure readers to give unfamiliar work a second chance, to see things they did not see at first glance, just as eminent critics could persuade the disgruntled theatre-going public to look at Beckett again. The possibility of this happening these days is diminished: specialist critics no longer have that cultural authority. If the Internet replaces print criticism it is in danger of atomizing the public sphere. Enthusiasts for experimental poetry or expressionist drama will talk to each other on the web but have little wider penetration in our culture. At the same time, mainstream films and plays, which are already cutting back on previews, can rely on the enthusiasts of Facebook to spread the word. This is a reviewing system more suited to *Snakes on a Plane* than *Citizen Kane*.

The conviction that informed taste is an elitist ruse, that one opinion is as good as another, and that we should take our lead for our cultural life solely from people like us might seem to be an instance of "people power". Yet if we only listen to those who already share our own proclivities and interests, it will lead to a dangerous attenuation of taste and conservatism of judgment. The loss of authoritative, specialist critics may ultimately serve the cause of cultural banality and uniformity. 



New Writing in Bite Sizes

No-one could complain about a dearth of new writing in March, when Dublin audiences were offered showcases of new works, and work-in-progress.

They may have been in miniature form, but short did not mean short-changed, writes **LISA MAHONY**.

42

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? IN TERMS OF THE ARTS, WHERE quality rather than quantity is the key concern, it's a tricky question to answer. Yet in the case of new or, to use the preferred parlance, "emerging" artists, and in the case of new writing for the Irish stage, it's hard to imagine that a surfeit of works could ever be a problem. It may be self-evident that new plays represent the future of text-based theatre, and that without an abundance of today's new work to choose from we stand little chance of discovering tomorrow's classics, yet



The 100 Minutes team: Mark Gordon, Catriona Lynch, Brenda Meaney, Sarah-Jane Quigley, Tara Robinson, Robert O'Connor, Connolly Heron, Faela Stafford, Colm O'Brien, Paul Gibson.

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somehow the topic of new writing seems to provoke a vague nervousness in the Irish theatrical psyche. Much is made by cultural commentators of the seeming paucity of new writing being staged, particularly in the most visible of places. The number of full productions of new Irish plays (excluding adaptations) being presented at The Abbey, for example, has undergone a steady decline in recent years, from five in 2000 to just one last year (Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus*).

Given The Abbey's generous funding and international prominence, and its *de facto* status as Ireland's "writers' theatre", this does seem to represent an unfortunate omission from the National Theatre's programming.

Yet regardless of what is happening at the top end of the production scale, new writing appears to be proliferating in all manner of forms and in all manner of places. A quick search of the Irish Playography database reveals that over the last decade, on average, a very respectable thirty-six new Irish plays were produced each year. Last year the Dublin Theatre Festival presented four new Irish plays, while the Dublin Fringe Festival presented eighteen new Irish works. Commissions from companies such as Druid and Fishamble and mentoring initiatives such as Rough Magic's highly successful SEEDS project have yielded results that, in several cases, have gone on to enjoy international acclaim. In addition more

and more platforms are being developed where emerging playwrights' work can be presented without the pressures of a full-scale production. For example, Cavan based Livin' Dred Theatre company (who were twice nominated at this year's Irish Times Theatre Awards) are currently seeking original submissions for a festival of new writing to be held next September, in which five selected scripts will be given rehearsed readings.

In the case of new playwrights who are still finding their artistic voices, the sense of distillation inherent in a short work, coupled with the manner in which a short format serves to foreground dramatic structure, can offer many creative possibilities.

ly's *100 Minutes* at Project Cube. However, such sudden profligacy is quickly explained by the fact that these new plays share a common characteristic – they are all shorts. This clarification is in no way intended as dismissive. Across artistic disciplines short works have played a vital role, sometimes occupying the highest realms of their respective canons. The concept of a work that is small, but perfectly formed, has been a draw for many artists, and - taking Beckett as the most obvious example of a playwright whose works grew ever more distilled - not just in the early stages of their careers. As a distinctive mode of expression the short - be it in film, literature or theatre - deserves to be recognised as an art form in its own right.

In the case of new playwrights who are still finding their artistic voices, the sense of distillation inherent in a short work, coupled with the manner in which a short format serves to foreground dramatic structure, can offer many creative possibilities. For those whose business it is to nurture new writing, the attractions of the format are just as apparent. Fishamble, a company wholly dedicated to the development of new writing, has produced several seasons of short plays, most recently in the form of *Whereabouts* - a series of site-specific works performed in and around Temple Bar, which won the Special Judges' Award category at the 2006 Irish Times Theatre Awards. Fishamble's long-standing Literary Officer Gavin Kostick sees the commissioning of short plays as a useful strategy in the encouragement and development of new writing. A writer, working in isolation may labour for an extremely long period of time to create a full-length script that, regardless of its merits, turns out for one reason or another to be difficult or impractical to fully stage, and languishes un-produced for years. By contrast, asking writers to come up with a complete short play, often within certain guidelines (a maximum number of roles, for instance) can result in new and original works which don't represent a massive in-





Monged, by Gary Duggan, produced by Fishamble. His new play Stop/Over was in the 20:Love series.

vestment of time on the part of the author but which do, crucially for anyone writing for the theatre, stand a good chance of actually being heard in public.

From this perspective the Literary Department at The Abbey is to be applauded for commissioning the 20:Love series, for which six emerging playwrights were each asked to write a twenty-minute two-hander dealing (like The Abbey's current season) with the theme of love. The commissions culminated in two evenings of staged readings at The Peacock theatre, and if the packed houses were anything to go by (seats, for which tickets were free, were apparently booked up weeks in advance), they generated a huge level of public interest. For the writers involved, simply gaining this level of exposure for their work at a relatively early stage in their careers must be highly beneficial. Also the fact that these emerging playwrights are seen to be forging working relationships with The Abbey is heartening, and reflective of the recent (and highly welcome) trend of opening up our national theatre to younger and more experimental practitioners. Though one might certainly hope to see an increase in full productions of new plays by younger authors at The Abbey, these short commissions and public readings, free as they are from some of the constraints and pressures that a full staging imposes, are a useful resource - both for new writers and for those facilitating their development.

According to Dublin based writer Philip McMahon, whose début play *Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)* won the Spirit of the Fringe award in the 2006 Dublin Fringe Festival, the remit of the 20: Love commission offered him an opportunity to experiment with writing dialogue for the stage. His resulting short play, *Invest-*

ment Potential, which gently charts the progress of a failing relationship, effectively marries sharp dialogue with the monologue form of his earlier work. The couple in his play narrate the details of their everyday lives to each other but in one quick-witted response, the lack of communication and essential emptiness at the heart of their relationship is effortlessly (and often hilariously) made clear. What

also stands out about his piece is the completeness of its structure with the multiple timeframes – the “how it is”, “how it started” and “how it ends” of the relationship – giving the story a sort of three-act progression that lends a feeling of wholeness to the play.

Taken together then, what noticeably unites the *20:Love* series, in addition to the common theme of love, is these six works’ contemporary perspective and their relevance to the ‘here and now’ of Irish culture.

Gary Duggan’s *Stop/Over* also makes use of multiple times and locations, condensing a full day and night into its short structure. As in the case of his earlier play, *Monged*, this piece takes the audience on a vividly sketched, hedonistic journey (again involving some illegal substances). Utilising the rush of New York nightlife as a backdrop to a brief, stunted love affair between two young Irish émigrés, Duggan’s writing also employs a combination of dialogue and highly descriptive monologue, to engaging effect. Though perhaps more conventional in their use of single scene structures, the other four shorts presented all take varied and distinctive approaches to their given theme. Nancy Harris’s *Love in a Glass Jar* is a comic look at procreation as a loveless transaction, to be negotiated via online liaisons. In Belinda McKeon’s *Two Houses*, while everyone may be connected by Bebo or Facebook, small town mentalities prevail, resulting in a love that is utterly misguided. Paul Murray’s *Kama* draws on fandom and obsessive love to interrogate the cults of celebrity and of modern day martyrdom, whilst Stacey Gregg’s *When Cows Go Boom* is a heightened take on eco-terrorism, environmental disasters and the cost to human relationships in their wake. Taken together then, what noticeably unites the *20:Love* series, in addition to the common theme of love, is these six works’ contemporary perspective and their relevance to the ‘here and now’ of Irish culture.

Foregrounding the concept of topicality and exploring it through even shorter works, Painted Filly Theatre Company’s third annual production of *100 Minutes* at the Project Cube presented, in rapid succession, ten new plays lasting just ten minutes each. Formed in 2005, Painted Filly’s stated aim is to connect emerging writers from all over the world with Irish based theatre practitioners, fostering an ensemble process in order to stage new writing. According to Artistic Director Nick Johnson,



Terminus by Mark O'Rowe was the only new Irish play staged by The Abbey/Peacock last year.

the primary remit when considering individual writers' submissions for inclusion in a *100 Minutes* season, aside from the quality of their idea, is that the plays "must be about now" - which is to say they must, whatever their setting, refer or respond in some way to the current political or cultural climate. The intention in presenting audiences with so many of these very short plays all at once is to allow a multiplicity of writers' voices to be heard. *100 minutes* aims to be a sort of theatrical forum that as a whole can be politically engaged, but which, by virtue of the diversity and even discordance of its constituent ideas and styles, cannot become didactic.

In performance, the clash of ideas, styles and genres implied by the very concept of *100 Minutes* and offered by its individual writers is indeed hard to ignore. Maedhbh Haicéid's *Wunderkind*, which takes the form of a witty sketch sending up the art market, follows hot on the heels of the psychological realism of Ross Dungan's doctor/patient dialogue *Checking Time*, for instance. In the second part of the evening Fin Keegan's comic dystopia, *Sing Hibernia*, is immediately followed by the noirish *Marry Me* by Shawn Sturnick, which in turn is followed by the social realism of Billie Traynor's *Stacey*, featuring a shattered family dealing with a teenage overdose. Tying it all together is the ensemble company of ten actors, who are all called upon to play a wide variety of roles in quick succession. The rapid switches between styles and genres, played out with minimal props on a bare bones set, posed a major challenge, and perhaps some of the theatrical potential of the more fantastical or surreal writing on offer was constrained by the strict requirements of the overall format. *100 Minutes* is certainly a bold experiment however, and one which, provided the form

doesn't overpower the content, provides a noteworthy forum for new writing.

Though multi-disciplinary in its approach rather than dedicated to new writing *per se*, the *Project Brand New* season offered another innovative platform for the development of, as the name suggested, brand new work. Supported by Project Arts Centre and taking place over three nights in the Cube space (regrettably, just

after this article went to print), *Project Brand New* was instigated and curated by Roise Goan, Jody O' Neill, Deirdre Roycroft and Louise Lowe – all of whom were par-

In the Irish theatrical context, all three of the above projects serve, in differing ways, to focus public attention on new work in an engaging manner.

ticipants in "The Next Stage" training initiative run by Theatre Forum and Dublin Theatre Festival last autumn. The objective of the *Project Brand New* venture was to provide a flexible framework for emerging performing artists to develop and test out new ideas, outside of the traditional production models. The desire for audience feedback was a central concern, providing artists with invaluable responses to their work at an early stage in its creation. From over forty original submissions the curatorial panel choose thirteen participants, across a range of performance disciplines. The artists were invited to present their ideas on a 'work-in-progress' basis, offering audiences a rare insight into the developmental stages of work that consciously "strives towards the new". *Project Brand New* was partly inspired by the "Scratch Night" formula developed a number of years ago by the Battersea Arts Centre in London. Scratch nights are monthly, informal evenings, where anyone can present a ten-minute extract of new work, and seek audience feedback afterwards in the bar. These events form the bottom rung of a structured 'ladder of development' pioneered by the centre, which aims to support new work at every stage of its progress from idea to completed work, and in which critical interaction between artist and audience is a key element.

In the Irish theatrical context, all three of the above projects serve, in differing ways, to focus public attention on new work in an engaging manner. These initiatives introduce us, at a relatively early juncture, to the development of new work for the stage. Run successfully, they serve to give an insight into the creative process in a manner that is surely beneficial to both audiences and artists alike. As a public medium that is constantly changing, theatre needs audiences that are engaged, curious and open to experimentation, if new writing and new modes of expression are to flourish.



Lisa Mahony is a Drama Studies graduate from Trinity College Dublin and writes about theatre.

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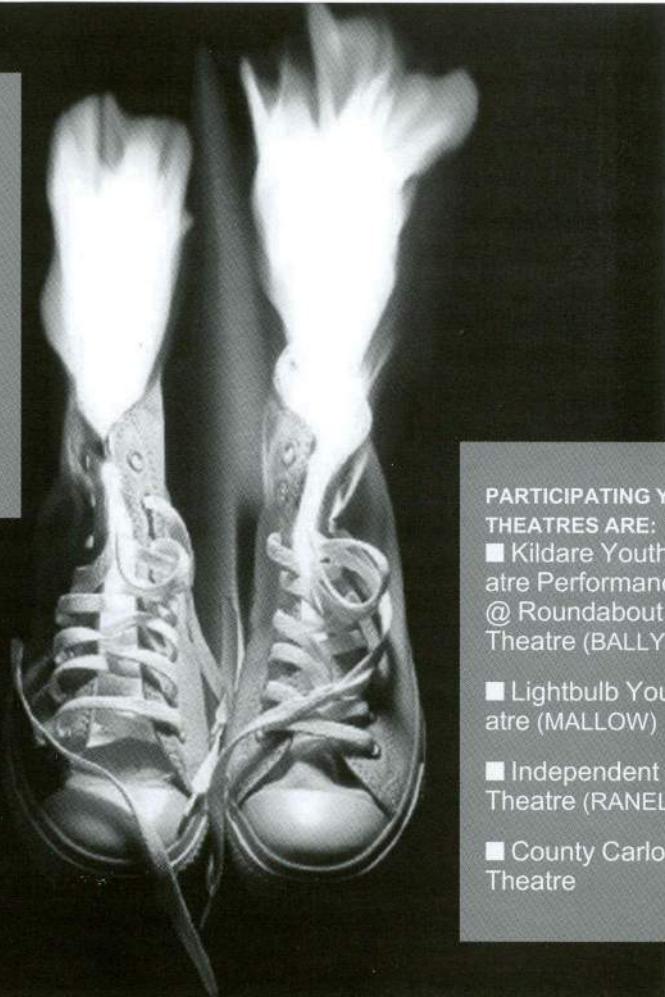
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SOMETHING WICKED

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

50

Macbeth with Patrick O'Kane, directed by Conall Morrison for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon, last year.

With Macbeths breaking out all over,
new Shakespeare productions have swept
the Irish stage in recent months. **RACHEL**

ANDREWS talks to directors about their
approach to these works – and why we
return to them again and again

THIS WAY COMES

TWO YEARS AGO BRITISH PLAYWRIGHT RICHARD BEAN called for a moratorium on Shakespeare. “Five years off! Please!,” he begged, “Shakespeare is killing British theatre. Specifically, he is killing off the new big play.” Bean’s argument, published in *Time Out* magazine, was that contemporary writers are forced into creating two-handers and chamber pieces by the laziness and greed of the big playhouses, who know they can make money producing large works by Shakespeare. “Living writers know that they can’t get their big plays on, there’s no money to do it,” he wrote. “so they self-censor and write small.”

Bean’s plea may be passionate, but it is unlikely to be seriously entertained. Shakespeare is, after all, a global phenomenon. At any given moment, there is a production of Shakespeare on a stage somewhere in the world. Irish audiences tend to gain most insight into the depth and breadth of Shakespeare’s achievement at festival time: a pyrotechnic, Polish *Macbeth* (Teatr Biuro Podrozy) was produced during Cork’s tenure as City of Culture in 2005, and over the past three years alone, Dublin Theatre Festival audiences have been treated to a version of *Macbeth* staged as a radio performance (New York’s SITI Company’s *Radio Macbeth*); a digital, French-Canadian take on *The Tempest* (4D Art in Montreal), and a Lithuanian interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* (OKT / Vilnius City Theatre), set in a pizza house.

In the past, the worldwide fascination with the Bard also extended to these shores. Anew McMaster and his famed Shakespearean company toured to towns and villages across rural Ireland during the 1950s, while the Hilton Edwards-Micheál MacLiammóir reign at the Gate Theatre included staging Shakespeare with what UCD Drama Professor, Christopher Murray, has termed “impeccable style and grace”.

Irish Times critic Fintan O’Toole has suggested that the dearth of Shakespeare may have arisen out of a “new inferiority complex” or a “developing obsession with Ireland and Irishness.”

During this time, a number of amateur companies, most notably the Dublin Shakespeare Society – which celebrated its centenary last year – also lit up the scene.

But in the same period, the Abbey Theatre was producing little or no Shakespeare – it staged none of his plays from the 1930s through to the 1950s, and after that only rarely.

As the twentieth century progressed, Shakespeare gradually dropped out of the broad Irish theatrical repertoire – notable exceptions such as the adventurous mid-1990s work of independent company Loose Canon, aside. It is hard to pinpoint exactly why this came about, although *Irish Times* critic Fintan O’Toole has suggested that the situation may have arisen out of a “new inferiority complex” or a “developing obsession with Ireland and Irishness.” There was also the view, still held among some, that Irish actors simply cannot get their tongues around Shakespeare’s verse.

In recent years, there has been a change. In her 2006 review for the *Shakespeare Bulletin*, of the Rough Magic production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, academic critic Anna Kamaralli wrote that there seems to be “something of a small renaissance in the staging of Shakespeare going on” in this country. One of the more important signs of this was the establishment, in 2004, of Classic Stage Ireland (CSI), a company dedicated to presenting regular productions of classic theatre – including Shakespeare – as well as to offering workshops and training in classical acting. CSI’s purpose was to create what it termed an “Irish Classic Voice”, through which the great dramatic works would be “married to the very particular cultural imagination of the Irish and to the wealth of Irish accents, speech patterns, rhythms, etc.” It was a bold mission statement, bound to irritate those wedded to the idea that Shakespeare’s verses must be enunciated in RP (Received Pronunciation) and CSI’s work received a broadly warm welcome.

Four years later, Shakespeare staging an even wider comeback. In fact, the present rash of Shakespeare productions here is beginning to look like a long-



Romeo and Juliet with Aaron Monaghan and Gemma Reeves in the title roles at The Abbey.

overdue love affair with the Bard. There are, at the time of writing, two *Macbeths* and a *Romeo and Juliet* playing on stages around the country, while Rough Magic Theatre Company has just completed a national tour of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Romeo and Juliet, on the Abbey's main stage, is a first for the theatre. The production, large in scale and ambition, follows an equally large-scale *Julius Caesar*, staged last year by the same director, Jason Byrne. Both form part of a deliberate policy by the Abbey's Artistic Director, Fiach MacConghail, to locate Shakespeare within the context of Irish theatre and within the tradition of the Abbey itself. "I have produced Shakespeare for Irish audiences," says MacConghail. "We are not trying to emulate the RSC or the National Theatre [in London]." He will only be presenting Shakespeare if it fits "contextually", as well as culturally and politically, into Irish society, and, if Irish audiences are able to recognise something of themselves on the stage. In a writing environment that has retreat-

ed over the past decade into monologues and two-handers, MacConghail also sees Shakespeare as an encouragement rather than a threat to writers wanting to put on big plays. "Shakespeare," he says, "gives licence to writers to be epic."

Director Lynne Parker also turned her version of *The Taming of the Shrew* into a world that Irish audiences could instinctively recognise – albeit a world now in

our past. Set in late 1960s rural Ireland, Parker envisaged the tale as a social satire on power, greed and a small-town mentality, as well as on a certain type of belligerent male – Irish or otherwise. Kate is por-

trayed as someone who accedes to Petruchio's demands outwardly only, allowing him to back himself into a corner in the process. The play, with its overtones of misogyny, is a difficult one for a contemporary age, and Parker's production doesn't completely resolve its problems.

Nonetheless, it is full of comedy, with tremendous acting from performers such as Owen Roe (Petruchio), Simone Kirby (Bianca) and Tadhg Murphy (Lucentio), who, along with the rest of the cast, appear consummately at ease with Shakespeare's text. This was something Parker vigilantly focused on. "I wanted to find a way of doing Shakespeare using an Irish idiom," she says, "and I wanted an Irish company to be completely comfortable with the language." Watching the DruidSynge cycle, Parker noticed the similarities in rhythm and texture between the language of Synge and Shakespeare – something she refers to as "bejewelled bullshit" – and in subsequent rehearsals for the *Shrew*, encouraged her cast to uncover "the song of the dialogue". "We spent a long time working on the clarity of the language, and we found that once the tongue is used, the language becomes quite muscular. It's possibly more Irish than English."

Although less rooted in time and context, the Shakespearean work of director Selina Cartmell has proved as startling as that of Rough Magic – if not more so. Cartmell's production of *Titus Andronicus*, for which she won Best Director at the Irish Times Theatre Awards, was one of the high points of 2005, and proved, if nothing else, that performances of Shakespeare in Ireland had come of age. Like Parker, Cartmell worked hard on the language – once again encouraging the cast to use their own accents – and it showed.

The production, highly stylised and rigorous, combated the notion that Irish theatre was somehow intimidated by Shakespeare. It combined a confident and

"We spent a long time working on the clarity of the language, and we found that once the tongue is used, the language becomes quite muscular.

It's possibly more Irish than English."

Macbeth from *Second Age*, with Enda Oates, Caitriona Ni Mhurchú and Frank O'Sullivan



AMELIA STEIN

clear interpretation of the text with equally assured references to a European tradition, by using space as a crucial element in the evocation of mood and emotion. Cartmell's most recent show, *Macbeth*, which has just finished, was a site-specific production set in the subterranean world of The Empty Space on Dublin's Wood Quay. Again she teamed up with set designer and long-time Peter Brook collaborator, Jean Guy LeCat, using space as a means to probe the play.

Morrison believes it would be foolhardy for a director not to consider what a Shakespearean drama "meant to me", but says that this can only be done wisely by "falling back into the play".

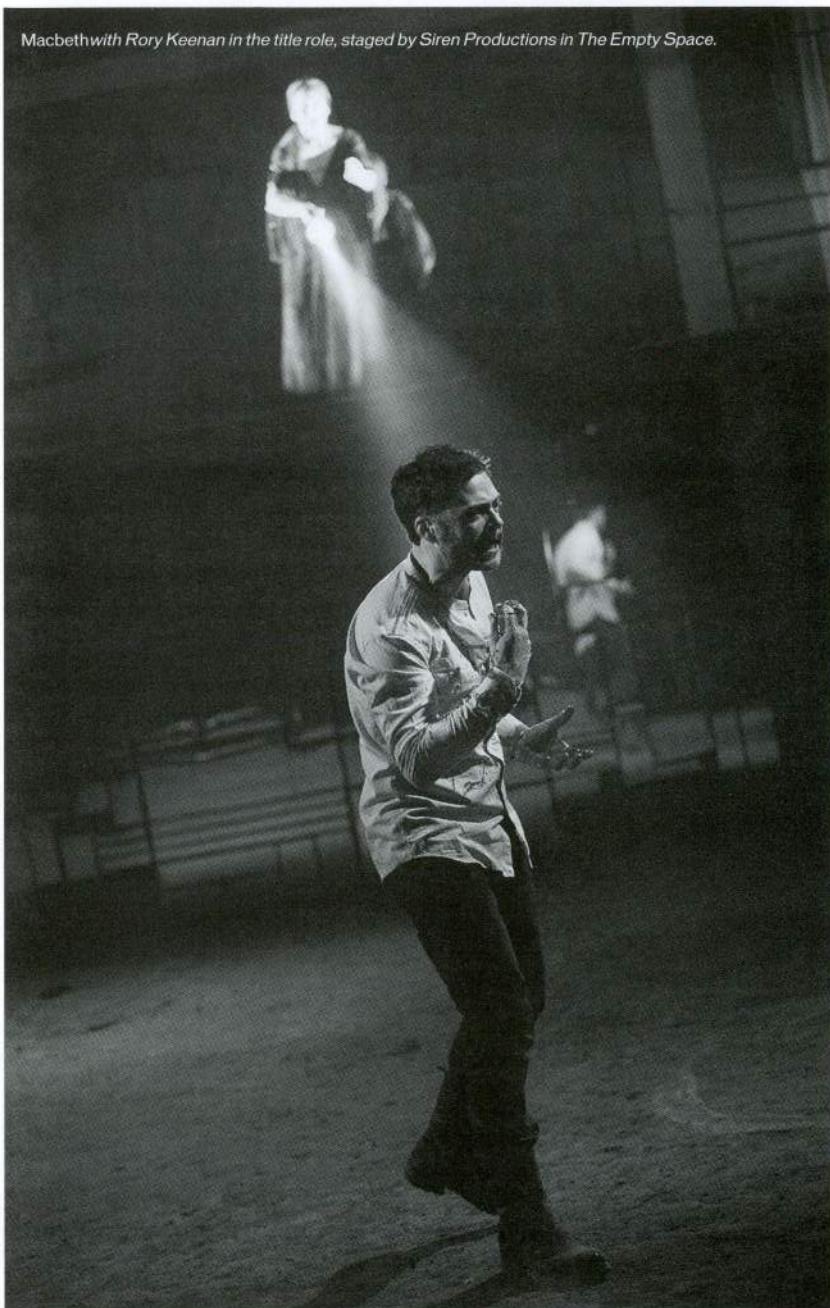
space, where there is no fourth wall, so the audience is implicated as guests in the banquet scene." Cartmell also discovered the space was haunted, hence one of the central themes in her production is "the ghostly presence" of the dead throughout the play.

But does Shakespeare need an angle, particularly a contemporary one? Conall Morrison is currently in rehearsal with a feminist reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon. When he was asked to direct *Macbeth* there last year, he envisaged it as an exploration of "how evil is personified", creating an extensive prologue for this purpose, and making allusions to global conflicts and politics, as well as to individual embodiments of evil such as Stalin or Hitler.

He views *The Taming of the Shrew* as a dark satire on the "venal and shallow" nature of male behaviour. Crucial to his reading of it is the retention of the play's framing device that sees it presented by players: this allows it to be viewed as a work that points fingers at "male viciousness", rather than the misogynist text it otherwise appears to modern audiences. Morrison believes it would be foolhardy for a director not to consider what a Shakespearean drama "meant to me", but says that this can only be done wisely by "falling back into the play", and discovering the richness within it, rather than "landing something spuriously on top".

Unsurprisingly, directors differ widely in how they believe Shakespeare should be approached. For Richard Croxford, Artistic Director of Replay Productions in Belfast, Shakespeare's stories should speak for themselves. Croxford recently directed yet another version of *Macbeth* for Replay's twentieth anniversary, staging it in the atmospheric setting of the former Crumlin Road Gaol

Macbeth with Rory Keenan in the title role, staged by Siren Productions in The Empty Space.



in Belfast. Despite the site's historical background, Croxford says he was careful to choose a location that avoided specific evocations of any particular period. "There have been so many Shakespeares where people have done an angle, where this means this, and that means that. It's almost a cop out in some ways."

Jason Byrne also finds he cannot approach a play with a "big overall theme" in his head. "If I did, it would freeze up for me. I really have a gut feeling about something. I try to find an immediacy in the action." For Byrne, objective analysis only tends to come after the fact, and is often dictated by the response of the audience. He says, for example, that he was "very taken" by the reaction of younger audiences to *Romeo and Juliet*. "It opened my eyes to some of the themes in a way I hadn't noticed before."

On the other hand, Corcadorca's Artistic Director Pat Kiernan, who has staged three outdoor productions of Shakespeare in Cork city over the past seven years, is convinced that Shakespeare needs contemporary relevance. Kiernan's most recent production, *The Merchant of Venice*, employed Polish actors, speaking in their native language, to play the parts of Shylock and his fellow Jews, while the notorious "pound of flesh" scene was enacted inside the city's courthouse. The play, staged as part of the City of Culture programme in 2005, was praised as "relevant" and "brilliantly convincing" among other things. "I believe you have a responsibility in taking on Shakespeare and that you need a reason for taking it on," says Kiernan, "and when you have that, the play sings."

This divergence of opinion only confirms what lovers of Shakespeare have always known: that the plays remains permanently unknowable and, as a result, permanently interpretable. Alan Stanford has produced "more Macbeths than is good for a person" with his educational theatre company, Second Age, staging classic texts from the secondary school syllabus. He continues to find "something fresh" within the work. "If it is a good play, there is always something good and new in it."

It looks as if in Ireland, as in the rest of the world, Richard Bean is unlikely ever to have his way – and he knows it. "There will never be a moratorium," he concluded, "so I've lost the argument before I start."

Rachel Andrews is an arts journalist and critic based in Cork.





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Selective Memories

A recent collection of essays sets out to re-evaluate Irish drama in the light of The Abbey centenary and transformations in Irish society, writes CLARE WALLACE.

CHOLARSHIP ON IRISH DRAMA is a burgeoning business, one that experienced an extra surge of energetic activity as the Abbey Theatre's centenary approached in 2004. The work in *Echoes Down the Corridor* is drawn from the papers presented at the 2004 IASIL conference in Galway—fourteen essays are collected here, prefaced by an informative and thought-provoking introduction.

The introduction meticulously sets the scene, providing an overview of the ill-fated 'abbeyonehundred' programme. At the outset, Lonergan and O'Dwyer draw attention to the paradox that while academic interest in Irish theatre was perhaps keener than ever before (as was evidenced by the numerous papers delivered at IASIL

2004), simultaneously the much anticipated centenary programme of The Abbey Theatre was on the point of catastrophe.

Among the focal points of criticism of the centenary programme noted here was its conservatism. With a few exceptions, the focus remained primarily on well-known Irish plays and afforded little space for new writing, work by women (either as playwrights or as directors) and no space at all for work in the Irish language. Lonergan and O'Dwyer maintain that these 'oversights' and the contingent problem of misrepresentation took on still greater significance since the programme was perceived by many (commentators at least) as "an act of public memory: a statement of what Ireland, as a nation

in 2004, valued from its past" – although this perhaps overstates general expectations somewhat and implies that a little disappointment was inevitable.

Such criticisms inevitably originate in a sense that The Abbey failed to do its duty as an influential national cultural institution and was perhaps distracted from higher goals by the dictates of filthy lucre, or more kindly, a huge operating deficit – anxieties that, incidentally, have shadowed the theatre for about a century now. The Abbey's attempt to produce a winning formula included various Irish classics by Synge,

Yeats, Murphy, McGuinness and Carr, but also a controversial production of *The Shaughraun* directed by John McColgan. The main elements of this controversy are highlighted perceptively. Why did The Abbey decide to showcase a play that would make Yeats turn in his grave; that seems the antithesis of the theatre's founding principles? Lonergan and O'Dwyer tread with extreme tact here but provide a convincing case to suggest that *The Shaughraun* produc-

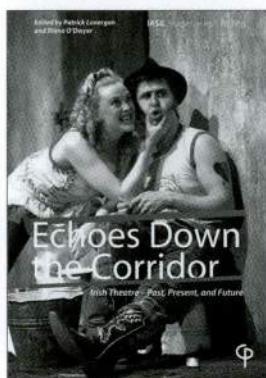
tion is, in their view, historically and conceptually at odds with a commemoration of The Abbey's role and achievements.

Significantly, the outstanding box office returns for *The Shaughraun* hint that the viewing public was comparatively untroubled by the compatibility of this production with a celebration of the Abbey's role as voice of the nation.

Lonergan and O'Dwyer juxtapose the difficulties of abbey-onehundred with the creative energies flowing in other quarters – Druid's *Playboy*, Rough Magic's *Improbable Frequency* and successes by Irish

playwrights in London. This other context belies the more inflated claims advanced with regard to The Abbey's "statement of what Ireland, as a nation in 2004, valued from its past". Nevertheless, the dominant note here is the role of the national theatre, and necessary re-evaluations of Irish drama in the light of the centenary and contemporary transformations in Irish society constitute the remit of the volume.

The essays that follow propose



**ECHOES DOWN THE
CORRIDOR: IRISH
THEATRE - PAST, PRESENT
AND FUTURE**

**EDITED BY PATRICK LONERGAN
AND RIANA O'DWYER**
Carysfort Press, 2007



The Shaughraun: John McColgan's production seemed at odds with the commemoration of the Abbey's centenary.

various re-evaluations and reappraisals. Christopher Murray's survey of The Abbey from 1904 to 2004 elegantly avoids reducing the century's activities to a list of dates and authors. In a reference to the epilogue to *The Crucible* – 'Echoes Down the Corridor' – Murray draws upon the metaphorical potential of the echo to emphasise the recursive, as opposed to linear, aspect of history and, in particular, Irish theatre history. (The citation furnishes this book's title; less fortuitously, *Echoes Down the Corridor* is also the title of Arthur Miller's collected essays published in 2000.). He picks out the echoes and reverberations between European modernism and the forces that shaped the Irish Literary Theatre, between The Abbey and the Dublin Drama League, be-

tween Ernest Blythe and the Experimental Theatre, concluding with the repercussions of the Abbey centenary which chime curiously with historical precedents.

Contributions to the first half of the volume focus on the earlier period of The Abbey, in particular on the work of writers such as Synge, O'Casey, Padraic Colum, Seumas O'Kelly and Lennox Robinson. Among the most engaging essays in this portion are those by Mary C. King and Paul O'Brien. King's essay explores Synge's autobiographical writings and his early play *When the Moon Has Set* in the light of Synge's readings of Darwin; O'Brien reviews O'Casey's troubled relationship with The Abbey and his subsequent work. As O'Brien argues, while O'Casey's

dramaturgy struggled to free itself from naturalism, it was restricted by his own vital anxiety to control the text and disdain for director's theatre. As a result, much of his later work awaits effective production on stage.

The following group of essays examines work by significant playwrights in modern Irish drama, namely Friel, Murphy, McGuinness, Jones and Carr. One of the most notable is Helen Lojek's survey of the productions and critical responses to Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, highlighting differences in tone and focus of productions and reviewers' attitudes. Lojek unites a close knowledge of the play with its performance history, facilitating a perspective on the work that transcends the literary to comprehend a spectrum of international responses. Particularly effective is a concluding quotation from the abbeyonehundred programme to the play which describes it as both celebrating the characters' "willingness to fight and die to preserve a way of life while offering a timely critique of the futility of war". A little like having your cake and eating it, it would seem.

The final two essays in the volume

turn to contemporary contexts. Here the authors focus on theatre's task in a globalised, prosperous Ireland. Jason King takes Friel's character Father Jack from *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a paradigm of an analogically structured "Irish-African intercultural encounter". The shared space between African and Irishman in Friel is ritual and spiritual. King goes on to juxtapose this more comfortable image of

Jason King asserts that the arrival of asylum seekers and migrants should occupy a more prominent place in Irish theatre scholarship's emergent critique of globalisation and Irish theatre, which is too often preoccupied with the reception of Irish plays abroad.

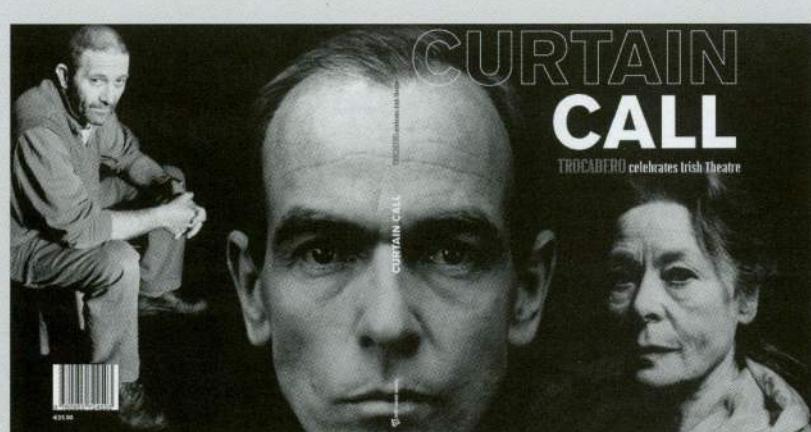
Africa with the uncomfortable theatrical images of African and Africans presented in Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum! Asylum!* and George Seremba's *Come Good Rain*, to argue that the connection is reconfigured "from a spiritual to a geopolitical nexus".

King also provocatively asserts that while Irish theatre scholarship has considered globalisation in terms of the mobility of Irish theatre, the arrival of asylum seekers and migrants "represents a more obvious face of globalisation than the peregrinations of the Irish theatre diaspora, and should occupy a more prominent place in the emergent critique of globalisation and Irish theatre that is too often preoccupied with the reception of Irish plays abroad". This is a strong point: the privilege and securi-

ty that surround Irish theatre's mobility cushion it against the radically destabilising and confronting effects of accepting the presence of 'the other' at home. Certainly it would be interesting to see what theatre scholars make of this gauntlet in the future.

Lisa Fitzpatrick, similarly, is concerned with Ireland in transition and the forms of drama that might adequately express new conditions of

identity. Pivotal to her argument is that the new generation of Irish writers is best described as post-national. The problem of finding new myths equal to current conditions of identity is discussed with reference to two difficult, uneven, recent plays: Marina Carr's *Ariel* and Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland*. Fitzpatrick concludes that "Irish theatre is at a liminal point, in transition be-



CURTAIN CALL - TROCADERO

CELEBRATES IRISH THEATRE

ED. BY MELANIE MORRIS

(€25, Red Door Project Management, 2007)

In aid of the Irish Cancer Society

THE DUBLIN RESTAURANT, Trocadero – or "The Troc" to insiders – is celebrating fifty years of "dining and acting" (not to mention dining actors). A fundraiser for the Irish Cancer Society, *Curtain Call* is a slim

volume of black and white photographs, unpinned from the claret walls of the Troc itself. Including short testimonials and reminiscences from the photographic subjects – thespians and celebrities all – many of the comments are in praise of the Troc itself and its owners. It would be churlish to suggest that this is for Troc fans only, given the good cause. *Curtain Call* is available from www.trocadero.ie or www.cancer.ie

tween national myths whose elements no longer function, and a new mythology that is either more local, more pan-national, or more likely, is simultaneously both".

To produce a volume of essays with a coherent and cohesive sense of purpose from such a wide-ranging event as an IASIL conference, is no small challenge. The editors of this collection are to be congratulated for

doing so effectively. Ultimately, this does not entirely answer the ambitious questions it set for itself, but it is rich with insights and observations about Irish drama in the wake of The Abbey centenary and usefully points the way for further explorations of theatre in Ireland post-Celtic Tiger. 

Clare Wallace is a senior lecturer at Charles University, Prague.

DUBLIN'S GAIETY THEATRE

THE GRAND OLD LADY

BY ROBERT O'BYRNE

(€65, *The Gaiety Theatre, 2007*)

Moving onwards to South King Street, this volume offers more substantial content – and a more substantial cover price. Celebrating the €10 million face-lift of the Grand Old Lady, her memoirs are presented in a well-produced volume, nicely bound, and packed with terrific images of the people, the posters and of course, the building itself. Robert O'Byrne traces the theatre's colourful 136-year history, and the performers who have graced its boards, decade by decade, with entertaining detail and comic asides. The hefty price of €65 might mean missing out on a night at the panto, but *Dublin's Gaiety Theatre* is a beautiful thing to hold and behold.

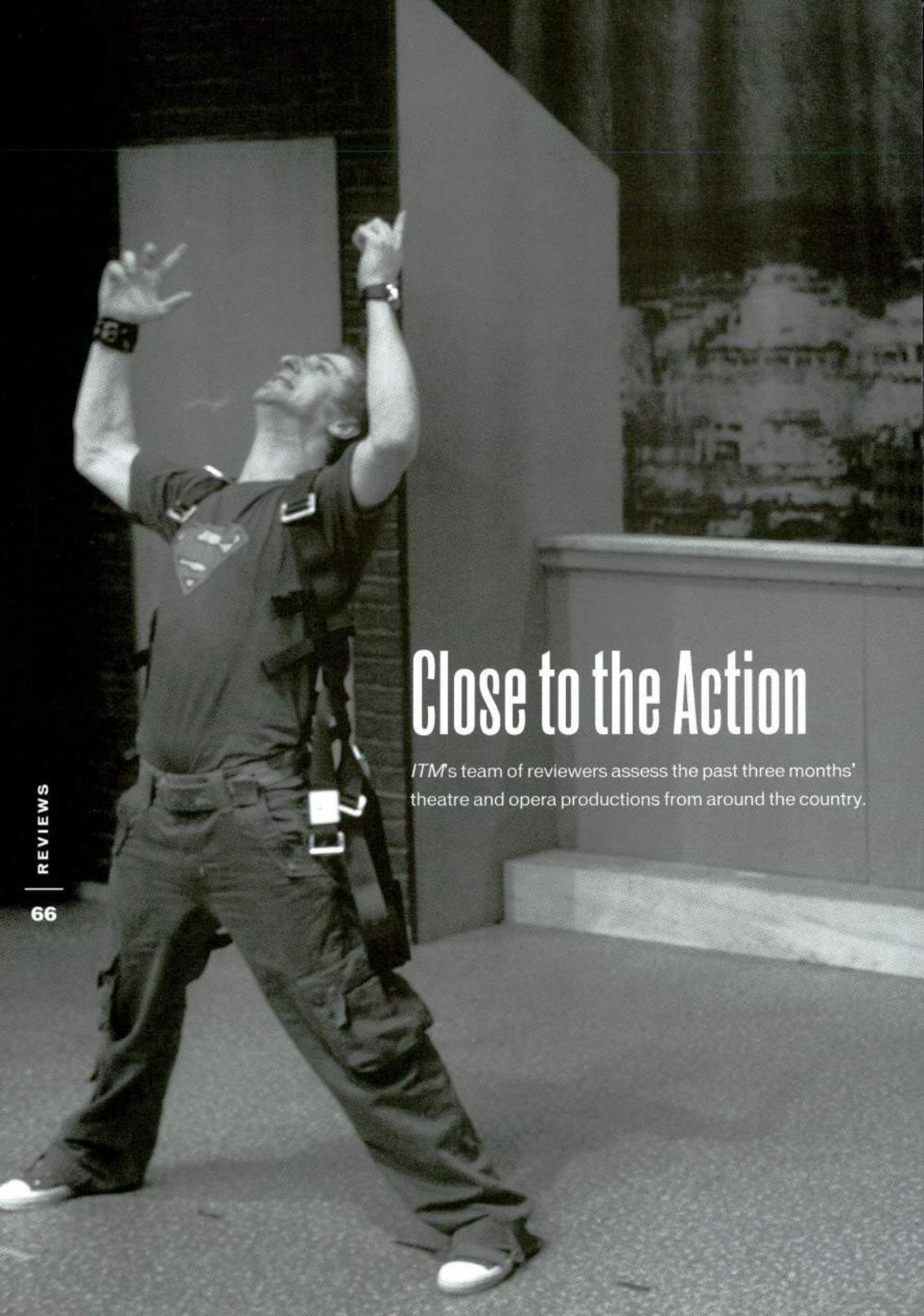
MACNAS: JOYFUL ABANDONMENT

BY TERRY DINEEN AND MACNAS

(€35, *The Liffey Press, 2007*)

On the occasion of its twenty-first birthday, this large-format volume celebrates the Galway company's coming of age with 240 pages of carnival colour. Tracing the group's rites of passage from its foundation in 1986 to today, it concentrates on visual material. That's appropriate for a chronicle of any theatre company, of course, but especially for one that has broken out onto the streets. Including reminiscences by those involved with Macnas over the years, its production quality may not be as impressive as the other books here, but nevertheless displays the "joyful abandonment" from which Macnas takes its name.

–Fíona Ní Chinnéide



Close to the Action

ITM's team of reviewers assess the past three months' theatre and opera productions from around the country.



POL MCGARRY

The cast of Falling Out of Love

New Spotlights on Society

This recent – eclectic – range of new plays illuminates both the comic and the serious sides of the way we live.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CELTIC TIGER

By Paul Howard

Landmark Productions in association with MCD

Directed by Jimmy Fay

Design: Conor Murphy

Lighting Design: Sinéad McKenna

Sound Design: Philip Steward

With Rory Nolan, Lisa Lambe, Rory Keenan,

Susan Fitzgerald, Philip O'Sullivan

Olympia Theatre

8 Nov – 5 Dec 2007 Reviewed 17 Nov

BY TANYA DEAN

FROM THE 'RUGGER BUGGER' TO the 'Mall Teaser' – those mythological species that roam the heartlands of Dublin 4 – the Ross O'Carroll-Kelly franchise draws its humour from recognisable stereotypes. However, in the same way that BBC sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* began as exaggerated mockery but gradually became unwittingly accurate, the massive popularity of the books and newspaper features 'by' O'Carroll-Kelly means that the parodic behaviour of the characters has become conventionalised. In past interviews, the author Paul Howard has bemusedly mentioned that many readers seem

to agree with the snobbish opinions of his fictional creations, and even proudly boasted of recreating key moments from the series (such as driving through Tallaght shouting "affluence!" out of the sun roof).

The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger trades heavily on the recognition factor for much of its immediacy and humour (with references to tribunals, the beleaguered Irish rugby team and a sly instrumental snippet of the Carly Simon classic, 'You're So Vain').

The first stop on designer Conor Murphy's set is a stylish homage to the clean crisp lines of the Ice Bar in the Four Seasons Hotel in Dublin. Amidst the marble pillars and coldly elegant lighting, we find our 'hero' drowning his sorrows. A lifetime of laziness, philandering and random acts of cruelty has unexpectedly failed to pay off for O'Carroll-Kelly (Rory Nolan): he is down to his last few grand, his father is serving time in Mountjoy prison for corruption charges, his mother is trying to plunder his incident-ridden life for her next smutty novel, and his wife Sorcha has left him after finding him in

Rory Keenan in The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger



PATREDMUND

flagrante delicto with their baby daughter's nanny.

This production constantly faces the threat of being stretched too thinly: even the most talented cast can only plumb so much depth from a stereotype; the book series has already strip-mined the clichés of D4 for anything original; and the chasmal Olympia is unforgiving to theatre productions, particularly those with a preponderance of monologues and a cast of five (who are heavily reliant on echoing microphones to compensate for a massive space with poor acoustics). However, Landmark Productions have assembled an absolutely cracking team of creative talent, and this investment pays dividends. While the character-types are by nature one-trick ponies, the cast do a strong job of making them sympathetic. Rory Nolan as R.O.C.K himself is a piece of brilliant casting, perfectly capturing the mixture of oleaginous charm and solid self-confidence. Lisa Lambe, Susan FitzGerald and Philip O'Sullivan all turn in strong performances (as Ross's estranged wife, mother and father, respectively), belying the superficiality of the character types. However, it is Rory Keenan as O'Carroll's illegitimate son Ronan, who steals the show with a brilliant performance: unsurprising, given his delight in all things criminal (plans for potential *nom de crimes* include 'De Liddel Gennidel',

or 'The Little General' for those who don't speak Northside), whether wheeling freely across the stage on his bicycle or showing his grandfather his blueprints for breaking him out of the 'Joy ("I did it in art class!"). Riotously well received by the sell-out audiences, *The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger* creates an engagingly humorous piece of theatre by skimming briskly over its own superficialities.

Tanya Dean is the General Manager of Irish Theatre Magazine and a freelance theatre critic.

FALLING OUT OF LOVE

By John Breen

Yew Tree Theatre

Directed by Mikel Murfi

Set design: Steve Neal

Lighting Design: Nick McCall

Costume Design: Debbie Millington

Sound design: Cormac O'Connor

With: Aaron Monaghan, Elaine O'Dea,

Tony McKenna, Conor Delaney,

Simone Kirby, Kelly Gough, Deborah Wiseman

and Alan Howley

On tour Nov 2007 – May 2008 .

Reviewed 17 Nov

The Mill Theatre, Dundrum

BY DEREK WEST

THIS PRODUCTION HITS THE GROUND flying, as Barry (Aaron Monaghan) psyches himself into Superman-mode, with some feverish roof-top flailing (soundtrack courtesy of his



Kelly Keogh and Aaron Monaghan in Falling Out of Love

own lips and larynx). Monaghan's energy levels match those of St. Vitus and it is clear from the outset that this is a pre-meditated comic assault on the audience.

With the support of a programme introduction by drama don, Eric Weitz, author John Breen is engaged in a forensic study of comedy, its nature and effects. Pace is a key element and director Mikel Murfi sustains a frenzied momentum, even at the occasional cost of coherence. A capacity for hysteria is helpful here – Kelly Gough (Ciara) is particularly successful, prompted by some involuntary flying. But it is Monaghan who captures and exudes the spirit of comedy in a twitching, gesticulating tour de force – passion, frustration and idiocy vying with each other in

restless physical movement – and also holds a moment of sad-clown pathos at the close.

The dialogue takes on a ping-pong dimension, where split-second timing is essential. It is to the credit of the six main actors that rapid-fire cues are caught and returned; pauses are strategically placed to maximise the liberation of laughter in the auditorium.

The narrative has its source in normality – three urban couples splitting up – but it is staged absurdly in an apartment block, with two of the couples inhabiting the same congested space, simultaneously, each pair oblivious of the other. Objects are seen hurtling past the window, and in an inversion of temporal logic, only seconds later, being heaved over

the balcony.

The mayhem proceeds apace but a major snag is that the special effects fall short of 100 per cent effectiveness. This kind of comedy is technically demanding and, while the aerial sequences deliver surprise and laughter, the audience is too close to the enactment of the illusion to suspend total disbelief. This is not helped by a clunky set and an elongated, lumbering scene-change. The production is caught between the need for a home-base, where the technical side can be anchored and sharpened, and a tour that puts pressures on its efficiency. It also calls into question the adequacy of stage architecture in new theatres, such as The Mill, and their capacity to present technically-challenging work.

However, John Breen is committed to the metaphor – bungee jump as the gravity-defying gesture, putting love before health and safety – and he walks his elected tightrope between drawing laughter and saying something significant, with dialogue that is sharp and authentically that of the thirty-something tiger cubs. This piece is a clinical exploration of sex and/or love in a contemporary climate; a brittle atmosphere where romantic love (with heart-shaped balloons, beaux on bended knees declaring undying whatever) loses out to the rational refusal to settle down to “the whole domestic thing”.

Conor Delaney (David) carries a lot of the coldness of the self-centred male (“I don’t think we should settle for each other”) and he snarls in very nasty fashion when cornered. The relatively quieter notes are sounded by Simone Kirby and Tony McKenna (Fiona and Edward), who also have the most detached and analytic discussion of the differing male-female sexual urges. Breen takes this seriously: we laugh through recognition of ourselves and of the absurdity of the human condition.

Derek West administers *Creative Engagement*, an arts funding scheme for post-primary schools and edits NAPD *Le Chéile*, an educational journal.

BLEEDING POETS

By Daniel Reardon

Roomkeepers Theatre Company

Directed by Trevor Knight

Set Design: Miriam Duffy

Lighting Design: Nick Anton

Choreography: Muirne Bloomer

Original score by Trevor Knight

With: Lisa Lambe, Mark O'Regan, Michael James Ford, Arthur Riordan, Jennifer O'Dea

The New Theatre, Dublin

21 Feb - 22 Mar 2008. Reviewed 25 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

THREE POETS MEET IN THE BLEEDING Horse in Dublin. This was not, perhaps, an uncommon occurrence in 1847; it may very well be a common



Mark O'Regan, Lisa Lambe and Michael James Ford in *Bleeding Poets*

occurrence now. That one of the three poets is Edgar Allan Poe, who very likely never visited this island, adds a level of unreality to the proceedings.

Unreality is perfectly well and good. In fact, Irish theatre could use a good dose of unreality, of imagination, of the pushing of narrative boundaries, of pure invention. However, even unreality has its own reality, its own rules of thumb, and the essence of Daniel Reardon's text, and the staging of it, confuse the frontiers between fact and fiction, without en-

hancing the feeling of fantasy. Rather, it causes one to focus far too much on discrepancies, when one should be carried away by illusion.

The text veers between wild-ranging fancy and stolid pub-play, and the literal setting of the Bleeding Horse is a primary problem. Despite Miriam Duffy's application of scraps of manuscript to the set, implying a whirlwind of thought and versifying that has plastered itself to the very walls, the action is anchored, and for the most part trapped, in the realistic setting of

the hostelry. This does not serve the potential oddness of the text: a fever dream that doesn't sustain the necessary fever pitch.

The pub is the watering hole of James Clarence Mangan (Mark O'Regan). He is sought out by peripatetic Cork poet, Frances Sylvester Mahony (Arthur Riordan), who is an admirer of Mangan's and has a poetry translation proposition that promises them prosperity. This scheme is nearly shunted aside by the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe, who, in a ferment of grief over the death of his wife and suffering from the effects of opium abuse, charges into the bar, waving a gun, and generally hijacking the proceedings. He takes advantage of Mangan's own substance issues, the two men get stoned, and it all devolves into a Nineteenth-Century poetry slam.

It is the moments of unreality that reveal something at the heart of the tale, the dark heart, in which grown men evince all the behaviours of the school-yard, yet with the unexpected fillip of artistic integrity. As the drugs take effect, and the effects equally affect the non-drug takers, one would have hoped for a more stylistically challenging approach to the staging. Trevor Knight has, however, opted for realism, with perhaps the hope that the madness of the fictional situation would lift the text out of its tangible restraints.

It doesn't. These characters — drawn rather well by Reardon to re-

flect the spirit of their own poetic voices — are clearly inhabiting the imagination of the writer, and that writer's choice to craft a pedestrian pub play out of an interesting and inventive idea is the text's very downfall.

Add to this a florid staging in a very small space, a pace that lurches from brisk to turgid, and the audience member has far too much time to wonder about details — details that, in a play that was operating properly in its own unreality, would not be asked. Such as: did the Irish public call the year 1847 'Black 47' in the actual year itself? Would a barmaid (Lisa Lambe) be able to read, write, and do sums? Why in the world would Boston-born Poe (Michael James Ford) have a Noo Yawk accent? He only lived in the Bronx from 1846 to 1849, and the accent of a lifetime does not transform in a handful of years.

Reality bites, and it certainly takes a huge mouthful out of this production. A clash of styles, an uncertainty of approach, and uneven pitch of performance result in a production that has not clearly established its aims from the outset. O'Regan's Mangan steals the show, and in many ways, he is the show: dreamy, intoxicated, bleating with pain, expounding with inspiration, Mangan is the reason we're all here, and as he drifts in and out of time and space one wonders

that the practitioners didn't take more of a lead from their lead character.

Susan Conley is a writer, and the Art Director of this magazine.

STUCK

By Rosaleen MacDonagh

Project Arts Centre

Directed by Jason Byrne

Set & Costumes: Wayne Jordan

Lighting Design: Sarah Jane Shiels

Sound Design: Karl Burke

With: Brian Gleeson, Michael Collins, Liz

Fitzgibbon, John Cronin

29 Nov -15 Dec 2007. Reviewed 13 Dec

BY IAN R WALSH

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE TRAVELLER community in Irish drama, from Synge to Carr, has often proved contentious. Playwrights have been accused of exoticising and further marginalising this section of Irish society. Traveller activist and playwright, Rosaleen MacDonagh's new play *Stuck* about the contemporary Traveller experience avoids such exoticisation. The characters of MacDonagh's play are neither romanticised nor vilified; their morality is relative and their actions equally cruel and loving as any other on the modern stage. Take her character, Seanie (forcefully played by John Cronin) a drug dealing Traveller, as much a victim as a villain, whose actions are in-

excusable but made understandable when he explains his motivation: "I just want my kids to be well-fed, well-dressed and not looked down upon." However, the complexities of these characters are largely sacrificed to an over-written plot and shaky performances

James (Brian Gleeson) wishes to be a 'modern Traveller', go to college and become a Garda, but he is paralysed by the past. He is being blackmailed for dealing drugs by his one time pusher friend Seanie; he is unable to be with the settled 'buffer' girl he loves, Aisling (willfully played by Liz Fitzgibbon) as he is promised to a Pavee girl; and the sins of his father, Bernard (Michael Collins) are about to catch up with him. He is stuck, trapped by his heritage and mocked by his contemporaries.

Wayne Jordan highlights James's isolation and sense of imprisonment in his simple but effective set design, consisting of an unadorned wooden platform. This functions for the most part as the inside of a caravan but by the last scene it marks out the space of a prison cell: James's home becomes his prison. Sarah Jane Shiels furthers the symbolic isolation in her sparing light design when she spot lights the platform making it float in the darkness like a raft: James is stranded at sea.

Jason Byrne directs his actors to deliver low-key understated perform-



Brian Gleeson and Michael Collins in *Stuck*

ances thus avoiding the more common caricaturing of Travellers on stage. But in such understatement the play is robbed of energy. The dramatic twists of the plot that must be explained through long sections of exposition become exhausting. Much of this task fell to Michael Collins as Bernard who spent most of the second half telling the story of his life and explaining his son's origins. Collins conveyed his pain at telling these stories by almost whispering them and at times was inaudible. Brian Gleeson struggled with the accent, shuffled his feet while delivering his

lines and was ultimately unconvincing. As a result the frustrations and anxieties that his character must convey became tiresome, and the audience was denied the empathy with the central character that such a naturalistic play requires.

With not enough vested in the characters, with the relentless gloom of the deterministic plot and the darkened stage, this reviewer found himself leaving *Stuck* unmoved.

Ian R. Walsh is a PhD candidate in the School of English and Drama, UCD, where he also teaches.

UNRAVELLING THE RIBBON

By Mary Kelly and Maureen White

Gúna Nua Theatre and Plan B Productions

Directed by Maureen White

Set and Costume Design by Liz Cullinane

Lighting Design by Tina MacHugh

Music and Sound Design by Denis Clohessy
and Carl Kennedy

With: Mary Kelly, Georgina Miller,

Eleanor Methven

Project Arts Centre

23 Oct – 10 Nov 2007. Reviewed 9 Nov

BY IAN R WALSH

THIS NEW PLAY BY MARY KELLY and Maureen White, with breast cancer as its subject, is a cleverly written piece. For the most part it consists of three intersecting monologues with all three characters remaining on stage throughout. Rose (Mary Kelly) is thirty-four with a lump in her breast and the state of her marriage on her mind. Lyndsey (Georgina Miller), her eleven year old daughter is annoyed that her mother is sick; the timing couldn't be worse as her own breasts won't grow fast enough and now her best friend is ignoring her. Lola (Eleanor Methven) is a widow, alone and embittered after fighting the disease, only to lose her husband when in recovery.

Sentimentality is avoided by the strong and humorous characterisations, excellently acted with warmth and sensitivity by all three actresses. Lyndsey's childish selfishness (wonderfully captured by Miller) counters

her mother's earnestness. Eleanor Methven as Lola is delightful when telling stories of her youth and chasing charity collectors from her door, while also managing to pull at the heart strings when describing her grief at the loss of her breasts, her self-disgust, and her ultimate rejection of a loving husband. Rose uses language as a form of resistance to the fear and suffering of diagnosis and treatment. She calls her cancerous lump Lily to make it less threatening and compares the women's behaviour in waiting for chemotherapy to how they behave when in a hair salon. Kelly is convincing and likeable as Rose, determined never to make her into a whining victim.

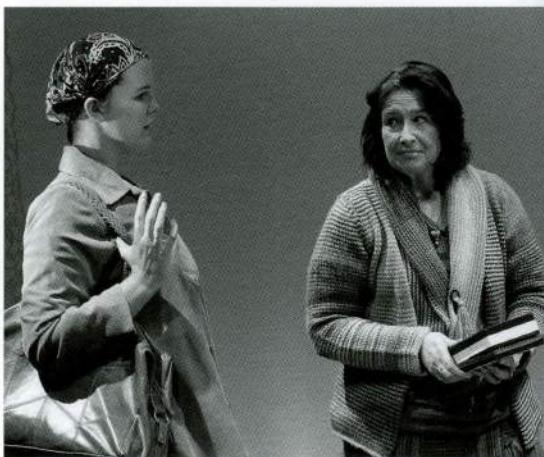
In Liz Cullinane's set design each woman has a designated part of the stage with objects associated with each character: Lola is surrounded by boxes full of keepsakes from the past; Lyndsey clammers around her bunk bed; a wilting Rose leans on her domestic open-shelved sideboard for support. The women's space is small and confined. White directs her cast in small unfussy movements within these spaces and has her actors' speeches well paced and timed. Lighting by Tina MacHugh is simple but effective, following the action of the stories, giving atmospheric moonlight and sunny warm rays where required. Denis Clohessy and Carl Kennedy's soundscape – a repeated rhythmic

clapping noise (perhaps the pulse of life?) - adds tension and tempo.

With direct address to the audience, the characters both testify to and demonstrate their isolation when confronted by breast cancer. As they speak their monologues, the frustration to communicate their experience is verified by the fact that the characters on stage cannot enter into dialogue. Such characteristics of the monologue play have been primarily associated with Irish 'crisis in masculinity' plays by McPherson, Friel and O'Rowe. This is not to suggest that Kelly and White are writing a 'female in crisis play' – the breast (rather than the vagina) monologues – for the characters of *Unravelling the Ribbon* are not bound by the monologue for the duration of the play.

As the piece develops, the women's narratives converge. After a rather forced 'chance' meeting, all three women become friends and begin to support each other: Lola comforts Rose as someone who has overcome the illness; Lyndsey begins to grow close to her mother once more; and Lola is no longer alone. The final scene of the play is one in which all three characters share the stage space and dialogue with each other. The message is made obvious in both form and content: the key to coping, to overcoming and to survival is the ability to communicate, support and listen to each other. In the theatre, as in life, women still seem to be better at this.

The problem with this 'coming together' final scene is that it is followed by an unnecessary epilogue. All three characters return to their designated positions and revert to direct address, giving closing statements on their individual narratives. The hopes for the future expressed in these statements are undermined by



Mary Kelly and Eleanor Methven in *Unravelling the Ribbon*

the actors' return to their isolated positions and the monologue form. In presenting such total closure at the end, the impact on the audience of the women's suffering, struggle and survival is weakened. The audience leaving the theatre is given less to think about as all seems resolved and neatly packaged; with this disappointing ending, the challenging unravelled ribbon risks becoming a limply tied bow.

Novel Approaches

Stage adaptations of much-loved books faced the challenge of creating new forms for modern audiences. Our critics tell the tale.

BEWARE OF THE STORYBOOK WOLVES

By Lauren Child, adapted by Tom Swift

The Ark

Directed by Jo Mangan

Set Design: Sinead O'Hanlon

Costume Design: Niamh Lunny

Lighting Design: Kevin Treacy

Sound Design: Jack Cawley

Animator / Projections: Sinead Woods

With: Louis Lovett, Emma McIvor, Jill Murphy,

Stephen Swift, Lisa Lambe

5 Feb — 16 Mar 2008. Reviewed 29 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

KIDS TODAY— HOW DOES ONE MANAGE to keep their attention? It has never been easy, particularly in theatre, as something about being required to sit quietly in the dark is physically and philosophically impossible for children. When eight-year-olds have mobile phones and mp3 players and PSPs, you've got to wonder if there's any point to trying to amuse them en masse— how could it possibly be interesting to a generation who are habituated to entertaining themselves practically in isolation?

Having said all that, there is nothing to match live performance, and

no matter how techno-savvy eight-year-olds are, watching grown ups cavort about a stage, in the act of storytelling, is an experience that can't be replaced by an iPod. Theatremaking is, of course, a narrative act, and the appeal of being told a story exponentially expands when dramatically enacted.

The essence of Lauren Child's story is the very essence of storytelling: Herb's (Stephen Swift) mum (Emma McIvor) reads to him every night before bed, and the typically scary stories instill a fear in Herb that, should his mum leave the book behind, and open, the wolves in the story will come and get him.

This proves to be true. Big Wolf (Louis Lovett) and Little Wolf (Jill Murphy) do indeed invade Herb's bedroom, and threaten to eat him, thus inciting a journey in which Herb must display cunning and quick thinking, meeting several archetypal fairytale characters, and generally succeeding in overcoming his fears.

Whether or not this message comes across to the kids in the audience is up for grabs. Swift sets up the a-b-c of



Louis Lovett and Emma McIvor in *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*

his dramaturgy effortlessly at the start, but one wonders if the need to hold that wandering attention has compromised the dramatic arc of the show. Pantomimic elements — mad dashing chase scenes, popular songs adapted to the context of the show — may or may not be an element in the source work; nevertheless, they seem antithetical to the flow of the story, which is more about brains than it is about brawn.

One scene jitters to the next as the show goes on, and it occurred to this reviewer at one stage that there wasn't

any indication of where the story was headed. It's not necessary, nor recommended, to give the game away. But in *The Wizard of Oz*, we know that Dorothy is trying to get home; here, we're not sure what the end game is. We see Herb staving off the wolves that want to eat him, we see him meet the scary fairy, and the fairy godmother, and there's some bit in the disco, and Cinderella is implicated, but it's not clear what the point is until we get there. That's not very much fun.

What is fun is the aesthetic, as ever: director Jo Mangan's quirky vision as

COLM HOGAN

translated by the designers and through the actors' performances. The energy level is high, but perfectly pitched for the intimate space in The Ark, and everything from the Big Bad Wolf's comb-over to set pieces dropping from the ceiling, to Lovett as Prince Charming appearing from a trap in the floor ensures that the young audience has always got something to look at.

Which begs the question: is it enough that they're visually dazzled? They can get that from the Gaiety every Christmas. This work is much cooler and smarter than the annual holiday panto can hope to be, but it suffered, dramaturgically, from the same problems that are prevalent in the works on the big stage: in trying to keep things moving, there's a loss of connective tissue from one scene to the next. After the fairy dust settles, there's a feeling that the adaptation of the story drifted far too much—seriously energetic wandering, but wandering nevertheless.

Due to Herb's bravery and cleverness, his adventures in fairytale land have altered those scary tales forever. Everything has become harmless, and the achievement of 'happy-ever-afterly' is far less strenuous than it has been, historically. One hopes that this robust production has altered the way its audiences look at theatre, as a creative and exciting enterprise, and not just an excuse to be out of school.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Adapted for stage by

Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy

Landmark Productions and The Helix

Directed by Michael Barker-Caven

Set Design: Jamie Vartan

Costume Design: Sinead Cuthbert

Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

Choreographer: Liz Roche

With: Niamh Daly, Tadhg Murphy, Kathy Fullam,

Malcolm Adams, Barbara Brennan,

Michael James Ford, Barry McGovern,

Clara Simpson and Ailish Symons

The Helix

28 Nov - 6 Jan 2008. Reviewed 5 Jan

BY VICTORIA WHITE

WHERE DO YOU GO IN A PRODUCTION if the original concept is not strong enough? Not very far. And that was the problem with Landmark Productions' *Alice in Wonderland* which premiered in the Helix over Christmas. All the inventiveness put into Jamie Vartan's set, Sinead Cuthbert's lavish costumes, Paul Keogan's lighting – all that heavy, heavy investment – was pretty much wasted because the production did not seem to know where it was going. Or if it did, it was in a different direction to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The book is a highly original work of literature which has its entire being in language and the use of language; if you are putting it into another art form, you have to attempt the same level of creativity, but in another form.



Malcolm Adams, Katherine Fullam and Barry McGovern in *Alice in Wonderland*

It is no good simply to speak Carroll's lines onstage. The actor is then merely distracting from the exotic play of the language. You need to make the physical presence of the actors on the physical stage an embodiment of Carroll's absurd; you need to look at the radical disruption of language in the book and attempt it visually. There is no possible staging of *Alice* radical enough to be true to Carroll that is not in itself an entirely original visual concept.

This production did not even translate Carroll's visual images. What Carroll does more than anything else is play with perspective. This is very hard to achieve on stage, but I do remember a Macnas production which got there (1989). Michael Barker-Caven's direction, with Vartan's design and movement by Liz

Roche, did not create a sense of distorted perspective.

This production of Mary-Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's adaptation certainly had a concept, but it was too weak and ultimately unconvincing. It placed the work in a socio-political context, as a subversive comment on Victorian society, its class system, its rigidity, its iron grip on children. To do this, they played heavily on the sequences in real time which begin and end the book, when Alice is dreaming in the garden. This really makes too little of the book, which runs away from the concept as soon as the staging begins. None of this would matter at all if Barker-Caven's production worked in itself. But the book itself makes sure that doesn't happen. It won't be penned in.

Reading it again, I was left with the

clear impression that the "It was all a dream" parts were put in to package the extraordinary work so that it could be generally read. I don't think the White Rabbit or the Mock Turtle or even the Queen of Hearts are metaphors at all. I think they're Lewis Carroll's friends. The imagination at work in the book is so extreme that it is a universe in itself. Carroll, a brilliant mathematician, had a different kind of mind to that of most of the rest of us. It's too simplistic to say he had something like Asperger's Syndrome but I believe it must be understood that he really did go to Wonderland.

The weakness of the concept played havoc with the actors' best efforts. Barry Mc Govern as the Mad Hatter (as well as Dr. Trilby, the Caterpillar and Gryphon) struggled vainly to conceptualise his characters, seemingly without clear direction. Ailish Symons, as Alice, played the little girl instead of solemnly believing in herself and in Lewis Carroll's world. Barbara Brennan very much rose to the challenge of the Duchess and Mrs. Smithson, though as the Mock Turtle she had to contend with the fact that by that point we didn't care why there was a turtle onstage and why it wasn't a real one.

How depressing to have to report negatively on such a massive effort, but Landmark Productions are capable of much more. Their adaptation of *The Secret Garden* at the Helix a couple

of years ago has stayed with my children and reigned our interest in the book. Onwards and upwards! And watch out for the rabbit holes.

Victoria White is a writer and freelance journalist.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

By Charles Dickens,

adapted for stage by Hugh Leonard

Directed by Alan Stanford

Set Design: Bruno Schwengel

Costume Design: Jacqueline Kobler

Lighting Design: Hartley TA Kemp

With: Kelly Campbell, Barry Cassin, Edie Davis, Donna Dent, Adam Fergus, Devin O'Shea-Farren, Domhnall Gleeson, Jack Gleeson, Katie Kirby, Murray McArthur, Bryan Murray, Robert O'Mahoney, Mark O'Regan, Cara O'Sullivan, Niamh Shaw, Mai Whyte

Gate Theatre

27 Nov 2007 – 2 Feb 2008. Reviewed 2 Feb

BY SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. This might have been the interior mantra of the adaptor Hugh Leonard and director Alan Stanford for their take on the Dickens novel, which was the long running Christmas show at the Gate Theatre. As this is drama, drawing on a widely read novel - also a successful film that evokes strong visual memories - it's important that the scenes are literally scenes of pivotal incident, that they are charged with enough atmos-



Jack Gleeson and Murray McArthur in *Great Expectations*

sphere, and balanced with the thrust of the narrative. Moreover, in an episodic play such as this, certain places are virtually synonymous with the characters who inhabit them. This presents a challenge for the creative team: here they score highly in the first part of the play but the grip seems less assured and the pace goes a bit awry as the narrative becomes more complicated.

But back to the locations. We go forward in the story before going back, as it were. When we first meet the young hero, Pip (Adam Fergus) he is explaining to his foppish but generous friend Herbert Pocket the circumstances of his arrival in London. So we leave the small but perfectly

formed Victorian morning room and travel back to the foggy marsh, the kitchen table in the village forge and the dusty reverberations of Miss Havisham's shrine to a wedding day that never happened. All of these, and particularly Magwitch, complete with clanking leg irons, looming out of the mist - one of the enduring images from Dickens - are deftly handled by designer and director.

Dickens had much to say about poverty and snobbery, fate, coincidence and class, and we see how this is underlined by the design. The confined quarters of the kitchen on the left of the stage from the early years of privation are then echoed on the opposite corner of the stage when the

action moves to the smart London drawing room. These physical and visual memories are important for characters and audience, and we can determine how Pip and his expectations might proceed when first Joe and then Magwich visit him in his new life and he responds to a recalling of the past.

It was later that it all came unstuck. While London Town was deliciously evoked in Bruno Schwengel's story-book pop-up cut out, the director's grip on the ever changing locations seemed to be less certain. The pace, and indeed some of the scene-stealing performances (Mark O'Regan as Wemmick) began to feel as if they were in another play or even, towards the end, a pantomime, despite Barry Cassin's lovely turn as the Aged Parent.

In fairness, the episodes and scenes of the story do follow one another quite quickly as events take on alarming speed. Much of the narrative depends on introducing or updating on previously delineated characters (the sinister Jaggers, the aloof Estella) in order to give context to the heady rush of co-incidence that unravels to bring the drama to a satisfactory, if familiarly unbelievable, end. The problem really lay in the lack of judicious choices in weighting and balance, so that many scenes appeared to have equal importance and it all ended in an unseemly, and even

cartoonish, gallop.

There were, however, some interesting choices made relating to performance and interpretation. Joe Gargery is the constant: solid, kind, unpretentious and loyal to everyone and Murray McArthur's performance is perfectly true to this. His wife and Pip's sister, Mrs Joe, fares rather more poorly both in character and endurance, as the impatience of the character and the busyness of Kelly Campbell's performance contrasted with the same actor's portrayal of Biddy, Joe's second wife, full of stillness and warmth. Miss Havisham, played by Donna Dent, is almost a Ms. Havisham: modern and assertive, younger and feistier, although no less manipulative than the iconic decrepit creature whose bitterness affects vulnerable Pip and her self-absorbed ward, Estella.

Uncle Pumblechook, positively gasping at the merest mention of notice from the rich and famous, is brought to life in true Dickensian style by Mal Whyte. Pip and Estella (Katie Kirby) are lightly drawn and acted, but overall it seemed that the director was in sympathy with Dickens, who gave more substance to those whom life had bruised: Joe, Magwich (a strong Robert O'Mahony) and Miss Havisham.

Seona MacRéamoinn is a journalist and critic.

THE HEIGHTS**Playgroup**

Dramaturgy by Lynda Radley
Directed by Tom Creed
Lighting Design: Sarah Jane Shiels
Costumes: Joan Hickson
Composer & Sound Designer:
Michael John McCarthy
With: Will O'Connell, Hilary O'Shaughnessy,
Raymond Scannell
Project Arts Centre
31 Jan – 16 Feb 2008. Reviewed 11 Feb
BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ARRIVING AT PROJECT'S CUBE, WE'RE confronted by an enormous red curtain that covers the performance space. In its grandiosity, it seems appropriate for a re-telling of *Wuthering Heights*, a story that in Emily Brontë's original novel comes dangerously close to being melodramatic. But then the curtains are pulled back, and what we see is a stage cluttered with costumes and musical instruments. On the back wall, there are gaudy fluorescent lights, and a screen that will display a series of aphorisms during the action. Three actors stand before us, dressed in contemporary clothing; they stare outwards without speaking. This gives us time to notice the young woman sitting upstage left at a control desk, with the script in front of her. And we realise that what we're seeing is not so much a stage, as a rehearsal room. So before the play has even begun, we must recon-

sider our assumptions. And in doing so, we soon realise that this Playgroup production is simultaneously much more – and much less – than an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*.

The contrast between the operatic red curtain and the grotty space behind it is merely the first of many disjunctions in a production that (like Brontë's novel) is about how apparent opposites can be unified. The basic plot of *Wuthering Heights* is moved to a city in the 1980's, so what we're seeing seems a rather frivolous presentation of postmodern culture: the actors sing 1980's pop throughout the action (fairly well); we get plenty of cheesy gags about celebrity, fashion and the media; and it all seems rootless and rather vapid. Radley's devised script is certainly lively and interesting; Tom Creed's direction is as always dazzlingly smart, though a little cold at times; and the performances from O'Connell, O'Shaughnessy and Scannell are impressive, but a little disjointed as they shift through their multiple roles.

Nevertheless, the production often seems inferior to its source material. Brontë's novel is an exploration of storytelling – its structure is fragmented, and all of its narrators seek to obscure their own involvement in events. Brontë's greatness lies in her ability to use this technique to disorientate the reader, to challenge our sense of normality to such an extent that, by the





Hilary O'Shaughnessy in *The Heights* (publicity shot).

end of the novel, we will absolutely believe that Heathcliff and Cathy walk the moors together as ghosts. By focussing only on the plot, *The Heights* seems blind to the features of the novel that make it so powerful.

But that superficiality is very important. Everything in the production refers to something else, and we're constantly confounded in our attempts to find meaning. It quickly becomes easier to determine what the show is *like* than to understand what the show is *about*. It's very like the Hungarian company, Krétakör's production of *BLACKland* (seen at last year's Dublin Theatre Festival) in its use of aphorisms that comment on or contrast with the action. It's very sim-

ilar to Pan Pan's recent work, which achieves an impact by undermining audiences' familiarity with classic texts. And like the Abbey's recent *Playboy*, it suggests that it's impossible to have poetry of speech in contemporary plays: just as Eileen Walsh finished the new *Playboy* with the words "Ah fuck off", here the actors move from direct quotation of Brontë's marvellous prose to phrases like "Heathcliff, you have really fucked things up". Soon we're just spotting similarities and quotations, enjoying the disjunction between one mode of stage representation and another – as, for instance, when Cathy's cries of pain while she gives birth are counterpointed with Kate Bush's song

'This Woman's Work'.

And as these fragments of quotation accumulate, I realise that the adaptation is doing something very important: it's trying to imagine how novels like *Wuthering Heights* can be mediated in contemporary culture — at a time when, instead of reading the text, people are just as likely to skim a plot summary online, exchanging text messages with friends while their iPod blares away in the background. *The Heights* therefore captures precisely the way that material is represented now: everything is a quotation of something else, and it's increasingly difficult to pay attention to one thing without being distracted

by something else. So Playgroup are raising important questions about mediation, memory, and the ongoing relevance of 'high' culture.

Does the production answer such questions? *Should* it have more to say? I'm not sure: Playgroup are *describing* our society effectively, and should be praised for doing so. But I wonder if they can push their work further, explaining that society instead of merely showing it to us?

Patrick Lonergan teaches drama at NUI Galway. He is currently writing a book on Irish theatre and globalisation, and is editing The Methuen Drama Book of Irish Plays.



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Dynamics of Power

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THE MAIDS

By Jean Genet

Theatrecorp/ The Town Hall Theatre

Directed by Max Hafler

Design: Mary Doyle

Lighting: Paul Noble

With: Sheila McCormick, Ionia Ni Chróinín,

Andrea Kelly

The Black Box

29 Jan - 3 Feb 2008. Reviewed 3 Feb

BY MATTHEW HARRISON

THEATRECORP'S CRISP AND TENSE production of Genet's 1950's Absurdist play is a detailed and conscientious exposition of the play's themes : the politics of power and gender, the ramifications of murder, the absurdly meaningless cruelty of life. Genet's *The Maids* is loosely based on a notorious murder of a bourgeois woman by her two maids in 1930's France. The subject of several period and modern-day films, novels and plays, no clear motive was ever uncovered. Genet clearly saw the original affair as the aspirations of class-struggle manifested, except that in his Absurdist post-WWII version, his protagonists' sound and fury is self-destructive and inept.

On his stage, two maids act and re-enact the murder of their mistress. Reality, fantasy and identity interchange as the unfortunate servants struggle to articulate their desire to rid themselves of serfdom and their haughty employer through their 'psycho-drama' or role-play. In their disturbingly obsessive actions, they take turns playing victim and murderer but always fail to realise their intended outcome.

Director Max Hafler decides to ignore Genet's (debated) requirement for male actors to play the maids and thus he avoids some of the complex gender questions that Genet might have asked. He does, however, create an interestingly cynical religious context through the sung Mass framing the play at the outset and at the conclusion. Madame's portrait in the room (a simpering, preening living picture played by Madame herself) is shrouded in a blue Bellini-esque shawl and creates a Madonna to which the maids pay obeisance and, as if symbolising their position at the bottom end of society, Claire and



Andrea Kelly and Sheila McCormick in *The Maids*.

Solange wring cloths into bowls of water on either side of this opening image. This example of sensuous and carefully considered attention to detail is consistent throughout Theatrecorp's controlled production.

It is obsession, claustrophobia and repression that Hafler and his team have so sensitively and rightly explored. In designer Mary Doyle's precisely proportioned and symmetrical 1930's boudoir, props are positioned and re-positioned with meticulous attention to detail; rigorously chequered floors lead off to the servants' quarters and, ominously, Madame's double-bed backs up against a wall of prison bars on which two inverted bunches of gladioli are strung. This sense of the maids' restricted world is also reinforced through Paul Noble's stark and exact

lighting and the slatted shadows that he allows to fall on the actors' faces at the front of the stage.

Sheila McCormick gives a solid and persuasive performance as Claire, and Ionia Ní Chrónín is an appropriately shrill and snooty Madame. Demonstrating a broad acting experience and, most importantly, effective vocal training, Andrea Kelly's performance as Solange is perhaps the strongest, most centred and credible of this competent trio. Genet's cynical, worldly view of life allows no conservative or happy ending; his dark outlook is carefully and truthfully reflected in this latest version.

Matthew Harrison is an English teacher at Coláiste Iognáid, Galway. He is theatre critic for the *Galway Independent*

MISS JULIE

By August Strindberg, in a version

by Frank McGuinness

Landmark Productions

Directed by Michael Barker-Caven

Designer: Joe Vanék

Lighting Design: Sinéad Wallace

With: Declan Conlon, Mary Murray,

Catherine Walker

Project Arts Centre

30 Jan – 1 Mar 2008. Reviewed 14 Feb

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

STRINDBERG'S *MISS JULIE* HAS LOST none of its power to challenge its audience. Its frankness and cynicism about sexuality are no longer shocking. Its Zola-influenced naturalist argument about social Darwinism is no longer disturbing politically. The play is no longer in any danger of imminent censorship. But its ferocity, its pace, and the rapid changes of character and tone are still disruptive. To a theatre-going audience accustomed, in spite of itself, to the comforts of empathy and identification wrought through a three act structure, Strindberg's one-act assault on sensibility may read as almost Brechtian. Its capacity to alienate those seeking smooth narrative progression and convenient social and psychological readings allows it to confront the audience in a way that makes it seem very much alive and contemporary even after one hundred and twenty years.

Strindberg finds sympathetic collaborators in director Michael Barker-Caven and adaptor Frank McGuinness. From the opening scene where Kristin (Mary Murray) potters wordlessly about Jan Vanék's massive set for what seems an age (Caven has always been comfortable dealing with physical pantomime - remember the cooking scene in *Skylight?*), finally interrupted by Jean (Declan Conlon) telling us that Miss Julie is "off her head" in familiar McGuinness-like Hiberno-English, there is an assured quality to the production. Caven and McGuinness are entirely comfortable in this world, and comfortable with the fact that their audience should be made uncomfortable by material intended to move them from complacency. This holds throughout, and provides an important anchor amid the whirl of battle between genders, classes, emotions, desires, and wills that follows.

The bulk of the action revolves around an impassioned series of sexualised confrontations between Julie (Catherine Walker), daughter of the unseen Swedish Count in whose home the play takes place, and her father's valet Jean (Conlon). Her motivations are initially uncertain - a mix of restlessness, revenge, and a desire for rough trade. His are equally mixed – he resists her at first, but is drawn in readily enough when the opportunity arises – where (and why)



Catherine Walker in *Miss Julie*.

exactly does he draw the lines between decorum and personal desire? After they have sex (not depicted, though even the suggestion was enough to cause panic in 1889), the mood changes. He becomes aloof, almost uninterested, and begins to dispassionately outline a plan for their elopement which has more to do with financing his dream of managing a hotel than romance. She becomes vengeful, spiteful, and eventually tells the story of her proto-feminist mother and her hatred of all men.

Before the audience has time to get very used to any one set of plot conundrums or character traits, Strindberg changes direction and supplies new ones, all drawn from the logic of his social politics and his dark, misogynistic view of human nature, not from the demands of narrative or audience expectation. This is what makes the play so exciting, because there is an underlying authorial voice here that can be clearly heard, beautifully articulated by McGuinness through the linguistic filters of Hiber-



no-English, neatly illustrated by Caven's clean direction. If you approach it looking for easy answers, you will find yourself thoroughly lost and confused, and that is a good thing, because Strindberg intended to shock and challenge, and it takes conviction on the part of a contemporary production to let the play do so without either locking it into a museum or distorting it beyond recognition to pander to 'good' taste.

This production benefits greatly from a superb leading turn from Walker, who manages the many challenges of this difficult role with confidence. She is able to shift from depicting the almost flighty sexual hunger of Julie when she first appears to the white-hot rage and intense focus she later demonstrates, to moments of barely repressed hysteria and delusion, and finds truth in all of them. Her body moves with the emotional logic of the scene, and changes posture, stance, and gesture with a precision that again connects beautifully with the text in all its wildness.

Beside this towering performative intelligence, Declan Conlon is less exciting. Hampered by his injury during the production and thus lumbered with a cane, he seems compelled to fall back on a mannered stiffness that doesn't really work for many of his scenes. Still, he is able to deliver his lines unhampered, and the vocal fireworks between the per-

formers are suitably explosive. He also manages to convincingly disintegrate into the frightened rabbit of the play's climax as the Count's summons arrives from above, and this allows the (implausible, inevitable, suitably disturbing) finale to work. The show must indeed go on.

Dr. Harvey O'Brien lectures in the O'Kane Centre for Film Studies, University College Dublin.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

By Tennessee Williams

The Gate Theatre

Directed by Robin Lefèvre

Set Design: Eileen Diss

Costume Design: Dany Everett

Lighting Design: Mick Hughes

Sound Design: John Leonard

With: Garrett Lombard, Francesca Annis,

Katie Kirby, Marty Rea.

12 Feb – 5 April 2008. Reviewed 12 Feb

BY TANYA DEAN

THE OPENING MONOLOGUE OF Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* takes pains to identify itself as a 'memory play', and emphasises that the mark of the teller's own bias will be stamped on each chapter. However, there is an ongoing trend for productions of *Glass Menagerie* to play it 'straight' – focusing on the naturalistic dialogue and character relationships – rather than faithfully adhering to Williams' desire to paint



Katie Kirby and Marty Rea in *The Glass Menagerie*

this as a self-styled 'dream' play. This staging by the Gate, under Robin Lefèvre's direction, makes a bold attempt to re-emphasize the mechanics of the text's blatant re-direction and sentimentality, but this 'memory play' proves a surprisingly problematic vessel to steer.

Garrett Lombard's Tom allows himself a wry glance at the audience as he slips from his opening monologue to step into this memory play, his own remembrances of family times past. Although Tom is the narrator of the piece, his mother Amanda (Francesca Annis) is the lynchpin. As the fading Southern belle (that mainstay of Williams' oeuvre) whose life has failed to measure up to the golden promise of her flirtatious

youth, Annis gives a slow, idiosyncratic performance that reverbs with the character's self-pity on every drawled syllable. Curiously disconnected from the other characters of the play, Annis lacks the claustrophobically smothering quality called for in Amanda's relationship with her children. And whilst Katie Kirby's Laura is suitably shy and subdued, her performance lacks the fragility – and indeed, lovability – that makes the character endearing enough to warrant the guilt and self-loathing in Lombard's anguished "Blow out your candles, Laura" speech that concludes the play.

Eileen Diss's set design features a gauze screen between the dining room upstage and the rest of the set

and the audience, as is suggested (but rarely adhered to) by Williams' original stage directions. This gives a dreamy, distancing effect to all the action upstage, to the point where it occasionally feels like the audience is watching an out-of-focus old film. The atmosphere in the Wingfield home is uncomfortably stifling, even to watch, as this fragile family spend their lives waiting for a catalyst to breathe welcome change into their stifling lives. As her son proves to be disappointingly indifferent to his mother's ambitions, a dissatisfied Amanda transfers her hopes fixedly onto acquiring a 'Gentleman Caller' for her daughter. As Tom deprecatingly notes in Act 1, "He is the long delayed but always expected some-

thing that we live for".

As they await his arrival, the production offers a warts-and-all example of how "all pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be" as a giddy Amanda dresses Laura like a doll, in a chintz dress that almost matches the new furniture covers. Marty Rea's jovial performance as Jim – the long awaited Gentleman Caller – injects a welcome note of energy into the deadening atmosphere of the family home.

In spite of this final enlivening uplift, it is a late compensation for the slow pace and uneven performances. Although well-considered and technically assured, ultimately this is a production of *The Glass Menagerie* that is less than the sum of its parts.



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Behind Closed Doors

Plays set in confined spaces with dark and claustrophobic relationships recurred in recent weeks. Our critics listened through the motel room walls.

FOOL FOR LOVE

By Sam Shepard

The Peacock

Directed by Annie Ryan

Set Design: Paul O'Mahony

Costume Design: Sonya Lennon

Lighting Design: Kevin McFadden

Music and Sound Design: Denis Clohessy

With: Catherine Walsh, Don Wycherley,

John Kavanagh, Andrew Bennett

15 Feb – 15 Mar 2007. Reviewed 21 Feb

BY TANYA DEAN

THIS SPRING, THE NATIONAL THEATRE paid tribute to the old adage, "Love makes fools of us all". Upstairs on The Abbey main stage Romeo lamented his fate as "Fortune's Fool", while in the Peacock another ill-fated romance tore open old wounds. This was *Fool for Love*, the latest production in the Peacock's on-going love affair with Sam Shepard. Set in a rundown motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert, *Fool for Love* is the displaced and unsettling tale of a love that is unnatural in origin and all-consuming in effect.

Paul O'Mahony's set - an arresting facsimile of a cheap American motel

room (attractively enhanced by Kevin McFadden's richly toned lighting design) – helps to create a claustrophobic, hyper-real atmosphere. Here two former lovers, Eddie (Don Wycherley), a macho rodeo stunt man, and the tempestuous May (Catherine Walsh) warily circle each other as their old relationship re-ignites. Watching them from his position in an otherworldly portal on the side of the stage is The Old Man (John Kavanagh), a ghost or memory who appears to have some connection to each of the characters (but more on that later).

Fool for Love wavers on a knife-edge balance between cinematic allusions and theatrical references. Visually, the cultural icons of the Western (the lasso, the cowboy) are instantly recognizable, particularly given the recent revitalisation of the Western genre in cinema (*Brokeback Mountain*, *3:10 to Yuma*). Director Annie Ryan reaches for a very physical, energised performance in this search for the Western spirit, and in doing so pushes both lead actors beyond their comfort zones. Wycherley jumps enthusiastically (sometimes literally) into this

Catherine Byrne and Don Wycherley in Fool For Love



ROSS KAVANAGH

new territory, whilst Walsh seems more unsure, leading to a performance that, whilst extremely skilful and well-considered, lacks the hot-blooded energy one would expect powering a character like May. Both leads imbue their dialogue with an almost desperate snap-crackle-and-pop, revealing that both Eddie and May are unhappily wise to the fact that they are caught up in a vicious, inescapable cycle of love and betrayal. May in particular has attempted to escape this trap and rages at Eddie's fecklessness. Torn between obsession and loathing, she alternately clings to Eddie and violently rejects him.

Fool for Love knowingly blends the gritty realism of Shepard's dialogue and setting with cherry-picked theatrical references (with more than a nod to *Oedipus Rex*) and a growing sense of surrealism. Martin, May's taciturn would-be suitor (a strong, understated performance by Andrew Bennett) acts as uneasy witness as the unwholesome truth is revealed: Eddie and May are siblings, both fathered by The Old Man (perhaps the eponymous fool for love) with different mothers. Whilst this revelation of incest is *Fool for Love*'s dramatic hook, here it is played with near indifference. The two siblings (or half-siblings, as Eddie is quick to point out) seem almost blasé about it, accepting it as a fact of their existence: they are related, yes, but they seem to believe

that they are still fated to love each other. Rather than evoking the masculine romantic hero of yesteryear, this foolish love is unwittingly reminiscent of a Jerry Springer TV special, making the cowboy and his world feel anachronistic (arguably because Shepard's script has dated since it was first performed in 1983).

Divorced from both geographical and cultural origins, the Western spirit of *Fool for Love* rests uncomfortably in the Peacock, uncertain of its own relevance on the Irish stage.

PROBLEM CHILD

By George F. Walker

Impact Theatre Company

Directed by Jeff Culbert

Design: Norma Lowney

With: Myles Breen, Norma Lowney,

Niamh Bowen, Brendan Hickey

Stix Cinema, Limerick

19 – 23 Feb 2008. Reviewed 23 Feb

BY MATTHEW HARRISON

OVER A CHIPPER AND UNDER THE ROOF of an ex-cinema, the Limerick Unfringed 2008 audience witness a rather sticky delivery of George F. Walker's clumsy *Problem Child*. This relative of 'dirty realism' is procreated through a partnership of Impact Theatre and visiting director Jeff Culbert: the resultant offspring is earnest but one that is ultimately over-estimated by its hard-working progenitors.

Denise (Norma Lowney), addict



Niamh Bowen, Myles Breen and Norma Lowney in *Problem Child*.

and ne'er-do-well is shacked-up in a motel with her ex-con partner and day-time-TV expert, RJ (Myles Breen). They await news of whether social services will release their child back into their questionable care. Despite their efforts to demonstrate their new-found worthiness, to stay off the junk and to become model citizens, and even with the cack-handed help of the motel's janitor, Philly (Brendan Hickey), relations with Helen (Niamh Bowen), the particularly harsh-hearted and puritanical social worker, do not run smooth.

Problem Child is clearly intended as tragicomedy in a vaguely 'absurdist' vein. Disenfranchisement, social alienation, fated motherhood and rehabilitation are set in counterpoint against the ludicrousness of day-time television and its cruel teasing of the lower social strata of North America where, in RJ's bitterly prescient words, "life is like that show". So,

both hefty and eclectic themes drive this work. Eventually, however, after the nth repetition of such self-deprecating rants as "there's no justice, just grab and run", these 'social truths' become cumbersome. Oh, and since our characters are 'trailer-trash', the

ubiquitous hand-gun must also get a brandish.

Picture Canadian writer George F. Walker's *Problem Child* as a cross-breed of city-based soap-opera and Martin McDonagh, but one that possesses neither the credibly melodramatic characteristics of the former nor the anarchic love of both violent farce and language of the latter: *Problem Child* inhabits no clearly defined theatrical world, nor does it create its own. Then, as if to confirm his own frustration and disenchantment with the work, Walker resorts to having Denise deliver a three-minute appendix to the play in which we learn how everything panned out in the end...

Impact Theatre's version of *Problem Child* is described as taking place in a "site-specific location" and multi-tasker Norma Lowney's design is an interesting and appropriately claustrophobic re-jigging of the original cinema space, even though it is diffi-

cult to see how this is 'site-specific'. Culbert directs a functional, if plodding version of the work and his performers work hard to breathe life into their rather flaccid, self-absorbed characters. Hickey produces perhaps the most convincing and well-timed example of this, but then he gets the best lines anyway... There are projection problems for two of the other performers and precisely the opposite for a very loud Breen as RJ, whose interpretation of prison habitué is more foppish than thuggish.

However, there were just enough moments of both humour and pathos to enthuse some of the audience, and Impact Theatre should be lauded for their optimism, determination and inventive use of space – if not for their choice of drama.

BUG

By Tracy Letts

PurpleHeart Theatre Company

Directed by Alan King

Design and construction: Martin Cahill

Costume Design: Peter Hjotsberg

Sound Design: David Gillespie

With Charlotte Bradley, Les Martin, Alexandra

Marcus, Art Kearns and Gerry O'Brien.

The New Theatre

8–24 Nov 2007. Reviewed 22 Nov

BY FINTAN WALSH

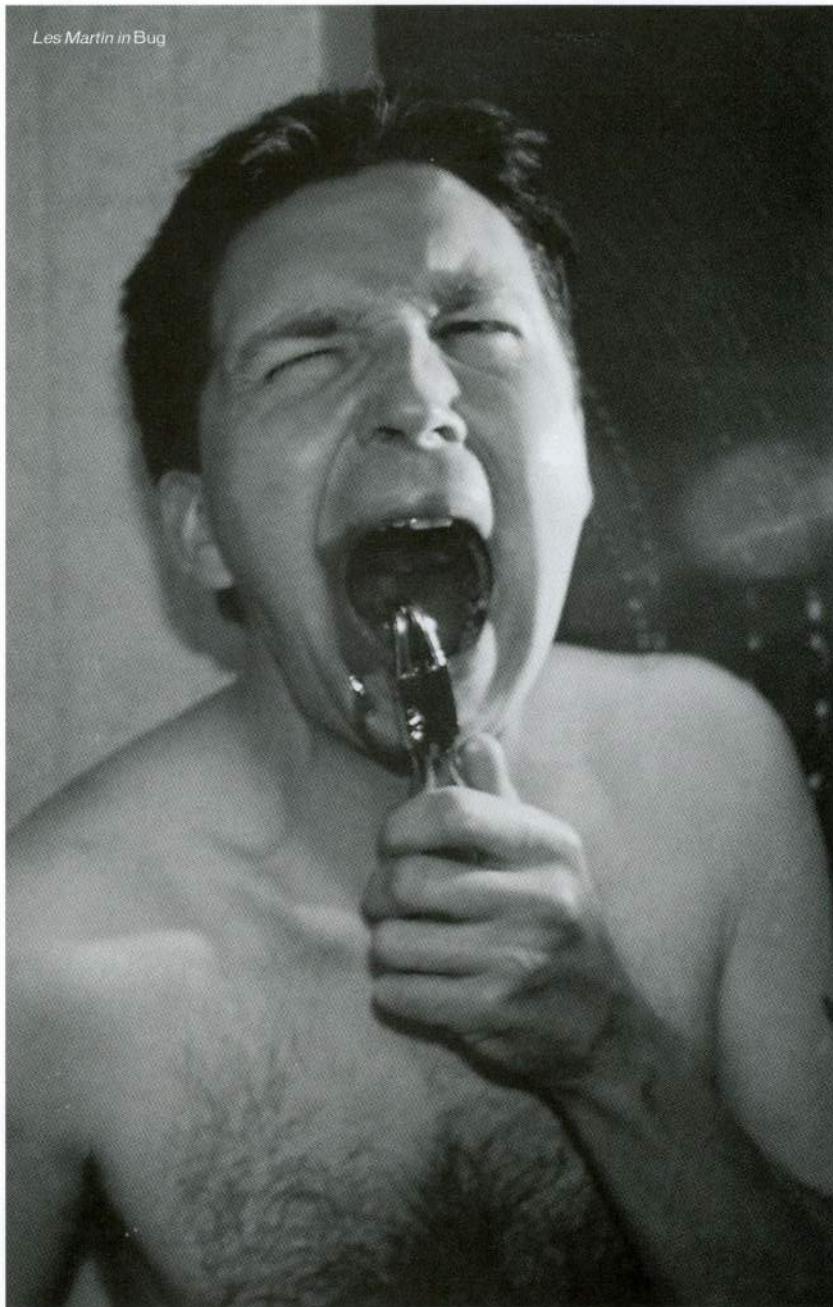
SCRATCHING, LIKE PARANOIA, IS contagious. There is little difference between thinking you need to scratch

and actually doing it: you think it, you do it, and so does the person beside you. The spontaneous flick of a finger can turn a room of seemingly well adjusted men and women into a pack of mangy dogs, chasing their tails for something which may or may not be there. For scratching has no bounds. The American playwright and actor Tracy Letts takes this phenomenon in his 2001 play and turns it into a conceptual playground to consider finer margins still, like the line between self-doubt and self-destruction, suspicion and paranoia, reasonable individual fear and the large-scale production of terror.

The play opens in a seedy motel room where forty-four year old cocktail waitress Agnes (Bradley) is harassed with phone calls. She answers, but no one is there. She is certain her abusive ex-husband Goss (Kearns) is behind the pranks. Recently released from prison, who else could it be? Soon he makes his entrance, beating his ex-wife and stealing money. Her resignation towards the attack is the hardest part to take, but there are more deeply rooted histories at work here too, like loneliness, guilt, and their kidnapped son who has never been found.

It is through these insecure fissures that Peter (Martin) wanders into Agnes' life. When he first arrives, looking for somewhere to stay, it is not entirely surprising that Agnes takes

Les Martin in Bug



LESLIE CONROY

comfort in his presence. He is the security guard, confidant and lover that she has never had but craves. By the time he has recalled 'the war in Syria,' being subjected to medical experimentation, and his belief that 'they' are still after him, Agnes is hooked. Soon, she can feel the blood-sucking aphids too, even if she or Dr. Sweet (Peter's psychiatrist who eventually turns up, played by O'Brien) cannot see them. But Peter's chemistry set tells another story, or so he claims. Although his body is covered in self-inflicted wounds, Agnes also thinks she needs to scratch to kill the bugs embedded in her flesh. It is a tightly spun cycle near impossible to break.

The New Theatre is the perfect venue for this constricting tale. Actors and audience members are equally cramped, and it soon becomes clear that the itch respects no theatrical parameter either: at some point in this production, everyone feels a little twinge. Such is the narrative build-up, and the acting talent, that we may also be forgiven for wondering if characters really are being spied upon; if helicopters do surrounded the motel; if the bugs do indeed exist. The audience reserves laughter until the end when the set is wrapped in tinfoil to scramble army signals, as if in implicit agreement that this kind of thinking is ridiculous. It is a healthy moment during

which the audience recognise the madness to which we might all succumb.

As the play mushrooms to its tragic end, Alan King ensures the performance keeps its head and does not flop into a fungal farce, as well it might. Working with a play that rushes towards absurdity and even insanity, it is no mean feat that the actors' performances are well modulated throughout. Charlotte Bradley distils the grand emotions of fear and lust into a raised eyebrow, and her edgy sexuality keeps the men, and the play, on its toes. Even if the resemblance between Les Martin and Timothy McVeigh is accidental, it is effective, and it chimes another resonance to his depiction of this unassuming young man turned violent paranoiac. Kearns, as Goss, is nasty enough to make Agnes' retreat to Peter plausible; while Marcus, as Agnes' friend RC, provides a necessary injection of relative normalcy early on.

Just as an itch originates in suspicion, paranoia is borne of an unnameable terror in Letts' world. This concatenation of threats that are everywhere but nowhere to be seen is classic post 9/11 territory. While the play is about mental collapse at narrative level, it is also about the power of political rhetoric to undo national subjects by planting terrifying thought-bombs that propel its people

into symbolic or literal suicides.

Terror, like a stray itch, lacks the visual markers that might confirm its existence. It is this open-endedness that forces people to poke for the horror within, which, as it turns out, is the horror of nothingness. As Agnes puts it to Peter, "It's easier to talk about bugs with you than nothing with nobody."

Fintan Walsh teaches and writes about theatre.

DEAD MAN WALKING

By Jake Heggie, libretto by Terrence McNally

Opera Ireland

Conducted by Bruno Ferrandis

Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess

Sets and Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

Costume Design: Joan O'Clery

With: Charlotte Hellekant, Marcus DeLoach,

Virginia Kerr

Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

18 – 24 Nov 2007. Reviewed 22 Nov

BY ÁINE SHIELS

MANY OPERAS CONTAIN DRAMA SO intense that music seems an entirely plausible mode of expression. The material in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* (San Francisco Opera premiere, 2000) should be ideal for operatic treatment: the text moves in a dramatic arc from an opening rape and murder scene to the execution of Joseph De Rocher, the murderer, at the close. It includes the traumatic ex-

periences of Sister Helen Prejean, spiritual adviser to the convicted man, and the anguish of the victim's relatives when De Rocher's mother speaks in court on his behalf. This is not everyday life: it is extreme enough to call for intense musical rendition. A shame, therefore, that the score does not meet this challenge. If anything, it drains the evening of most of the expected tension, providing instead a patchwork of soundscapes that rarely produce any real sense of urgency. Only when soloists, chorus, and full orchestra are united at full throttle (for example, during Sr. Helen's Death Row-hallucination at the close of Act I) or when the vocal writing allows for complex interactions between many characters (for example, in the courtroom scene) does a rare sense of conviction emerge. Playing in the recent Opera Ireland production, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra was clearly not enthused by the score; conductor Bruno Ferrandis could only coax a spongy and diffuse sound from the players. Charlotte Hellekant as Sr. Helen, Marcus DeLoach as Joseph De Rocher, and Virginia Kerr as Mrs De Rocher were vocally strong despite the limitations of the music; Kerr generated a notable injection of energy in the courtroom scene, and Hellekant allowed her voice to crack at the close, breaking through her otherwise refined performance.



Gerard O'Connor, Charlotte Hellekant and the Opera Ireland Chorus in *Dead Man Walking*

The cast was occasionally hampered by design and direction choices. The set placed some of the performances up-stage at a significant remove, blunting in particular the energy of the Death Row scene in Act I. Here, the caged inmates should have had a particularly imposing effect, but they were distant and rather apologetic in tone and gesture. This lost opportunity seemed strange for a production that generally looked well and worked in an assured manner. Paul Keogan restricted his colour palette to good effect, and used a cold lighting scheme to underscore his greys, blacks, and whites.

The director, Thomas de Mallet Burgess, made particularly good use of Keogan's structural layers in Act II. As De Rocher thinks about his victims in his cell, the victims appear and

walk across the stage in front of his cell bars, followed by Sr. Helen in nightclothes. At one and the same time the victims represent the convict's conscience and Sr. Helen's nightmare. This effective deviation from the production's overall naturalism is not matched by the awkwardly mimed car journey in Act I. A siren sounds above the score during the mimed sequence, and a policeman enters. Sr. Helen has been speeding, but the policeman lets her off with request for a prayer for his sick mother.

This piece of sentimentality is typical of the work as a whole, despite De Rocher's Act II plea 'None of that sentimental crap!' But execution is a grim (if not directly Irish) fact of life, and this production allied itself directly with Amnesty International,

even setting aside a percentage of box office sales from one of the performances for the organisation. This suggests an overtly political intention behind the production, yet Opera Ireland did not deal with some of the hardest politics associated with the American death penalty. Its death row prisoners were all white, and racial politics were left untouched.

Perhaps in the end the work is less about death penalty politics and more, as Sr. Helen suggests in a programme note, about human redemption and forgiveness. And just as De Rocher gains redemption through Sr. Helen's love and forgiveness, so too did this production redeem itself

with a truly tense 90 seconds during the execution scene. These were silent seconds, apart from electronic beeping; and with this realization the question inevitably arose, why was this material made into an opera? Was it not more effective as a film or in the theatre version that has been widely performed across the USA? Opera Ireland is to be highly commended for staging contemporary opera, but *Dead Man Walking* is not the work to leave Irish audiences assured of opera's future.

Áine Sheil is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Drama, Trinity College Dublin.

CROOKED HOUSE, IN COLLABORATION WITH TEATRO TRI-BOO, FLORENCE,
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BY MICHEL MARC BOUCHARD (translated by Linda Gaboreau)
DIRECTED BY MICHELE PANELLA

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The Shadow of America

America loomed large over the Irish stage this season, as a place that beckoned, or promised escape.

THE COMING WORLD

By Christopher Shinn

Making Strange Theatre Company

Directed by Tom Creed

Set Design: Deirdre Dwyer

Lighting: Sarah Jane Sheils

With: Megan Riordan and Joe Roch

Project Arts Centre

13 – 24 Nov 2007. Reviewed 15 Nov

BY SARA KEATING

THE TITLE OF *THE COMING WORLD* heralds the future, but Christopher Shinn's play speaks to the past. A petty criminal tries to mend relationships with his ex-girlfriend and alienated twin. A young woman finds comfort in the arms of a ghost of her dead lover. A social recluse dwells on his personal history of isolation rather than the future possibilities of his rehabilitation. In the self-contained fiction that Shinn has created, the world the characters are seeking has already come and gone.

Tom Creed's production for Making Strange Theatre Company is brave in its absolute spare-ness. Framed only by Deirdre Dwyer's glowing grid-like design and three

TV screens, it creates a virtual reality within the theatre, confirming the post-apocalyptic set-up of Shinn's post-climactic scenario. Dora (Megan Riordan), Ed and Ty (both played by Joe Roch) enter like pawns in a fantasy world rather than protagonists; the actors' slight physicalities transform the intimate space of the Project Cube into a cavernous, yet somehow depth-less, canvas against which their shared stories will be played out. However, the computer-game aesthetic which these elements conspire to create is seriously compromised, if not entirely contradicted, by Shinn's conservative dramaturgy and his thin, hole-heavy, heavy-handed plot.

There are so many themes going on in *The Coming World* – the meaning of truth, life, love, loss – that it manages to be both over-written and under-written at the same time. The use of identical twins to explore questions of identity is particularly unoriginal, and Shinn fails to deepen the use of this plot-device with his half-drawn characters Ed and Ty. Established as polar opposites - Ed the angry ado-

Megan Riordan and Joe Roch (twice) in The Coming World.



ADRIAN MULLAN

lescent turned petty criminal, Ty the shy successful nerd – Shinn traces the fracture in their relationship to puberty and the over-sexualisation of one brother at the expense of the other. Their diminutive names add subtext to the idea of the twins as “two halves of a decent man”, as Tom Murphy would have it. However, individually, neither brother moves beyond the stereotyped sketch offered by his nemesis; both Ty and Ed remain exactly, simplistically, as they are described by the other.

Dora, meanwhile, is desperately attracted to both the dangerous Ed's fantasies and the security that Ty's nine-to-five existence lends him, but she develops only in line with her relationship with the brothers. In fact, her gratuitous beating mid-way through the play is not merely a punishment for her infidelities, but for her attempts at independence. Despite Riordan's sensitive performance, Dora is simply a vehicle for allowing the major plot detail – the heist – to happen. Yet even this climatic event falls flat; it is as if Shinn is borrowing as much as he can from film culture in an attempt to make his play ‘contemporary’.

Some of the writing in *The Coming*

World wrests poetry from the idioms of these ordinary, clichéd, characters, allowing Shinn to sculpt metaphor and metaphysical musings into the surface of the text. In Roch and Riordan's soft East Coast inflected accents (Massachusetts meets Manhattan on the Jersey Shore), these set-piece soliloquies are persuasive. However, the actors' finely delivered speeches are merely a distraction from the sentimentalities of Shinn's formulaic existential enquiries.

The question of ‘what makes us who we are’ is age-old. It is the basic question that pervades, perhaps defines, human consciousness. However, it is not in the question itself, but in the possible answers, that the real drama of human existence lies. Shinn does not interest himself in potential, even provisional, solutions. For him, the coming world “gleams dimly in the distance” like a comforting beacon of hope. However, the discerning spectator knows that, really, there is no such certainty of self to be found. Well, not in this world anyway.

Sara Keating is a critic and freelance journalist. She is a judge for The Irish Times Theatre Awards for 2008.

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PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!**By Brian Friel**

Second Age Theatre Company

Directed by Alan Stanford

Set Design: Eileen Diss

Lighting: Sinéad McKenna

Costume Design: Léonore Mc Donagh

With: Áine Ni Mhuiri, Marty Rea, Sean Stewart,

Walter McMonagle, Dearbhla McGuinness,

David Heap, Enda Oates, Joan Sheehy, Donn-

cha Crowley, Dan Reardon, Conan Sweeney,

Roger Thomson, Andrew Adamson

and John Olohan.

On tour 18 Oct – 1 Dec. 2007. Reviewed 29 Nov

Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire.

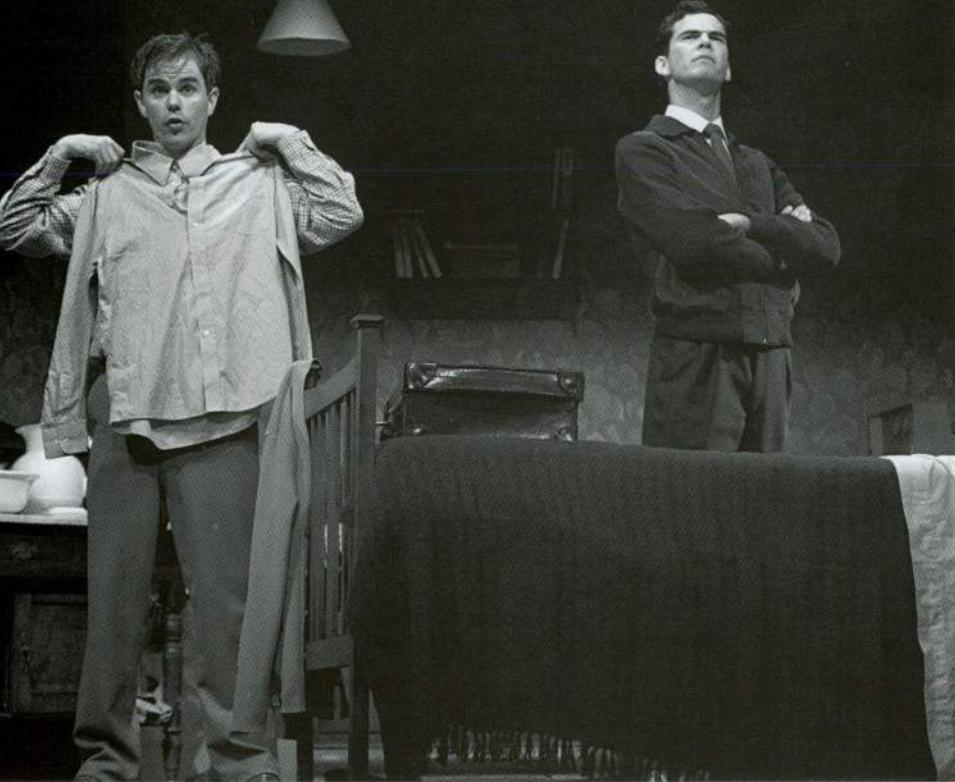
BY EMILIE PINE

IN A POST-CELTIC TIGER WORLD, Ireland is more familiar with immigration than the necessities of emigration, and one wonders if an audience will find a play set on the eve of one young man's departure to America in any way relevant or affecting. Of course, Brian Friel's play *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* has always worked against the idea that emigration was purely the result of economic necessity. Instead, Friel creates a claustrophobic world of social stagnation, sexual frustration and emotional paralysis and this is what continues to give the play its resonance. When Gar's alter ego Private Gar confides in his father S.B. (who cannot hear him) that he fears he is a "sex maniac" the audience has two reactions. First, they laugh. Then as Private Gar

continues, lamenting the fact that all the local "boys" are obsessed with sex yet all are still virgins and likely to continue to be so for quite some time, the mood shifts and the fear and shame of sex and bodies and emotion that characterised Irish culture for so long, and from which we are still dealing with the fall-out, becomes dreadfully apparent.

We might like to think that we have moved on from this kind of emotionally paralysed society but at the Pavilion theatre in Dun Laoghaire, the largely Leaving-Cert audience was rapt with attention during this scene in particular. Perhaps we are not so far from Ballybeg after all.

Indeed, the audience really tuned into the play, enjoying the humour and recognising the tension and pain of family dysfunction. This is not merely because of the strength of Friel's construction, with Private Gar fulfilling the audience's desire for something explosive and a little bit different (and a little bit camp) to happen in this old-fashioned set, but also because of the strength of performances. Private Gar, played by Marty Rea with irrepressible energy, drives the play and stands in fine contrast to the silent, brooding and disappointed presences of Master Boyle, played by Enda Oates, and his father, played by Walter McMonagle. When McMonagle looks up from his



Sean Stewart and Marty Rea in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

game of draughts on the line "I wouldn't say die yet", he manages a moment of real pathos, a feat for an actor who barely speaks before the final scene.

Poignant moments such as these were among the most successful scenes of the play, and were balanced by the high farce of the two Gars playing up the fantasies of early manhood – taking the free kick at the All Ireland final, or strutting down American boulevards with a blonde on each arm. These fantasies illustrate Gar's longing for something out of the ordinary, to counteract the dreary realities of everyday life in Ballybeg. Yet just as Madge points

out that S.B. was just like his son at his age, these fantasies uncannily match the big talk of "the boys" and their imagined conquests. It is fantasy that enables the dreary everyday to continue as it rescues the boys from recognising the futility of their lives and actually doing something about them. Gar it seems, in taking the decision to go to America, is taking on fate itself and changing his life for the better, but his doubt at the end of the play and the excessive emotionalism of his Aunt Lizzy, both imply that Gar will simply be exchanging one form of fantasy and emotional suffocation for another.

Overall, this is an excellently per-

formed production, although in the role of Lizzy, Joan Sheehy somewhat struggles to convincingly manage the hysteria of the returned emigrant, begging her sister's son to come and live with them. Similarly, for most of the play Sean Stewart as Public Gar acts with a combination of manic energy and shambling sulkiness, both of which are difficult to reconcile with his private self, his love for classical music and recitation, and render Kate Doogan's affection for him somewhat unlikely.

The split stage, with Gar's bedroom on a higher level, conveys well the divisions within the family and within himself, with the muted colour palette suggesting the limits on his imagination

Though in many ways this is a play from an Ireland that has, for the most part, passed, it still speaks to us today. When Madge, played with gravitas by Áine Ní Mhuirí, tells S.B. that her new grandniece is to be called Bridget, not Madge, as she had hoped, almost every audience member sighed with her. And it is the creation of characters like these, and direction by Alan Stanford that knows better than to tamper with the quiet desperation of such moments, that make the play still mean something to a Twenty-First-Century audience.

Emilie Pine lectures in Drama at University College Dublin.

CONVERSATIONS ON A HOMECOMING

By Tom Murphy

Livin' Dred/Nomad Theatre

Directed by Padraic MacIntyre

Set Design: Maree Kearns

Lighting: Barry McKinney

With: Andrew Bennett, Peter Daly, Jenn Murray,

Brid NiChumhaill, Michael Patric, Karen Scully,

Don Wycherley

On tour, 22 Oct – 24 Nov 2007. Reviewed 6 Nov

Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda

BY SARA KEATING

TIME STANDS STILL IN THE WHITE HOUSE, the pub in which Tom Murphy's 1985 play *Conversations on a Homecoming* is set. The town-hall clock might chime on the street outside; the parish bell might peal a few minutes later, reminding us of that "familiar discrepancy between church and state"; but the clock on the wall in Kilkelly's bar has stopped, frozen between the past and the future. This is a world of rural ennui, social stasis, and crippling disillusion; a world where the unbearable disappointments of the present stretch on into infinity. However, Padraic MacIntyre's languidly paced production for Livin' Dred, ensures that *Conversations* remains both fresh and timely, despite the insipid monotony that has gradually destroyed Murphy's characters' lives.

Maree Kearns' realistic set is a period re-creation of an Irish country pub: all cheap chipped chipper-wood and stained carpet floor and glasses



Don Wycherley and Andrew Bennett in Conversations on a Homecoming.

on display like they are crystal. However, its frayed edges capture the decay that is destroying this purgatorial world. The seats are spilling stuffing at the sides. The faded papered walls are ghosted by paintings that once

hung there and photographs of lives that were once full of hope. A portrait of John F Kennedy, the spirit that has deserted the town, pales behind a grimy frame; his smile, his charm, now waning. The metaphorical con-

nection between this rundown pub and the lives wasted and wasting away here is palpable in the atmospheric ennui that Kearns' meticulous design evokes.

Amidst the mouldering of the bar, "the lads" sit on low stools at small round tables that they have grown too large for; they are overgrown children, their lives arrested at the point of adolescence. Tom (Don Wycherley) is unable to make the transition from son to husband. Michael (Andrew Bennett) has tried to find freedom from his family and failed. Junior (Peter Daly) is forever belittled by his nick-name despite being a father. And Liam (Michael Patric) is a self-made gombeen man, the accoutrements of his success where the others failed marking him out as a figure of ridicule: a child playing cowboys-and-indians in a grown-up world.

The action unfolds on the night of Michael's homecoming, an evening less of celebration than cathartic mourning, an expurgation of all the mutual betrayals and frustrations of the once close-knit group of friends. As the pints are poured, the rounds paid for and fought over, "the lads" find clarity in the fog of inebriation that settles over the room. Tom, failed school-teacher, socialist and one-time poet, can rage against "the American-wrapped band-wagon of so-called idealism"; Liam is freed to fight

against "truth and faith, and faith and truth, inextricably linked"; Junior admits his disappointment instead of laughing it off; and Michael, the actor who cannot even convince himself of his performance, articulates the despair that unites them: "This kind of – life – isn't it at all."

Don Wycherley seethes as the cynical Tom; Peter Daly's Junior is charmingly optimistic; while Michael Patric swaggers and then staggers in cowboy boots as the despicable Liam, in a worthy comic performance. Andrew Bennett's Michael, however, is a bit too weathered; his dissipation so complete that he carries little charm, making his flirtation with JJ's daughter, Anne (Jenn Murray), deeply uncomfortable, and her growing fondness for him inexplicable. It is, however, Karen Scully's Peggy that we most feel for: her exile to the doorway as Tom turns on her is perhaps a little overplayed, but the desperation in her gestures as she tries to comfort, encourage and console the men around her, and their inability to acknowledge it, is deeply poignant – a sad echo of the gulf between what-might-have-been for Murphy's trapped characters and their depressing reality.

But it was inevitable, wasn't it? It's that damned "country-and-western system itself." As Tom astutely reminds us, the decline is unavoidable: "all we have to do is wait".

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Classic texts have been given new readings and unconventional settings this season. Our critics respond to the shock of the old.

ROMEO AND JULIET

By William Shakespeare

Abbey Theatre

Directed by Jason Byrne

Set & Costume Design: Jon Bausor

Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

Music & Sound Design: Denis Clohessy

With: Aaron Monaghan, Gemma Reeves, Anita

Reeves, Peter Gaynor, Michael McElhatton

6 Feb – 22 Mar 2008. Reviewed 14 Feb

BY COLIN MURPHY

AT THE CORE OF JASON BYRNE'S *Romeo and Juliet* is a scene that is, more typically, neglected: Juliet's feigned suicide. It comes after a first half that bustles and bristles, theatre of swaying hips and preying hipsters. Then, after the interval, this early exuberance is allowed to drain like Tybalt's blood. For long minutes, our attention is focussed on Juliet's bedchamber: first, the scene of a bizarrely modest post-coital embrace with Romeo, before he flees; then, the scene of tiresome familial wrangling between Juliet and her nurse and parents. And then Juliet drinks her vial, and collapses. It goes dark. In darkness (though it is now morning), her

nurse enters and finds her, and cries for help. Her mother enters, and then her father who stoops and gathers her in his arms. A dim halo of light rises on this scene of mourning. Then the Friar, and Paris, her intended. They set to keening. The light rises and falls between near-total darkness and a chiaroscuro focus on the scene around the bed.

Until now, director Jason Byrne's references have been more contemporary, more obvious, more populist: Amy Winehouse on the soundtrack, costumes and choreography from *The Matrix* and *A Clockwork Orange*. But his reference here is more classical: a Pietà. Juliet will rise again, but her family does not know it. The scene speaks deeply of grief, and yet it is stylistically anachronistic within the overall production, and obscure within conventional approaches to the play: why focus on the grief, when we know that Juliet is not dead?

Byrne's focus on grief here foreshadows the climactic scene in which the "pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life". He plays this final scene atop a sarcophagus, which rises from

Aaron Monaghan and Gemma Reeves in a publicity shot for Romeo and Juliet



ROSS KAVANAGH

underneath the stage in the place where Juliet's bed has been, recognising that this scene is of more iconic than emotional value.

The Pietà of earlier haunts the production as a whole. It suggests a less conventional reading of the play: one that is not a homage to romantic love, but a study of adolescent suicide. (This is also suggested by Germaine Greer and Clare Keegan in incisive programme notes.) The scene also suggests that Jason Byrne is less interested in grafting a cohesive whole than in rigorously exploring certain ideas and moments in the text – an approach that seems consistent with his earlier theatrical explorations with Loose Canon.

It may not be quite cohesive, but the whole on offer here is an entertaining and energetic account of the play. Yet there is a shoddiness of execution in the more adventurous moments that leaves it less than convincing. Denis Clohessy's sound design may be stylistically apt, but it is abrupt and intrusive, unsure whether the music is itself a dramatic device (as in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film of the play), or simply a mood-enhancing transition from one scene to the next.

The fight and dance scenes are attractively choreographed, but poorly realised. Punches and feints fall visibly short, and the dance moves are at times more suggestive of an Irish disco than an R&B video. Much of the verse speaking suggests that, as with

the dance and fight moves, the actors are keeping time in their heads.

This is surprising, because textual clarity was the supreme virtue of Jason Byrne's early work on Shakespeare with Loose Canon. At that stage, he had something of an ensemble, and they poured immense energy into both getting the verse right, and finding ways to combine it with aggressively theatrical physicality. But the Abbey is a very different beast, lumbering and expensive where a small company in the 1990's was supple and cheap. This production suggests Byrne needs more rehearsal time. Still, there is vision and ambition here, and a density of thought that is exciting.

As Romeo, Aaron Monaghan is, as ever, restless and edgy. He combines this with the most incisive, intuitive grasp of the verse of anyone on stage: he mangles the metre at will, realising that the most authentic verse speaking can come from those who pay least overt attention to its rhythm, or at least who play against it. Gemma Reeves is an able Juliet, less idiosyncratic than Monaghan and more deferential to the verse, but supple and confident. Anita Reeves' Nurse, Peter Gaynor's Prince and Michael McElhatton's Mercutio are each memorable.

Romeo and Juliet marks a step on for Jason Byrne from 2007's *Julius Caesar*: more ambitious and aggressively theatrical, and more coherent. He has

yet to really put his stamp on the Abbey stage, but this suggests that he will, with time – and, perhaps, with more rehearsal time.

Colin Murphy is a journalist and theatre critic for the Sunday Tribune.

MACBETH

By William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company

Directed by Alan Stanford

Set Design: Carol Betera

Costume Design: Caroline Bronwen Hughes

With: David Shannon, Caitríona Ni Mhurchú,

Simon Coury, Enda Oates

On tour 21 Jan – 14 Mar 2008. Reviewed 31 Jan

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY MATTHEW HARRISON

HOVER AROUND FOR LONG ENOUGH in the thunder, lightning and rain of Irish education and *Macbeth* steams back into view on the Leaving Certificate syllabus. This regular apparition is swiftly shadowed by numerous theatre companies staging productions of the set text. Be bloody, bold and resolute; get your actors on and off stage swiftly; give students thrills, spills and a taste of what Seventeenth-Century drama might be about. Second Age's rather unambitious production fits this bill.

Shakespeare's infamous Scottish warrior 'o'er leaps' himself in his desire to gain what he believes is his rightful position in society. "Blood will have

blood" and there's plenty of war, gore, and "hurly-burly" in which director Alan Stanford and his cast rightly wallow, and for those who like their Bard brash, this tack works. In a setting vaguely suggestive of an early medieval world, the melodramatic orations, sexually charged witches, back projections, billowing dry ice and convincing sword-fighting created genuine excitement among the audience. As Shakespeare gave innuendo and guts to the Globe's groundlings, so Stanford does for Sixth Year pupils in the stalls.

But perhaps this audience's pleasure might have been greater had the directorial decisions been more sophisticated and imaginative, since this version seems to slip uncomfortably between two stools. In the catalogue of *Macbeth* productions, Second Age's goes for neither innovative Twenty-First Century revision nor authentically 'Golden-Age' reconstruction.

While there is a frankness and unequivocal brashness about this version, a more imaginative response might have avoided some of the pitfalls associated with a big show and a small budget. It is a production dressed in borrowed robes drawn from most periods in history. The costumes are an anachronistic mish-mash of items drawn from every century since the First: Viking round-shields, Norman double-edged swords, plastic Tudor breastplates, Victorian hunting boots, Pre-Raphaelite dresses and a modern

David Shannon in Macbeth.



Austrian hiking jacket. This juxtaposition of styles appears to have little point, for while the play's themes may well be timeless and universal, the costumes seem merely mismatched.

Accessibility at all costs creates problems too. David Shannon's youthfulness adds credibility to the eponymous hero's ambition but he provides a rather diminished navel-splitting 'Bellona's bridegroom'. Whilst he is well partnered in crime by Caitríona Ní Mhurchú as Lady Macbeth, both performers are subjugated to the break-neck speed (not pace) throughout, so there are disappointingly few opportunities for them to bring depth to their roles. This is most obvious in Macbeth's famously nihilistic final soliloquies which, in this production, scarcely waver from the swift and loud and thus fail to sound suitably world-weary or reflective. More interestingly, though, Simon Coury's Banquo dithers between good-guy and wannabe baddy, and Enda Oates's Macduff is excellently gruff and driven. Designer Carol Betera's cleverly conceived Giant's Causeway-like pillars provide a suitably oppressive and darkly looming presence on the stage, although all too often the smaller hexagons are leapt upon simply because they are there.

The most directorially forceful aspect of this production is Stanford's decision to weave his strangely handsome and sinuous witches throughout

the play. Regularly chanting a motif supposedly by Shakespeare's contemporary Middleton, their unscripted hauntings highlight the play's overarching evil and spell-like language. This rather literal dramatisation of demonic possession does not entirely pay off, however, since it must be clear that Macbeth is ultimately responsible for his own actions.

Macbeth is probably Shakespeare's most accessible tragedy. The drama and special effects are in his language. Most students can cope with a production where this is the focus, rather than a tub-thumping Hollywoodesque *mise-en-scène*. They can get that on DVD.

MACBETH

By William Shakespeare

Siren Productions

Directed by Selina Cartmell

Set Design: Jean Guy Lecat

Lighting Design: Mike Gunning.

Costume Design: Gaby Rooney

Composer: Denis Clohessy.

Sound Design: Carl Kennedy

With: Rory Keenan, Barbara Brennan, Olwen

Fouré, Gerard McSorley, Robert O'Mahony,

David Heap, David Devaney, Caoilfhionn

Dunne, Domhnall Gleeson.

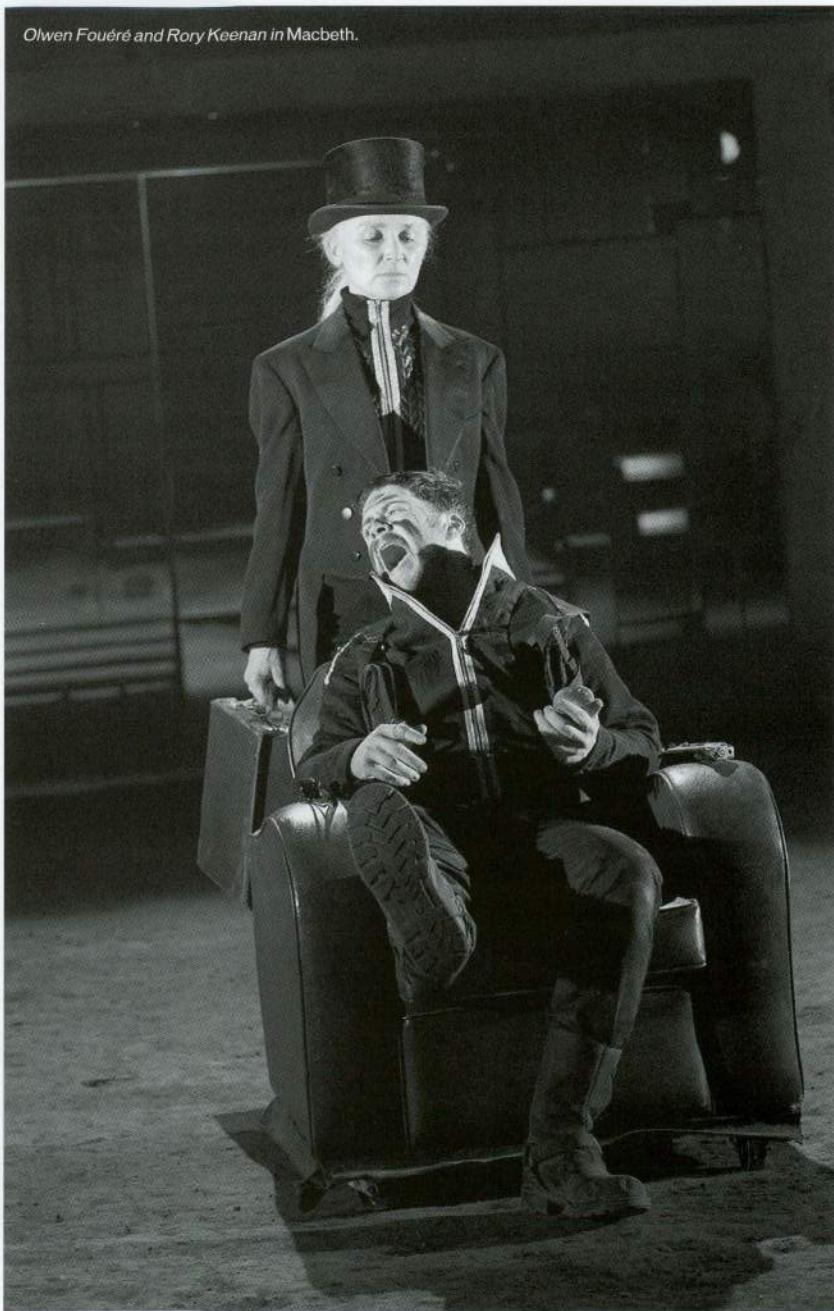
The Empty Space, Smock Alley

29 Feb - 19 Mar. Reviewed 4 Mar

BY SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN

THIS IS A PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH* intensely driven by the visual possibilities of the text. In a gloss rather

Olwen Fouéré and Rory Keenan in Macbeth.



CHRISTOPHER HILL

than an interpretation of the 'Scottish Play', Selina Cartmell harnesses her arsenal of creative energy to ensure her directorial vision is paramount, taking a scattergun approach to the drama which makes for a non-stop cinematic series of mesmerising images in a play already soaked in powerful words and themes of war, violence, good and evil. For anyone already familiar with the play this production is subversive, frustrating, intelligent and provocative, although the trade-off is that the tragic consequence of human frailty and vaulting ambition is left on the cutting room floor.

For this is not just a visual force storming under controlled strategic direction, as is always evident in Cartmell's work, but as often happens with special effects in film, it causes to distance the audience emotionally, while simultaneously creating an assault on other senses. The audience knows from the start that they are in for a visceral elemental treat when Jean Guy Lecat's set design invites them into the bear-pit of sand and earth, facing a two-tiered stage constructed of small panels of mirrored glass. It creates an arena of Elizabethan style, with an audience reflected at times back to itself so that everyone in the play is then tainted in blood and treachery and there are perhaps no innocent bystanders. In her previous

work on Shakespeare, a startling production of *Titus Andronicus*, Cartmell had exploited the visual potential of a play again teeming with blood and cruelty, yet the effect was that we were brought into the emotional heart of the play. Perhaps she felt the mythic element of real tragedy is missing in *Macbeth* and at times is sadly just a bloody farce.

In this production, while it remains faithful to all textual references, we do not find ourselves in familiar Scottish highlands or lowlands nor are we in any specific place at all. This is territory that through costume design and performance could be claimed by any dogs of war from Tarantino misfits to Soviet dictators or the bizarre excesses of certain African despots. In the banquet scene, it is not just the ghosts of Banquo and other murdered victims of Macbeth who haunt the stage but the empty vessels of meaningless reality shows. It is Posh and Becks with crowns, a pair of deluded charlatans playing at royalty but it's too late. The game is up already, they are out of their depth and in this case with blood on their hands. As the doomed couple, Barbara Brennan as Lady Macbeth and Rory Keenan as her younger husband (an age differential in casting that promised more than it delivered) seem already unhinged by the time we meet them. Lady Macbeth is consumed with

appearance but is inappropriately dressed, her sexual appetite reeks of vulgarity rather than passion. While plotting and goading each other to murder Duncan, their host, both she and her husband seem high on manic energy but already separated, forced to manage their guilt in isolation and confront the meaninglessness of their murderous act.

This impression of a circle of senseless violence in the production is underlined as almost every character, through a series of double casting, finds themselves in the role of part time or full time soldier/killer. They are power crazed, full of meaningless self importance, at times gathered petty-criminal style around an enormous pool table or plugging in a chainsaw for their own mini-massacre of Macduff's innocent babes.

But while the creative team and production crew were on red alert in this production, the words of Shakespeare were also firing on all cylinders and certain performances underlined Cartmell's commitment to the text including Olwen Fouéré, Gerard McSorley, Keenan, Brennan and Robert O'Mahony. In particular, smart choices made in casting and

interpretation bring Olwen Fouéré into several roles. She first appears as a sinister figure with pram - not a cinematic innocent and protective mother careering down the Odessa steps in the midst of war, but a harbinger, meddler, fully implicated in war's evil ways. No witches' prophecies were ever delivered in a more macabre way. With equal verve, Gerard McSorley also takes on several roles from the benign to the masterfully sinister including the regal Duncan. His king, full of calm authority is also a sultan of spin.

For those not familiar with the play, the text plundered for its theatrical and visual possibilities might at times have jumbled the narrative thrust of the drama. Macbeth may have murdered sleep not just for those within the play but those without as there was little room for rest in this production. The only stillness was in the striking image of each newly murdered person slowly turning as the sands of time fall through their open fingers, intimating their next role in the ghostly armies of the night who would haunt Macbeth's dreams.

Read Brian Singleton on Rough Magic's
Life is a Dream online:
www.irishtheatremagazine.ie

THE RECRUITING OFFICER

By George Farquhar

Directed by Lynne Parker

Set Design: Ferdia Murphy

Costume Design: Kathy Strachan

Lighting Design: Tina MacHugh

Music Director: Hélène Montague

With: Cathy Belton, Des Cave, Kathy Keira Clarke, Declan Conlon, Denis Conway, Miche Doherty, Dermot Magennis, Peter Hanly, Pat Laffan, Garrett Lombard, Fergal McElherron, Eleanor Methven, Janet Moran, Marc O'Shea,

Derry Power

The Abbey Theatre

6 Dec 2007 – 26 Jan 2008. Reviewed 14 Jan

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH me that I enjoy this type of thing? For some reason, the spread of the holiday pantomime beyond the borders of the traditional family venues has never really bothered me. In previous years I have enjoyed productions like *A Christmas Carol* at The Gate or *Tartuffe* at The Abbey, where holiday flavour and bonhomie tended to win out over a search for enlightenment. Though it makes an ill-advised attempt to connect with its audience by transferring the action from England to Ireland, the Abbey Christmas Show is an otherwise fairly straightforward rendering of George Farquhar's Restoration Comedy, complete with faux-period painted sets and ripe, moustachio-twirling characterisations that invite shouts of

'he's behind you'. And on that level, it is harmlessly enjoyable.

The story, inspired apparently by Farquhar's own brief mobilisation in the early 1700's, revolves around the efforts of military recruitment agents to trick, cajole or otherwise persuade men to join the army, and the maelstrom of (apolitical) troubles that this causes in a small town where several of them also have romantic interests. In the original version, the small town was Shrewsbury, so the clash of metropolitan versus rural values was of the Imperial centre versus its provinces. By shifting the setting to Ireland, this production somewhat blunts the satirical thrust of things and makes it an indigenous colloquial clash at the far fringes of the Empire, which doesn't quite resonate the same way.

This geographical transposition is a mis-step which gives a lie to Stuart Parker's comment in the programme that "My own longing for a Farquhar play set in Ireland is an irresistible but foolish one, since he was of course working within the restraining demands of a tiny, English, metropolitan theatre culture. He clearly thrived in these circumstances and forged from them from his own distinctive style of comedy, which remains a potent influence and example almost three centuries later." Parker was right. Much as he himself 'longed for' it, the Irish Farquhar



Declan Conlon in *The Recruiting Officer*.

play does not exist. This isn't it either. He was also right in that this play goes about its job perfectly well if you are prepared to accept it for what it is, a distinct style of comedy that was seminal in making that style into a genre, a genre which, admittedly, you may not care for.

The play couldn't be more obvious. Its characters are name-labelled, from Captain Brazen (Miche Doherty) to Justice Balance (Denis Conway) and Sergeant Kite (Garrett Lombard). Everyone behaves in predictable

ways, there is some cross-dressing heroine-in-disguise action as no-nonsense Silvia (Cathy Belton) goes undercover to discover if her suitor Captain Plume (Declan Conlon) truly is a worthy man, while the well-meaning local gentleman Mr. Worthy (Peter Hanly) tries to keep the peace as misadventure, miscommunication, and fiendish deceptions complicate the path of true love. Oh look, you can't expect anything massively meaningful from a play with characters called Justice Scruple (Pat Laf-

fan), Justice Scale (Des Cave), and Bullock (Fergal McElherron).

The cast get in the spirit of things for the most part. Doherty is actually a genuine hoot as Captain Brazen, perfectly judging his movements and self-conscious poses to capture the mock-haughty quality of a character who is quick to speak of his heroism but slow to draw a sword unless he's very sure of the odds. Declan Conlon is unusually animated as Captain Plume, the supremely self-confident, roughish hero, ably side-kicked by Lombard as his wily Sergeant who assumes a range of identities including disguising himself as a fortuneteller who sounds like Frank Kelly's Dr. Astro on 'Wanderly Wagon'. Cathy Belton is also good as Silvia, playing the hoary old cross-dressing girlfriend bit completely in the spirit of the thing.

Lynne Parker's direction is a tad less sharp than it might be. The play doesn't clip along quickly enough to really keep the audience on side, something that was evident by the low turnout and occasional walkout on the night attended by this critic. It is certainly not as slick as John McCollgan's *The Shaughraun*, or the not dissimilar but better executed *She Stoops to Conquer* directed by Patrick Mason in 2003. But for all that, this is harmless seasonal fare that you either enjoy in itself (I did) or decry and despise for all that it is and that it represents.

TURANDOT

By Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe

Adami and Renato Simoni

Opera Ireland

Conducted by Bruno Dal Bon

Directed by Dieter Kaegi

Sets and Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

Costume Design: Joan O'Clery

With: Stefania Spaggiari, Warren Mok,

Mari Moriya and Brian Jauhiainen

Gaiety Theatre

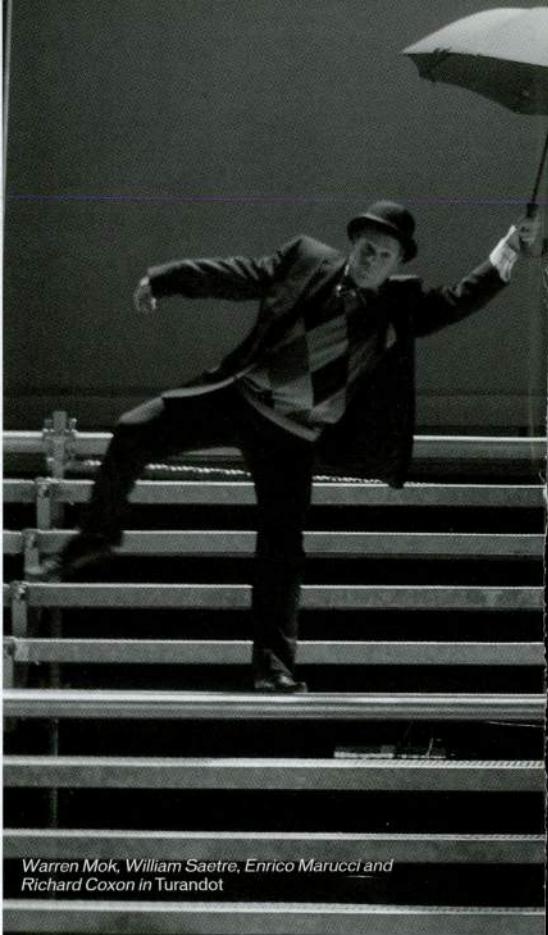
17 - 25 Nov 2007. Reviewed 23 Nov

BY ÁINE SHIELS

DIETER KAEGI'S NEW PRODUCTION of Puccini's *Turandot* opened promisingly, making an instant visual and aural impact. Ranged on steel steps and dressed in Maoist-style costumes, the chorus members lowered newspapers one-by-one from their faces, revealing the significant contingent of Chinese vocal students that Opera Ireland engaged specifically for this production. Workers toiled underneath the steps while a dark-suited mandarin in a red tie proclaimed Turandot's determination to execute her suitors. As the crowd surged forward and was pinned back by police, here was a spectacle that represented crude hierarchy and authoritarian force. Combined with vigorous choral singing and a spirited and focused sound from the RTÉ Concert Orchestra under Bruno Dal Bon, the effect was impressive. It lasted beyond the entrance of the old

man Timur (played with some unsubtlety by Brian Jauhainen), his loyal servant Liù (the young Japanese singer Mari Moriya, who recently won the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition in Dublin), and his long-lost son Calaf (Hong Kong tenor Warren Mok). Moriya and Mok presented two ends of the vocal spectrum – Moriya at her best when spinning delicate high notes of great finesse, and Mok rarely stepping back from full-voiced resoluteness.

Mok's enthusiasm was characteristic of the production as a whole, which seemed to delight in a rich succession of Chinese motifs. These included tai chi, a projection of crowds of cyclists, pot noodles, chopsticks, a flatscreen television playing lush images of Chinese scenery, traditional dragon patterns, oversized peaked police caps, and voluminous red drapery. No doubt China is a land of many contrasts and strong visual imagery, but after a while this eclectic collection of motifs seemed overgenerous. A postmodern approach to time and politics manifested itself in the course of the production: in their dark blue workers' suits the chorus represented communism, while the pinstripes, bowler hats and umbrellas of the three ministers Ping, Pang and Pong (Enrico Marrucci, Richard Coxon and William Saetre) conjured up a stereotypical picture of



Warren Mok, William Saetre, Enrico Marrucci and Richard Coxon in *Turandot*

English capitalism. The Emperor (Joe Turpin) entered in a western suit, red sash and military coat, adding a touch of imperialism to the mix. Nor was Western consumerism overlooked: dressed warmly and juggling artificial snowballs, the children in Act I resembled an advert for Gap-style winter clothing.

The children's chorus sounded underpowered and was one of the weaker moments in the production, but other elements took their toll too. Despite the display of heads on poles and the sharpening of a knife in Act I,



Turandot's failed suitor (the Prince of Persia) was executed by firing squad rather than beheading. After Ping, Pang and Pong's farcical umbrella routine in Act I, these props could not be taken seriously as torture instruments in Act II. This was symptomatic of a larger problem with the three ministers: as comic relief they fell short, not least because of some ill-disciplined ensemble work, nor could they pass as genuinely rounded characters despite professions of homesickness and their fear of Turandot. Turandot herself, as performed

here by Stefania Spaggiari, was no more rounded than Ping, Pang and Pong. Spaggiari's tense vocal and physical delivery was not entirely explained by her character's unbending nature and the fact that she spent remarkably little time on stage. Spaggiari's presence in Act I was limited to a projection on the back wall, and her centrality was further diminished by Opera Ireland's decision to finish at Liù's suicide – the last part of the opera that Puccini composed before his sudden death. Completions of the score by other composers were es-

chewed in favour of leaving the ending open, as Kaegi suggested in a brief programme note.

There are many critics who would argue that *Turandot* is a dramatically flawed work, given Calaf's inexplicable attraction to the icy Turandot and his disregard for the devoted Liù and his aging father, Timur. The prominent musicologist Joseph Kerman once commented that "there is almost a sense of despair in [Turandot's] meaninglessness". Perhaps, then, Opera Ireland's presentation of the

work as a visually stylish, for the most part musically energetic spectacle was a perfectly valid approach. Why not respond to an illogical and incomplete text with a postmodern production that does not tie up loose ends?

Those looking for an interpretation that might clarify the plot or draw a coherent contemporary relevance from it will have been disappointed. But on the night this reviewer attended, there was little sign of disappointment: the production was warmly received by a capacity audience. ■



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