

irishtheatre

VOLUME TWO, NUMBER FIVE SPRING 2000 £4

MAGAZINE



NORTHERN IRELAND:



THEATRE ON THE THRESHOLD

9

ISSN 13937855
771393 785003

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2 WHAT'S NEWS

6 BOOM OR BUST, FOLD OR TWIST? David Grant offers his perspective on the choices facing theatre in Northern Ireland.

12 WHOSE CULTURE, WHOSE AGENDA? Mark Carruthers argues that the prevailing talk of confidence in the Northern theatre industry is far from the full picture.

16 ITS OWN WAY OF THINGS? Mark Phelan and Ophelia Byrne chart the last 100 years of Ulster theatre history — from the Ulster Literary Theatre to the present day.

26 MARRIED WITH CHILDREN The Belfast Festival at Queen's is still defining its adult identity, argues Caoimhe McAvinchey.

30 MARCHING SEASON An exclusive excerpt from Gary Mitchell's new play *Marching On*.

36 PLAYING THE COMMUNITY Claire Cochrane discusses two very different community theatre projects and the issues they raise.

40 NORTHERN VOICES Some stayed; some left; some came from elsewhere. Theatre artists and professionals talk about their relationship to Northern Ireland.

48 SPECIAL REPORT: ALL EYES ON I.A.P.A. Eibhlin Ni Ruarc reports on the implications of the recently-announced national performing arts academy for the theatre sector.

53 OPINIONS AND OVERVIEWS: Our critics and columnists sound off:

COLUMNS

Loughlin Deegan on Entrances and Exits; Jocelyn Clarke on Books; Naomi Conway on Ulster youth drama

REVIEWS

Our critics discuss 16 recent productions and festivals.

ON THE COVER: From top: Seán Campion, Donncha Crowley, and Conleth Hill in the Lyric Theatre's *Waiting for Godot* (photo, Jill Jennings); Photo of Stormont by Pacemaker Press Int'l Ltd.; The Wedding Community Play Project (photo, Mervyn Smyth/Belfast Exposed)

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Printed by A.Cunningham. Tel. 8389398



Theatre on the Threshold

IN THE TIME IT'S TAKEN US TO PREPARE THIS issue, the political situation in the North has done an all-too-familiar backslide, rendering our original issue title, "Theatre in the New North," sadly unusable. Thus we found ourselves in a parallel dilemma to that which artists and arts organisations in the North have faced for most of the last century: How do you express yourself when reality is constantly shifting?

At the same time we also found ourselves questioning our instinct to single out the North for an exclusive focus — would we do an issue on a single area of the Republic? On reflection, the answer to the latter question is, We just might; and we forged ahead in producing this issue because, even if the New North is still being born, theatre in Northern Ireland is very much alive, and yet very much a closed system. There is so much that we in the Republic don't know or understand about the history and current reality of the cultural scene in the North. And vice versa — the border between the Republic and the North has been a significant barrier to cultural traffic.

Much of the dialogue about devolution has centred around the notion of a unique Northern Irish culture and identity — distinct from that of the Republic or Britain and comprising both Catholics and Protestants. While many people we talk to in the North want to believe that such a culture does, or could, exist, constant delays to political progress stand in the way of seeing how this notion might flesh itself out in lived experience.

This is where the arts can take the lead. Artists and cultural workers have the means — many would argue the responsibility — to envision new cultural possibilities; theatre in particular is a place where new ideas about society can be rehearsed. And yet the North lacks a continuous tradition of theatrical activity, a fact that, as Mark Phelan and Ophelia

Byrne argue in this issue, has much to do with the area's contentious political history.

In the '80s and '90s, though, progress has slowly been made towards the creation of a theatrical infrastructure, and the last few years have seen a significant upswing of activity: an independent theatre scene continues to grow; new venues are cropping up throughout the region; new training opportunities are becoming available; change is afoot at the Lyric Theatre and the Belfast Festival... As Mark Carruthers and David Grant discuss in this issue, caution and a skeptical eye are still necessary, and yet, it seems, a critical mass seems imminent, which might arrest or even reverse the historic talent drain out of the North. Theatre truly feels like it's on the threshold.

We found ourselves over-reaching our capabilities in our attempt to cover the field — this is our fattest issue ever — and yet we're all too aware of gaps: we were unable to give Charabanc and Field Day their due nor to interrogate the notion of a Northern canon; the power and continuity of the youth and community drama movements deserve a closer look... What we offer therefore is a selective, topical overview: May it prompt more dialogue between the different theatre cultures on this island.

We owe thanks to many individuals and organisations in the North who offered us advice, assistance, and resources for this issue: the Drama Department at Queen's University; the Lyric Theatre, particularly Brona Hoey; the Linen Hall Library; Belfast Exposed; Molly Brown; Ashley Dunne; Jo Egan; Stuart Graham; David Grant; Maureen Harkins; Martin Lynch; David McFetridge; Gary Mitchell; Eamon Quinn; and John Sheehan. We reserve our final thanks for the real "without which" people of this issue: Ophelia Byrne, David Johnston, Caoimhe McAvinchey, and Mark Phelan.

No news is bad news

Ringing around the Republic for theatre news was something of a futile exercise this March, as nearly every organisation had only one story to tell: We're waiting on the Arts Council. The well-publicised behind-the-scenes dramas at Merrion Square — the most recent being the resignation and replacement of three Councillors including the chairman — have caused considerable delays in decisions on year 2000 grants. Doubtless this situation is just as unpleasant for Arts Council staff who are facing the frustration of their clients and awaiting word from above about how the ambitious *Arts Plan 1999-2001* will be implemented. The question being asked more and more openly in the arts community — to what standard of professional competence can and should the Arts Council be held? — seems to have been echoed in Government: the Arts Council is called before an all-party committee of the Dáil to account for its recent activity on 4 April.

BUT UP IN THE NORTH... Tinderbox are bursting with news. They're touring Joseph Crilly's *On McQuillan's Hill* throughout the island through 8 April (see the review section for our critic's take), and are rehearsing their next production, *Ruby*, written by MARIE JONES and directed by IAN MCELHENNY. *Ruby* opens in Enniskillen from the 13-15 April and then moves to the Group Theatre Belfast from 18 April-13 May. Tinderbox's tenth annual APRIL SUNDAYS FESTIVAL (9, 16, and 30 April at the Old Museum arts centre) features rehearsed readings of plays by Nicola McCartney, Paula

Cunningham, Pól MagUidhir, and Terry Eagleton.

WE'RE NOT BITTER The LYRIC THEATRE were the biggest winners in this year's third annual Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Awards, which were held on 13th February -- they picked up three awards including Best Company, Best Production (*Stones in His Pockets*), and best actor (Conleth Hill). Congrats to all the winners, especially Waterford's **LITTLE RED KETTLE**, who triumphed in the Judges' Special Award category over particularly bracing competition. Nice one!

OUR LATEST EXPORTS Three Irish pro-





THE HAPPY FEW: This year's Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Award winners

ductions will travel to Washington, D.C. for the "Island: Arts from Ireland" festival which runs from 13-28 May: Red Kettle are sending Donal O'Kelly's *CATALPA*; Druid are sending Marina Carr's latest, *RAFTERY'S HILL*, which will have premiered in Galway only the week before; and Rough Magic are reviving their 1995 production of Stewart Parker's *PENTECOST* especially for the occasion. Other theatre-related content at the D.C. Festival includes a Fintan O'Toole-organised symposium on theatre and history in contemporary Ireland... Kudos to *BEDROCK*, *PAN PAN*, and *RIDICULUSMUS*, who collectively won a Fringe First at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in March. Pan Pan report that *Standoffish*, the production they premiered in Adelaide, is heading out on a five-week tour of

France in May, and will continue to tour the continent throughout the year. We'll most likely get our first chance to see it here in Ireland in January 2001 at their **INTERNATIONAL THEATRE SYMPOSIUM...** Full marks for forward-thinking programming to the Arches Theatre in Glasgow who've put together a fierce edgy slate of small-scale Irish productions for their Spring Dreams festival, running 16 March-22 April: *GREENLIGHT'S The Good Thief*, *CALIPO'S Xaviers*, *CHAMBERMADE's Journeyman*, *COMMON CURRENCY's Bimbo*, *YEW TREE's Alone it Stands*, and a production of Ron

Syngean Study

The theme of this year's Synge Summer School, which will be held on 2-8 July, is "The Voices of Irish Drama"; speakers include Cathy Leeney, Declan Kiberd, Martine Pelletier, Jennifer Johnston, Brendan Kennelly, Roy Foster, Tom Murphy, and course director Nicholas Grene. For registration ring 0404-46131.

Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull* from Scots RAPTURE TO... Yew Tree, Common Currency, and Calipo are reviving their respective productions in Ireland as well: *Bimbo* plays the Civic Theatre Tallaght from 17 April-5 May; *Xaviers* is on a seven-stop tour which ends up at the City Arts Centre on 11-13 April; and the seemingly unstoppable *Alone it Stands* tours the island through 2 June.



LET'S GET PHYSICAL Ring 01-671-2013 for information about **BARABBAS...** THE COMPANY'S two-week physical theatre workshop, running from 3-14 April... Sligo's **BLUE RAINCOAT** are holding their annual spring workshops from 17-22 April and 24-29 April; they will train participants in Suzuki method, Viewpoints, and Corporeal Mime. Ring 071-70431 or e-mail bluerain@iol.ie for more information.

Lashings of Leigh

Hard on the heels of *Abigail's Party*, Plush Productions' revival of Mike Leigh's cocktail-party-from-hell play, at the New Theatre (running through 15 April), Sidetrack T.C. are mounting Leigh's *Ecstasy*, directed by David Horan, at the Crypt from 27 March - 8 April... Martin Murphy also conducts a fascinating interview with Leigh in the current issue of the National Association of Youth Drama's excellent annual magazine *Youth Drama Ireland*, which traces Leigh's famed improvisation-based theatre-making style back to his days working in youth drama in 1960s Birmingham... Contact NAYD on 01-878-1301 for copies of the mag.

COUNTDOWN TO PROJECT Project Arts Centre have set a date for the long-awaited reopening of their Temple Bar headquarters: the Jaki Irvine-curated moving image exhibition *Somewhere Near Vada* opens on 10 June and plays through 16 July.

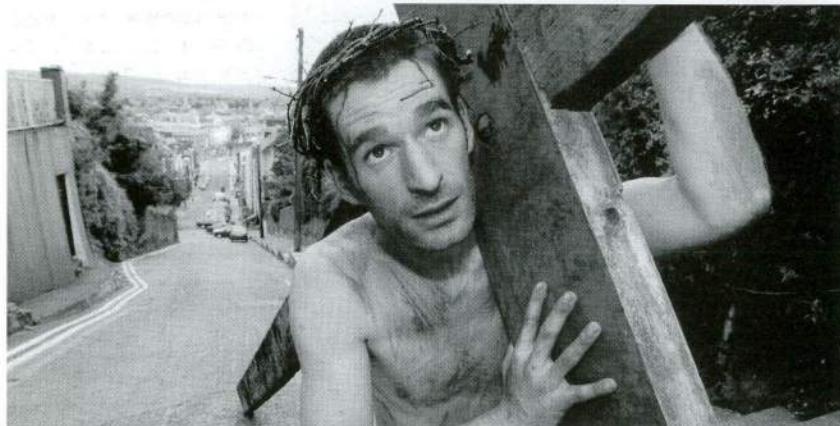
WHAT DO THEY DO THE OTHER 11 MONTHS OF THE YEAR?

The Dublin Fringe's **ALI CURRAN** has been back and forth to

England scoping the best new dance work for Fringe 2000, and also reports a theatrical coup: she's secured the Dublin premiere of Corn Exchange's *Foley* (see a review of *Foley* in this issue). Curran was also keen to report that **SIOBHÁN COLGAN** will return to handle the Fringe's press and marketing for a second year... Meanwhile, Theatre Festival Director **FERGUS LINEHAN** and Development Manager **TAMMY DILLON** spent Paddy's weekend in New York, launching the American Friends of the DTF programme at the Broadway premiere of *Riverdance*, along with their chairwoman, *R'dance* producer **MOYA DOHERTY**.

MUSICAL THEATRE FANS TAKE NOTE

Fair play to Hands Turn TC who have secured the local rights to the hit American musical **RENT**, winner of oodles of Tony Awards as well as the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama; it runs 15 July-9 Sept. at Dublin's Olympia. Producers say casting will take place in Ireland and London.



CORK PASSION: Mick Heffernan in *Corcadorka's Trial of Jesus*

SO YOU WANT TO BE A MILLIONAIRE? The annual Theatrical Cavaliers Cricket Club Charity **TABLE QUIZ** is scheduled for 16 April at the Teachers' Club, Parnell Square. Ring 01-838-9826 to register.

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS ISLAND in Limerick are premiering *The Trickster*, by Harriet O'Carroll (after Molière) and directed by Terry Devlin, at the Belltable from 23 March–1 April and then taking it on tour... **RED KETTLE** have a new Jimmy Murphy play on the way, *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*, which goes into rehearsal on May 1 under former a.d. Jim Nolan's direction... **CORCADORKA** are staging a one-day, outdoor *Trial of Jesus*, penned by Cónal Creedon, at various sites around Cork's Patrick Hill on Good Friday, 21st April. Company a.d. Pat Kiernan directs... **THE CIVIC, TALLAGHT** are planning a showcase of small-scale work from Britain: *ELECTRA* from Scotland's Theatre Cryptic (29–30 May); *CASTRADIVA* from Wales (1 June) and Fringe First winner *CAR* from Theatre Absolute (2–3 June).

LILLIPUTIANS UNITE! A revival of their 1993 adaptation of Swift's *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*, directed by Theresia Guschlbauer, is *GALLOGLASS'* next production; it plays in Clonmel from 2–10 June and tours its way to an extended run in Dublin's St. Patrick's Cathedral... **CALYPSO** are working towards the summertime premiere of Gavin Kostick's *THE ASYLUM BALL*, based on the real-life phenomenon of 19th-century galas in which people from the outside world would visit homes for the mentally disturbed. The site-specific production will be directed by a.d. Bairbre ni Chaoimh with music by Trevor Knight... Derry's **SOLE PURPOSE PRODUCTIONS** are touring *WAITING*, written and directed by Dave Duggan; it plays the Conference Centre in Enniskillen on 6th April and they're looking to bring it to non-theatre venues in Dublin and Glasgow soon... Northern TIE company **REPLAY** are touring Mike Kenny's *THE LOST CHILD*, a play for 4–8 year olds, through April (it ends up in Dublin's Ark from 26–29 April).

BOOM OR BUST, FOLD OR TWIST?

DAVID GRANT offers a personal perspective on the choices facing theatre in Northern Ireland.

IT WOULD DEFY ANYONE TO HAVE PREDICTED 20 YEARS AGO the vitality and diversity of theatre in Northern Ireland at "the dawn of the millennium." A roll-call of the major theatre companies is impressive enough. We now have the Lyric (at 50 next year, the second oldest independent theatre company in Irish history), Tinderbox, Replay, Prime Cut, Centrestage, Big Telly, Dubbeljoint, and Kabosh (all with their distinctive niches clearly carved out), as well as a whole host of newer companies, including Aisling Ghear,

catering professionally for Irish speaking audiences for the first time. Combine this with a brief survey of the rapidly developing regional infrastructure and an even rosier picture emerges. New theatres have come on line in Armagh, Derry, Cookstown, and Lisburn, alongside excellent venues in Enniskillen and Coleraine, and there is talk of more in Omagh, Bangor and Strabane.

An encouraging enough account to greet the new Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, you would think. But experience suggests at best a cautious optimism. The root structure of this development and growth, though vigorous, is fragile and undernourished.

My first serious involvement with theatre in Northern Ireland was in the late 1970s. We had come through the grim period of almost total shutdown. The Lyric was about to embark on the most intensively productive period of its history with a flood of fine new plays. Brian Friel and Stephen Rea would soon launch Field Day with the memorable *Translations*. There were seeds of hope. But where were the designers, actors and directors? True, the Lyric had kept a small light burning, and the likes of Liam Neeson and Ciarán Hinds were there to avail of the new opportunities that Field Day offered, but the fallow years had driven most into exile. (In 1998, when Rea was directing *Northern Star* in Belfast with a largely local cast, he commented on how difficult that would have been in 1980.) And where were the theatres?

The truth was that following that initial burst of renewed life, as "The Troubles" became normalised and politicians began to speak of "an acceptable level of violence," there were insufficient human and infrastructural resources to offer it much sustenance.

It was in that climate, and as the ener-

gy at the Lyric began to wane, that a few of us set up camp at Belfast's Old Museum, in the seemingly quixotic hope of establishing it as a performance centre for the encouragement of new work. Although the original ideals of that feisty band were compromised by the demands of funders, I believe that Replay,



LOCAL BOYS: Stephen Rea (top) and Liam Neeson

NEESON: JOHN CARLOS

Tinderbox, Prime Cut, and a host of other less durable companies owed their existence in large part to the working space the Old Museum provided.

Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, the arts may not have seemed too urgent a priority. Coleraine, as the chosen location of the new University of Ulster had its own excellent theatre space, the Riverside (a

fact for which Derry would be slow to forgive it!). And the perceived tourist potential of the Lakelands drove on the creation of the lovely Ardhowen Theatre in Enniskillen. But despite these first-class facilities, resident professional activity was at best sporadic. Where, often in the absence of specialist venues, the Republic can boast Druid, and Red Kettle, and Bickerstaffe, and Yew, and Galloglass, and Corcadorca and so many other vibrant regional initiatives, in the North, since Field Day stopped touring, Big Telly alone have managed to sustain any continuity of activity outside the regional capital.

Buildings are fine, and welcome. But it's people that produce art. If we are to make sense of the growing investment in new arts facilities throughout Northern Ireland, we have to match it with investment in the education and development of the artists who will provide those buildings with their *raison d'être*.

My generation was lucky. Emerging in our fledgling state from university on the cusp of Thatcherdom, having enjoyed the luxury of a proper grant, we could still live comfortably, if not lavishly, at the State's expense while we developed our creative potential. My memory of contemporaries who included, among many others, the founder members of Théâtre de Complicité, is not of feckless spongers, but of young people with a passionate sense of their own creativity.

This is not to argue that the Dole is the most appropriate way to encourage younger

theatre on the threshold

artists. The crucial point is that no alternative support structure has emerged in its place. In a similar way, while the Social Security system in the Republic seems to be less oppressive to actors than in the UK, and "creative" artists enjoy generous tax concessions, it has been one of the ironies of economic growth in the Republic that there have been fewer and fewer candidates than ever before for the job-creation schemes under the FÁS aegis on which many arts organisation have come to depend. A new commitment to the support and nurture of individual artists is becoming urgent.

So when the question is asked (as thankfully, it increasingly is), "what is going to fill all these new arts buildings?", my answer is this. The work of artists, of whose existence we can, at present, have at best only an inkling.

And where will they come from? Experience has shown that a little investment in creative people goes a very long way. Indeed, the return on that investment must compare extraordinarily well with any other area of the public sector. Where, for instance, has the current the-

atre community in Northern Ireland come from? Many have arisen from private initiatives like the Lyric Drama Studio and the Ulster Theatre Company summer schemes. Many more from the burgeoning youth theatre movement. The investment in this kind of work has been relatively small. The output has been little short of phenomenal.



BURGEONING : Queen's

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PRIME CUT - JILL JENNINGS; REPLAY - PHIL SMYTH



'90s SUCCESSES: Richard Dormer in *Prime Cut*'s Problem Child and Grainne McCann in *Replay*'s *The Lost Child*

Of course, the universities have also been important. New companies (most notably Kabosh) have regularly arisen from the long-established Theatre Studies course at Coleraine, and Queen's University's Dramsoc has also nurtured a wide variety of talents, from individuals like Simon Callow and Stephen Rea to companies like Tinderbox. Ironically, at

school advocated almost a decade ago by the Basil Deane Report. Highly regarded at the time, and thoroughly researched, for a time it seemed that both Derry and Belfast would compete to fulfill the Deane Report's recommendation of a purpose-built drama school in Northern Ireland (it even specified the building needs).

It remains to be seen how these devel-

the very time that Queen's is developing a new drama course, Dramsoc has been under suspension, following a loss-making ISDA Festival that predates any current undergraduate. This is regrettable. The long-term loss to the local theatre community of this short-sighted policy will never be known. But the new course does seem to be creating a new wave of creativity among the current student body.

The good news is that the drama course at Queen's seems to be rooting well, and there is talk of a new MA in Creative Writing. At the same time, there is a sense of renewed energy at Coleraine, and a performing-arts-related MA course may soon be on the way. I am reminded of the way that in the '90s the Gaiety School and the Samuel Beckett Centre, two of the Republic's leading training institutions, seemed to spur each other on. Perhaps Northern Ireland will yet see the local vocational drama

opments will be affected by the proposal for a new centre for training in the performing arts in the Republic. But I remain convinced of the need for locally based training if the potential of the new arts spaces is to be realised. In the past, those who have trained away have tended to stay away; whereas some of the most energetic members of the local theatre community have been drawn to Northern Ireland from elsewhere through their choice of university or other training course. And however well developed formal training may become, there will always be a place for a healthy range of extra-curricular opportunities. This historically is where younger directors have learnt to take responsibility and initiative.

But supposing we do invest in the training and encouragement of theatre artists. Will this answer the needs of the new venues? Not without a general will in regional and local government actively to promote a lively cultural agenda.

I see two main threats here. The first relates to government policy. In common with all areas of government, arts funders are coming under increasing pressure to make their policies conform to key concerns of central government. In particular, there has been great emphasis on TSN — "Targeting Social Need." While no-one could argue with this general premise, there is a danger that in striving to fulfill a broad social agenda, artists become pressured into losing sight of the essential creativity that must surely continue to be their central concern. Artists must not come to see themselves as civil servants.

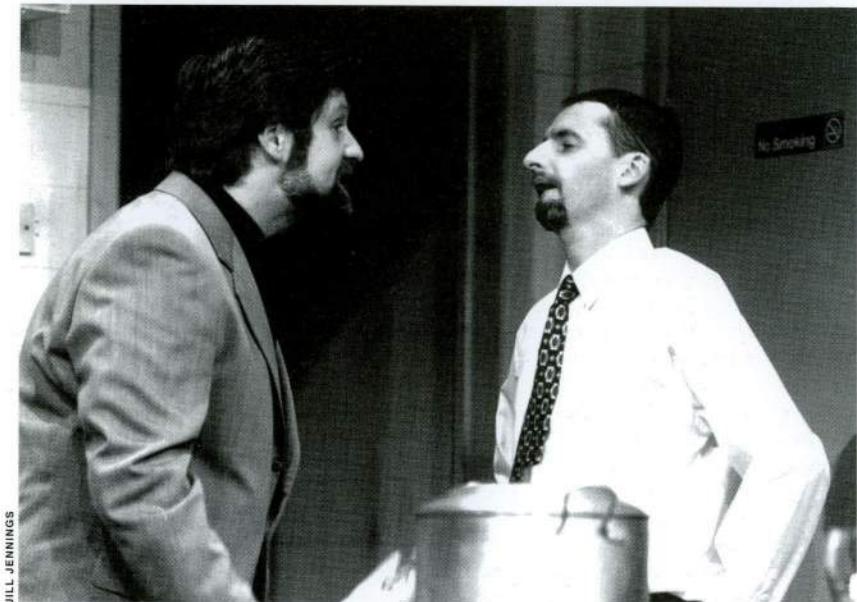
The other threat exists at a local government level, where there is a growing danger of excessive parochialism. I can see many arguments in favour of the

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EU's favoured notion of "subsidiarity" — the idea that things should be administered at as local a level as is appropriate in all the circumstances. In principle, this fits well with the immediacy of the arts. A play, for instance, can speak with a much more local voice than television or cinema. But in practice, administrative divisions in Northern Ireland often seem arbitrary and too small for the effective administration of the arts, especially when these are used as an instrument for the distribution of that increasingly significant element in arts funding — Lottery money. It is entirely understandable when equity demands that funding is spread as evenly as possible across the community. But there is need for an over-arching strategy when it comes to the creation of new buildings.

Strict application of current policy could lead to an even greater proliferation of venues. This would add to the pressure theatre producers already feel to mount whistle-stop tours of one-night-stands, when it would be preferable to make longer stops in fewer locations. The desire of individual local authorities to be seen to serve their own immediate communities is understandable. But a one-night touring pattern has a detrimental effect on the quality of product toured. It also requires the duplication of specialist facilities from venue to venue. Might it not be better if one venue in an area took a special interest in music, another in dance, another in small-scale drama, another in larger-scale drama, leaving each free to concentrate on providing specialist facilities accordingly?

It seems that the unprecedented building boom has been driven more by issues of local prestige than a coherent arts policy. There is an urgent need for theatre



JILL JENNINGS

FOLD OR TWST?: Dan Gordon and Frankie McCafferty in Dealer's Choice

producers in Northern Ireland to work with the growing network of local authority arts officers to help them encourage their Councils to take a more strategic approach to arts development. Too often, local authority promoters have found difficulty in booking the touring shows that local theatre producers want to offer them. Clearly, there has to be a greater degree of consultation between the two sectors, and the new Theatre Exchange, a regular regional forum for the sharing of ideas and information, is a welcome move in this direction.

But local authorities must also make a real commitment to supporting their arts officers in the vital area of audience development. The recent Prime Cut production of Patrick Marber's *Dealer's Choice* is a case in point. This was an

excellent play, well cast, superbly directed by Oscar-nominee Tim Loane, starring Frankie McCafferty (a familiar face from "Ballykissangel"), but as a new play by (in Northern Ireland) a little-known English author, I gather that it was considered too much of a risk for a regional audience by many local promoters. Certainly the proportion of Northern venues to those in the Republic for this tour is much less than might have been expected. If we are not to condemn ourselves to perpetual banality, there has to be a greater collective will to promote risk. As the gamblers in *Dealer's Choice* might say, we have to decide whether to fold or twist!

David Grant is the former artistic director of the Lyric Theatre.

WHOSE CULTURE, WHOSE AGENDA?

For MARK CARRUTHERS, the future of Northern Ireland's artistic landscape is uncertain. In this personal opinion piece, he argues that the prevailing talk of confidence in the industry is far from the full picture.

FOR A FEW SHORT WEEKS THE RECEIVED WISDOM OF THE past three decades and more was turned on its head. As the 108 members of the Assembly eased themselves into their amply furnished offices in Stormont's marbled Parliament Buildings and began to enjoy their full privileges under devolution, they also began

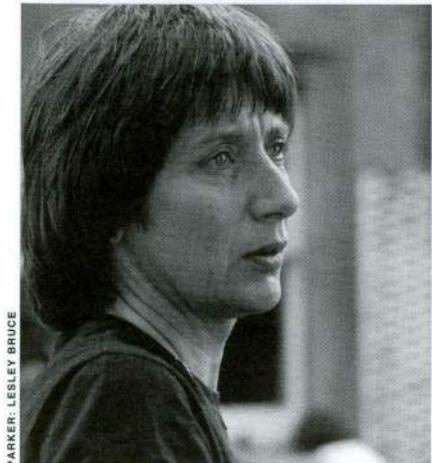
to speak — albeit falteringly — a new language. For as long as anyone I know can remember, elected representatives have clung fast to the old adage that there are no votes in the arts. Suddenly, blinking in the light of a new political dispensation, some were heard muttering uncertainly about the value of "arts tourism." While the notion of the arts as a honeypot for tourists may be unpalatable to many who've laboured long and hard in the industry here, it was nonetheless a sign, perhaps, that at least some of our politicos were beginning to wake up and smell the greasepaint.

Another reason then to suppose that the much vaunted, new-found optimism in the arts might have some substance to



A NEW LANGUAGE? Stormont

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PARKER: LESLEY BRUCE



HOUSEHOLD NAMES? Christina Reid and Stewart Parker

it. Of course, as we now know, the politicians put devolution on ice, and so it's back to where we were: prolonged discussion about decommissioning and related matters, and the arts are back where many politicians seem to believe they belong — firmly off the agenda.

In truth, the politicians have not been alone in giving the arts a wide berth. For many in a society as fractured as this one has been for 30 years, a good night out was very often a good night in. Throughout the dark days of the 1970s and early '80s the Belfast Festival at Queen's was an unrivalled cultural beacon in a community riven with sectarian violence. Just as swathes of ordinary decent folk opted out of politics, so too they opted out of the arts — much easier and safer to stay at home and watch television. That, of course, hardly strengthened the hand of those seeking to build audiences for challenging new work in exciting new venues.

Strangely though, Belfast today has fewer performance venues than it had a few short years ago. The Arts Theatre

closed over a year ago, and the Crescent Arts Centre's main performance space is shut for repairs. Of those that are open for business, the Grand Opera House — widely credited with acting as a cultural catalyst when it reopened in 1980 — is large and broadly populist, the Old Museum arts centre is small with big access problems, the Waterfront Studio has limitations as a theatre space, and the Lyric is a medium-sized, single auditorium rep. The provision of new performance venues in Belfast continues to generate much paper, but to date no firm commitments have been made. As of now Belfast has no Traverse. It has no Tron. It has no Royal Exchange, no Project, no Royal Court, no Donmar, and no Tricycle. So much for the tourist honeypot!

Outside Belfast a tranche of newly built arts centres and theatres in Omagh, Cookstown, Derry, Ballymena, Armagh, Portadown and Lisburn is emerging. Fabulous new state of the art restaurants — but will there be anything to eat? The question that's increasingly being asked

is if they can realistically hope to offer a programme of events not heavily dependent on tribute bands, local amateur troupes, and community projects. The current policy of having an arts centre or theatre no more than 20 miles from anyone in the country looks good on paper but it is an economic nonsense. How thinly can you spread the jam?



D. JONES

20-SOMETHING: Darragh Carville's Language Roulette

That problem is further compounded because too many people here have an understanding of culture which leaves a lot to be desired — for culture read "kultur." As I understand it culture is not, in fact, about the right to express a particular religio-political affiliation — so often the right to march, the right to fly flags, in short the right to delineate territory. Isn't it meant to be about celebrating diversity, about opening minds to bigger and better ideas of how people live and relate to one another? What's the point of theatre, for example, if it doesn't challenge our lazy, cherished positions?

Unfortunately many people here think culture is about the celebration of separation while the arts are simply about entertainment. That pervading philistinism is something that people who work in the arts, and those of us who write about and

theatre on the threshold

comment upon what they do, constantly come up against. I never cease to be amazed at the number of otherwise well-informed individuals who simply consider the theatre an irrelevance. Ask them if

they've heard of Darragh Carville or Gary Mitchell and they'll stare back blankly. You'll get a similar response if you mention Joseph Crilly, John McClelland, Damian Gorman, Owen McCafferty, or Robin Glendinning. That's a shame. Will they be familiar with the work of Stewart Parker? Christina Reid and Graham Reid? Too few will be, and that's regrettable too.

Of course not everyone is out of touch. Many people do frequent arts events and those who have an interest in theatre — especially those with an appetite for the work of our better independent companies — are invariably very loyal in their support. As is so often the case though, it is a question of scale — too few people committed to too few events on too irregular a basis.

Which brings us back to those much-maligned politicians. Now that the power and influence has ebbed away from them again, will they maintain an interest in the industry? Will they remember what they've heard from groups like the newly-formed PAL — Professional Arts Lobby — which highlights the importance of the arts sector as an employer and an economic agitator? I hope they will, but I fear they will not. Many elected representatives will be only too happy to turn up to the opening of the new venue in their area. But will they be back on a wet Monday night six months hence when the photographers have long gone? I hope my scepticism is ill-founded, but I'm looking forward to going along to find out.

Mark Carruthers presents "Newline" and "Spotlight" on BBC Northern Ireland and "Evening Extra" on BBC Radio Ulster.

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ITS OWN WAY OF THINGS?

*The history of Northern Irish theatre mirrors that of the place itself: impassioned and embattled, writers and companies have struggled to find their own voices and identities within the context of political turmoil. The Ulster Literary Theatre, whose history **MARK PHELAN** recounts here, set the terms of the debate; **OPHELIA BYRNE** follows the story through to the present day.*

On the verge of a revolution

NORTH IS NORTH AND SOUTH IS SOUTH, IRREVOCABLY, and although the line of demarcation is not to be so firmly drawn as between Occident and Orient, it nevertheless demands recognition. Ulster has its own way of things." (*Ulaid*)

Samuel Cooke, the incandescent 19th-century Ulster Protestant orator, denounced the theatre-goer as being "one degree lower than the Sabbath breaker," so we can only wonder how the redoubtable reverend would have responded to Tinderbox Theatre Company's recent rehearsals in the Cooke Centennial Hall, built to commemorate the legacy of the "Black Man." Such theological tirades typified the hostile atmosphere towards theatre in 19th-century Ulster. *The Parliament Gazeteer* commended the neglect of theatre as being "greatly to the credit of the

North," while Calvinistic denunciations of "godless" theatre were compounded by colonial notions of respectability, in which the good citizen of "Linenopolis" (Belfast) deemed it better to wait "until he goes to London before he patronises a place of the kind — and when he returns he can speak with a kind of deprecating air of our theatres." The rapid industrialisation of the 19th century also stifled the once-vibrant cultural life of the North, reducing Ulster to, in the words of the periodical *Ulaid*, "an intellectual Sahara... (where) our ideals are strangled at birth."

Given the harshness of these conditions, it is unsurprising that 19th-century Ulster drove its artists to the more conducive literary climates of London and Dublin. However, against this background of pervasive philistinism and puritanism emerged the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT), the North's first theatrical movement and a much-overshadowed corollary of W.B. Yeats' Irish Literary Theatre, the forerunner of the Abbey.

Founded by Bulmer Hobson and David Parkhill, the ULT's original aims were overtly political and romantically wistful. It sought to reclaim Belfast's reneged title as

Parkhill's proposals for the creation of a "Northern Branch of the ILT," possibly because as it would operate beyond the pale of his literary jurisdiction. But Maud Gonne and other ILT actors embraced the Northern proposals and were instrumental in staging and producing the ULT's debut productions in 1902: Yeats' *Cathleen ní Houlihan* and Belfastman James Cousins' *The Racing Lug*.

Reaction to the two plays indicated the disparity between the political and cultural affinities of North and South and intimated the future unravelling of the rapprochement between them. While the



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"The Athens of the North" and restore the status it had enjoyed as Ireland's intellectual and political capital in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when, harbouring the radical ideas of the French and American revolutions, and as home to the United Irishmen, the city was the harbinger of the nationalism which swept the island and led to the 1798 uprising. The ULT's goals represented a titanic struggle, for unlike its Southern counterpart it had to combat not only apathy and indifference but actual Calvinistic hostility — what Belfast historian David Kennedy diagnosed as the Ulsterman's "anti-theatre complex."

Yeats refused to support Hobson and

homely idiom and accent of Cousins' characters elicited a warm response from northern audiences, they were alienated by Yeats' characters and baffled by his message, which had invigorated and inflamed audiences at its Southern premiere. One northern audience member was heard to comment about Cathleen's arrival — perhaps the most famous entrance in the history of the Irish stage — that it was "all going rightly 'til she came along," hilariously highlighting how different the literary and political atmosphere in the north was from that in Dublin.

Such indifference to "Cathleen's call" provided a pragmatic and political justifi-

cation to found a separate movement in the north, first called the "Ulster Branch of the ILT" and then rechristened the Ulster Literary Theatre upon receipt of a chastening letter from Yeats' organisation denying any relationship to the new group and claiming royalties for the use of the name. From 1903 - 1912, the ULT was to create a remarkable body of work, notably through the plays of Rutherford Mayne, Lewis Purcell and Gerald McNamara, most of which were set in the North and performed in the earthy idiom of Ulster speech, as opposed to the elevated diction of the Dublin stage. Such a divergence was not accidental, as from the outset the ULT declared: "our art of drama will be different from that other art of drama that speaks from the Irish National Theatre in Dublin." Their objective stemmed not from a mere petty provincialism, but had evolved organically as a response to the particular religious, political and economic development of Ulster over past centuries, which precluded any wholesale cultural identification with the dramatic movement based in Dublin.

At the same time, their stance was not a secessionist one. The ULT sought rather to define Ulster's distinctive character and integrate it with that of the nation's: "we shall have our own way — and still be in Ireland." The ULT's magazine *Ulad* (the Irish word for "Ulster"); Purcell's *The Enthusiast*; Mayne's folk-dramas, *The Drone*, *The Turn of the Road*, and *The Troth*, all set in rural Ulster; and McNamara's political satires *Thompson in Tir-Na-nOg* and *Susanne and the Soverigns*, set in

theatre on the threshold

Belfast, were critically and commercially successful and helped to articulate a distinctively Ulster voice, dedicated to interpreting the North to the rest of Ireland and helping Ulster understand itself.

Without the idealisation and Gaelicisation employed by their Southern compatriots, the ULT sought to map out the *provincial* "lineaments of race" in contrast to the ILT's presentation of the *national*. The Northern movement's portrayal of "Ulstermen" provided the first realistic alternative variation of the romanticised "Irishmen" — rural, Catholic and Gaelic — presented on the Southern stage. This achievement was all the more radical against the background emphasis on the Gaelic Catholic ethos of national identity, as the Irishmen of the ULT were invariably Protestant.

For over ten years, without wealthy benefactors or a permanent home, the ULT moved from strength to strength: writing and producing new work; touring Ireland, England, even the U.S., provoking *The Irish Times* to opine that, "we seem to be on the verge of a

revolution in dramatic art, and remarkably enough, it has been left to Ulster to lead the way."

Ulster was indeed on the verge of revolution, but its *dramatis personae* were not the players, rather the politicians of the day, as the destabilisation of the 1912 Home Rule Crisis left the North teetering on the brink of civil war. Around this time, recalled one member, "the atmosphere of Belfast perceptibly changed... there was a sense of tension and a discreet attention to the expression of views and opinions," and this could not help but



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WRITER: R. Mayne

affect the ULT. Instead of courting controversy, it courted the gilded cornucopias of the Grand Opera House where it later acquired a de facto residency — a transition which had a terminal effect on its radical ideals.

The ULT's potential expired largely because of the political problems of the time, and arguably the North's perennial (political) "state of chassis" has had the same inhibitive effect on the development of theatre to the present day; Ulster theatre has never had the same sense of cohesion or continuity which characterises its Southern counterpart. Its theatrical tradition is a truncated one, bereft of the same sense of a cultural legacy and linear movement enjoyed in the South. Perhaps this is because the North's political landscape has defined (and undermined) the contours of its theatrical tradition, for the highest drama in Ulster has always taken place in a political *mise-en-scene*. Either way, the permanent lack of stability and the powers-that-be's perception of theatre

as "dangerous" has precluded a cumulative, coalescing sense of tradition, a lack which needs to be redressed.

The ULT sought to lay the foundations for a dramatic tradition in Ulster, to leave a legacy that would furnish Ulster's future "genius" with "matter for his use, practising methods, perfecting techniques and training actors"; it sought to create a "citadel in Ulster for Irish thought and art." As the founders of Ireland's first regional theatre, (which ironically pre-dated the opening of the Abbey by two weeks), and the true pioneers of realism in Irish drama, (their body of naturalist drama contrasting with the pseudo-realism of Synge and Southern dramatists), they sought to lay the foundations for a tradition, which Ulster has struggled to build on ever since.

Belfast native Mark Phelan is a PhD candidate at Trinity College, where he is researching the history of theatre in Ulster.

An Ongoing Balancing Act

Born of flamboyant regio-nationalist debate, the theatre in Ulster has been fuelled since by fervent arguments about and discussion of the question of identity. The same questions first asked by the Ulster Literary Theatre have remained persistent and unresolved, the terms in which they were first

addressed still of considerable relevance today. Is the Ulster theatre primarily enclosed within a "broad circle" of Irish nationality? Or is it citadel-like, having its own distinctive "way of things"? Was

it practical exigency, or genuine belief in its difference, that led the Ulster theatre to take its own direction? Or is the theatre in Ulster indeed "different from that other Irish art of drama"?

The responses elicited by these questions have been many and varied, from the Ulster Literary Theatre to the 1930s Belfast Repertory Players, the mid-century Ulster Group and Lyric Theatres, and the more recent Field Day and smaller independent companies. That is not, however, to suggest a consistent tradition wherein the interrogation of identity can loom large. The line meanders and occasionally even peters out: there is no northern Abbey Theatre equiv-

**theatre
on the
threshold**

alent, no company with a consistent long-lived history. The reasons for this have been variously attributed, from the lack of a regular public or private subsidy similar to that in the Republic, to the much-lamented absence of a dedicated home such as the Abbey; from the sometimes frosty relationship between state bodies and the local theatre, to the sheer difficulty of asking questions in a sometimes volatile socio-political atmosphere. Nonetheless, two broad periods can still be discerned in the regio-nationalist debate, the first lasting some 60 years, the second for just 20. Between them, most dramatically, lie the early years of the Troubles; less dramatic, but also surprisingly problematic, are the troubling 1960s. The gulf between these years, and the emergence of Field Day and Charabanc in the early 1980s, seems unfathomable; the practical consequences of this gap in the tradition cannot be underestimated.

Pre-Troubles theatre in Ulster is characterized by its utterly self-conscious and confident assertion of a regional identity. There is a tradition of sorts of companies declaring their primary allegiance to Ulster, and attempting to embody in theatre a belief that, in Ulster poet John Hewitt's words "out of a loyalty to our own place, rooted in honest history, in familiar folkways and knowledge, phrased in our own dialect, there should emerge a culture and an attitude individual and distinctive." By turning affections to the region, Hewitt believed a chance might be offered to "transcend sectarian division in Northern Ireland." Companies working on this model included the Belfast Repertory Company, which presented working-class dramas about urban Belfast for the first time. Most prominent of these groups, however, was the Ulster Group Theatre. Founded by an amal-

'WORKERS'
A SHIPYARD PLAY BY
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BUSINESS AS USUAL: the UGT's production of Boyd's Shop by St. John Ervine

gam of amateur companies in the midst of World War II, it premiered a significant amount of new work by Ulster writers over its 20 years. While the company also staged Irish and international plays, in practice it was more often proudly described as "Ulster's Own Theatre." Writers such as George Shiels, Joseph Tomelty and St. John Ervine regularly had work produced there, alongside premieres of works by newly-emerging playwrights including Louis MacNeice and Brian Friel.

Despite much early success, however, sharp criticisms were rapidly heard regarding the Ulster "way of things" being presented by the UGT. A succession of mid-century critics attacked the Ulster theatre and its writers for a basic lack of courage. Questions arose as to whether the regionalist drama being presented was genuinely "rooted in honest history," or was actually heavily circumscribed by the political situ-

ation. Companies and writers were accused of practicing self-censorship; of focusing in the main on "Ulster problems outside politics and religion which provide safer dramatic material," of the satiric being "the only approach our stage has made to these fundamental problems."

Though contentious in-house debate on the topic is not recorded, statements by UGT writers in journals are indeed suggestive of an ethos of self-censorship. While accepting that on occasion their work might lack "guts," the writers threw responsibility for the apolitical nature of Ulster writing back to the theatres. Playwright Ruddick Millar believed that "few dramatists will take the trouble of writing a play if they know that it has little or no chance of being staged." Jack Loudan echoed this, stating that "if [the Ulster playwright] had written a play about the part he played in the 'troubles'

nobody would have produced it." Contemporary commentators agreed that the relationship between the state and culture was a delicate one. Though UGT General Manager and writer Joseph Tomelty dreamt of a permanent, state-subsidised theatre, he could nonetheless envisage drawbacks: "state control," he declared in 1944, "will always muzzle." The state arts funding body, CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts), was deemed "timid about the political repercussions of the spoken and written word"; it was believed to encourage mainly "English and foreign artists."

The Group's mid-century years marked an uncertain time politically, a period when, it has been suggested, the embryonic Northern Irish state establishment manifested a strong need to "establish a common narrative identity." In such a sensitive political atmosphere, criticism of or challenges to this carefully-constructed homogenous identity were not always welcome. This left the UGT in an unenviable position: the company was dependent on box-office receipts, and to foreground diversity and tensions might have left the company in an untenable financial position expressed through box-office difficulties rather than direct political control. But not to address the current situation left it open to charges of artistic untenability. The Group appears to have devised a careful line, if not as "rooted in honest history" as its writers would have wanted, nonetheless one that created new

theatre on the threshold

audiences for itself — "a public willing to pay to see plays about Ulster." Judgements about this policy must be viewed in the light of the most bitter controversy in the Group's history: the landmark

Over the Bridge censorship débâcle.

In 1959, now limping badly, the UGT announced that it was to present a series of new groundbreaking plays at the theatre, amongst them *Over the Bridge*, a play about sectarianism by shipyard worker Sam Thompson. But the Group's board then announced it was removing the play from its season with the infamous statement:

"It is the policy of the directors of the Ulster Group Theatre to keep political and religious controversies off our stage." Amid a stampede of resignations, the word "censorship" was frequently used; Lionel Pilkington notes that "poorly-disguised state censorship" might have been more accurate. The Chair of the Group board, which had been restructured in 1958 to secure support from CEMA, was J.R. McKee,



COURTESY ROWEL FRIENDS ESTATE/LYRIC THEATRE/LINEN HALL LIBRARY

also vice-president of CEMA, head of its drama sub-committee, and national governor of the Northern Ireland BBC. Company members were quick to suggest that state involvement, as Tomelty had predicted, had indeed resulted in artistic muzzling. The Group itself effectively collapsed. The play went on to a triumphant independent production at the Empire in 1960. Staged by the former Group Theatre members styling themselves "Over The Bridge Productions," it was seen by 42,000 people in 6 weeks.

To end *Over the Bridge* accounts at this point is common, with censorship publicly overcome, and a wholly representative "way of things" restored to the stage. The long-term picture was more worrying. Coming into the 1960s, in the face of the full blast of a new international culture of dance-bands, X-rated movies, and shifting cultural barriers, the theatre in Ulster was at an impasse. At a time when young playwrights in the Republic were impatiently struggling to push over previously-sacrosanct shibboleths, their Northern counterparts had been overtly presented with relatively narrow parameters in which they could operate. The "Ulster situation," J.R. McKee had been told by Lord Wakehurst, governor of Northern Ireland and CEMA patron, was to give "local colour and framework but no more." Simultaneously, Ulster theatre had all but disintegrated: to start from scratch in the face of strong new competition for leisure pursuits would require some form of state subsidy. The outcome was, in many ways, predictable. An ambition to make the Empire the "National Theatre" of the North, staging new plays by local authors, proved short-lived, and the venue closed in 1961. Now homeless, some of the old Group players reformed to become the touring Ulster Theatre Company, but relied on tried-and-true UGT favourites.

The mantle of new writing was now irregularly assumed by the Lyric, then a small theatre operating on a private basis from the home of its founders, Cork



CLASSIC: The UGT production of Right Again Barnum

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woman Mary O'Malley and her husband Pearse. Somewhat controversially, the Lyric became the first company to overtly reject the regional in favour of the Irish theatre. Achieving a strong reputation in the 1950s for creating "a style suitable for dramatic poetry" in theatre, the Lyric focussed mainly on poetic Irish and international drama. New plays made its stage only occasionally, and these were firmly and unapologetically located by the theatre within the "broad circle" of Irish nationality. This affiliation was made most publicly visible by the O'Malleys' refusal to allow the British National Anthem to be played after their private performances. Though this was customary at all CEMA-sponsored events, for example, the O'Malleys believed it would "affect artistic independence and vision." On accepting much-needed state sponsorship for their new theatre building which opened in 1968, however, such decisions were no longer personal. The couple found themselves fighting their own board on the Anthem issue to the point of resign-

ing as trustees from the theatre they had originated.

The Troubles can hardly, then, be said to have truncated a healthy theatre movement, from the point of view of new writing, either regional or national in orientation. The 1970s did, however, sound the death-knell for that theatre of a regionalist spirit practised in the first half of the century. The confident assertions of "Our Ulster Theatre" disappeared with the advent of the Troubles; for a number of years, indeed, most professional theatres were closed altogether. The Arts and Group Theatre buildings remained dark for most of the early Troubles; the Lyric stayed open through sheer doggedness. Attendances at most theatres were affected almost immediately, the Grove Theatre at the Shore Road being hit by a succession of bomb scares, the highly-respected Circle Theatre taken over as a refugee centre.

Not until the late 1970s did the professional theatres cautiously begin to re-open their doors: the new socio-political landscape which greeted them was unprecedentedly altered. The challenges were immense. The practice and product of theatre would have to be rebuilt and sustained despite continuing civil strife; so too would the previous theatrical ethos. To credibly stage only safer dramatic material, with on-street conflict erupting on the streets beyond the theatres, was hardly possible. How to represent a "way of things" in the ULT sense in this situation? Or should it be represented? How to square audience expectations, just when the theatre most needed to win back its public? What would it now imply to argue for or against the fact that the theatre here was indeed "different from that other Irish art of drama"? And would these arguments be theatrically or politically influenced in the main?

theatre on the threshold

Such questions have been simmering beneath the surface of theatre in Northern Ireland to the present, though the regio-nationalist debate is now enacted in more subtle and less visible ways than heretofore. In the last two decades, many companies have enacted an understated balancing-act between the national and the regional. The importance of the local is acknowledged in practice, through production of works by local writers and on subjects of immediate local relevance. In public, however, the "broad circle" of Irish nationality has most often been acknowledged first, the regional not overtly referred to. The implications of this balancing act are rarely openly addressed. Is regio-national fluidity a positive thing, allowing companies a genuine exploratory freedom? Or does it simply result in a difficult twilight zone, with practitioners struggling to express meaning between the margins? Is the theatre practiced by Northern Ireland-based companies actually a regional one or is it an intrinsic part of a national Irish theatre?

In asking such questions, a clear framework of critical and historical debate and analysis is urgently required. The absence of historical awareness, exacerbated by the '60s-'70s break in tradition, has left companies from all sectors addressing often difficult issues on the ground unaided. If theatre is to face the undeniably challenging period ahead, it needs to be reminded of its past, and to use it to ask honest questions of its current practice. For the first questions asked by the ULT remain unanswered, but no less pertinent: Is it similarity, difference, or practical exigency that is taking this theatre in its current direction?

Ophelia Byrne is curator of the theatre collection at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

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Married with Children

38 years old this year, the Belfast Festival at Queen's is still defining its adult identity. CAOIMHE McAVINCHY assesses the state of play at one of Northern Ireland's major cultural institutions, and surveys the highlights of last year's BFQ.

T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE HALLOWE'EN. A BITTER, TOE-NUMBINGLY cold night. Tiny wizards with bright eyes danced through the streets of Belfast. Drums thundered. Bats slumbered in nooks and crannies oblivious to what was about to happen. Thirty thousand

people had squeezed into Oxford Street, around the Waterfront Hall, and up along the banks of the Lagan. Young children, bundled up in blankets, shivered as they sat impatiently in their buggies. People pulled their coats and their lovers closer to them, waiting. Getting colder and colder. Suddenly there was a high pitched whirring, a bang and a shower of lights falling from the Belfast sky. Then another. And another. The crowd forgot to shiver and roared with delight. The fireworks had started. For the next 20 minutes, Christophe Berthonneau and Group F painted the sky with light. Startled bats swooped above the crowd. People were laughing and cheering at each fantastic explosion. There was an overwhelming sense of celebration, of festival. And rightly so, for the fireworks were part of Belfast Festival at Queen's 1999.

On 21 July 1972, this same street, Oxford Street, was strewn with pieces of

bodies shredded by one of 22 IRA car bombs that had been planted in the city centre that day. The horrific television images of "charred bodies and limbs being swept up like black jelly and dumped in bags" still haunts the collective memory. It's hard to imagine that one street could be the location for such devastating carnage and, 27 years later, such celebration. Yet that it did happen is symptomatic of the gradual cultural changes taking place in Belfast.

Belfast Festival at Queen's (BFQ) will be 38 this year. As befits its age, it has left behind its impoverished teenage years and is now married with 2.4 children and earning a comfortable living — £1.2 million sterling, to be exact, which it receives from, amongst other sources, Queen's University Belfast, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council, and Guinness. Now within sight of middle age, BFQ has been hounded with crit-



JILL JENNINGS

A MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION: *Waiting for Godot*

icism that it is a festival for the middle-aged — inaccessible, invisible, and conservative. It has been accused of not being for all of Belfast, of not generating a sense of "festivity," and for being too closely linked with Queen's. This particular relationship is a double-edged sword, providing BFQ with an administrative and fiscal infrastructure, but sometimes smothering it in an immediate context of institutional conservatism. The placement of many of the Festival events in a small yet affluent geographical area creates, in a city renowned for segregation, an arts ghetto.

BFQ is an international festival because of the product it promotes rather than the audience it attracts. Much of this has to do with the unhelpful international perception of Belfast's turbulent past and uncertain future. The Festival's inter-

national profile was raised considerably when Seán Doran was employed as Programme Director for the 1997 and 1998 Festivals. Doran put together an innovative, daring and challenging collection of international work, which included that of Robert Wilson, the Wooster Group, and the National Theatre of Craiova. Doran was also fundamental in securing substantial additional funding for BFQ and initiating two new Festivals: Young at Art, a Festival for young people; and the Belfast Festival Fringe (which I ran in 1998). Young at Art is now an independent organisation and will be staging its third Festival in May 2000. Unfortunately, an executive decision was taken by BFQ management not to continue the Fringe due to "conflicts of funding and sponsorship." After a frus-

trating relationship with the management of BFQ, Doran resigned in May 1998 to become the Director of the Perth International Arts Festival in Australia. The position of Programme Director, which had by its very nature an artistic bias, was never advertised. Instead, last year's Festival was programmed by the administrative team — Robert Agnew, the Executive Director (who had programmed the Festival before Doran's position was created), and Rosie Turner, the Assistant Executive Director.

The 1999 Festival featured a collection of international works including *Masquerade* and *The Cherry Orchard* by The Small Theatre of Vilnius, Lithuania; the exquisite *Romeo e Giulietta* and *Snow White* by Teatro del Carretto, Italy; The Wrestling School's *Scenes from an Execution*; and Northern Stage Ensemble's brash *A Clockwork Orange*.

Most of the international theatre pieces programmed included Belfast as part of a larger UK tour rather than a one-off venture to this part of the world. During the Festival there was a great deal of local debate in the press about the theatre programme. Was the Festival taking work that was good, international, and available rather than thinking about what was good, international, and original? Undoubtedly it would be just stubborn not to programme productions just because they happened to be touring, but there is an art, which Doran displayed, in creating a framework that happily supported both available and specially invited work.

BFQ is an international event, but it must also be concerned with the presentation and support of quality indigenous work that will have an international audience both immediately, in the venue it is playing in, and through the interna-

theatre on the threshold

tional media that respond to it. One of the most interesting outcomes of the 1999 Festival, and an element for which it deserves congratulations, was that Belfast-based companies were as much a highlight of the theatre programme as the visiting companies.

R & J, Kabosh's high-octane, all-male physical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Wedding Community Play*, a site-specific play about a mixed marriage produced by a collaborative of local community theatre companies, both received a considerable amount of media attention that extended beyond the local papers. Even though the people who read or hear a review may never see the production in question, the fact that it has been discussed can only help build up the idea of Belfast as a place that has more to offer than deadlock and ships that sink.

The Lyric Theatre's production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* provided a perfect example of a symbiotic relationship of the international and the local. The Lyric Theatre is Northern Ireland's only full time producing house. It employs mainly, though not exclusively, local practitioners and was recently named Best Company at the Irish Times/ESB Theatre Awards. However, for this production of *Godot*, the internationally acclaimed Romanian director, Gabor Tompa and San Francisco-based designer Andrei Both were invited to come to Belfast to live and work for five weeks.

By their own testimony, the cast and crew of *Godot*, including Séan Campion and Conleth Hill as the existential double-act, had an extraordinary experience; working, sharing and fusing together ideas to create what was a refreshing, intelligent, and above all humane production of one of the 20th century's most famous, difficult texts. Crossing different cultural experiences, and giving the



BRASH: *A Clockwork Orange*

resulting fusion time to grow, is a rare and invaluable thing. The *Godot* team will have extended their perspective and craft because of working on this particular production; the *Godot* audience witnessed the result of this international collaboration; Tompa and Both returned to their respective homes having fulfilled a dream. Everyone involved gained from this international venture.

A successful international Festival is not simply a one way street of bringing visiting companies for a hit and run experience. Longer-term collaboration between arts agencies can only lead to more fulfilling experiences that are of greater benefit to Belfast's practitioners and its cultural reputation. Collaborations are a sign of willing partnerships where all parties feel that they are in a win-win situation. Maybe Belfast is

just beginning to have the confidence to take itself seriously, and it is only a matter of time before it expects other organisations from other places to as well.

This January, Agnew announced that he was retiring after 20 years of working with BFQ. Queen's has decided to advertise for a Festival Director who will be "the Festival's artistic leader and chief executive." Long-term concerns about the Festival's visibility, accessibility, and reach have obviously been heard, as the job description specifies that as well as developing a long-term artistic policy and strategy for the Festival, the director would be expected to widen its audience base at home and abroad; ensure that it builds links with the community through education and outreach work; and to work closely with other institutions and arts organisations to develop a coherent artistic vision for Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole. This person will not be appointed until at least April of this year, by which time a considerable amount of the 2000 Festival will already be planned. Much of the future success of the Festival will depend on whether this strategy, of combining both the artistic vision and administrative strategy, works. We won't know until 2001 at the earliest.

Belfast, despite the current political stalemate, is still clinging onto the life buoy of optimism thrown to it by the Good Friday agreement. The Belfast Festival at Queen's, as a major cultural agency within the city, is in a prime position to reassess the part that it can play in encouraging and promoting Belfast as a place of cultural confidence at home as well as abroad.

Originally from Armagh, Caoimhe McAvinney is currently acting development officer at the Old Museum arts centre and teaches on the new Drama degree at Queen's University.

Marching Season

Belfast-born and -based playwright GARY MITCHELL offers an excerpt from his latest play, Marching On, which will play at the Lyric Theatre this summer.

GARY MITCHELL: When the Royal National Theatre's literary manager Jack Bradley told me that they couldn't schedule *Marching On* until 2002-3, I felt that I needed to look elsewhere due to the topicality and immediacy of the play. To my obvious delight the Lyric Theatre, Belfast stepped in.* Set in an uncertain world, slightly in the future, the play tackles the marching season in Ulster at a time when it seems to be under increasing threat.

It takes place under one roof, with the family representing all the important "Protestant players," including a Scotsman, as the play also attempts to shed a little light on the curious relationship between Ulster and Scotland from a Protestant perspective. * The scene you're about to read takes place in the living room. A local traditional march has been banned. Civil disturbances are sweeping the province — in fact they're just outside the door. Lorraine's brother Ricky has gone to join in the madness. The grandparents are sleeping upstairs. Johnny, the Scottish guest, has decided that Ricky's departure from the house is the last straw and Lorraine must not be allowed to follow him.



LORRAINE: What are you, frightened?

JOHNNY: Of what?

LORRAINE: You tell me.

JOHNNY: I'm no' frightened of anything.

LORRAINE: Everybody's frightened of something. Even my Da has fears.

JOHNNY: Really?

LORRAINE: Oh yeah. The thing about fear is, once you understand what it is and why it is you're afraid, you can beat it.

JOHNNY: I cannae get over the change in you.

LORRAINE: What do you mean?

JOHNNY: The difference a year makes is unbelievable. If someone hadae told me last year that you would be standing here this year talking like this or looking like this I would've told them tae get their head examined.

LORRAINE: Do you like it?

JOHNNY: (*hesitates*) Never mind. Listen. Let me get you a cup of tea and

you can tell me about your Da's fears and how he conquered them.

LORRAINE: Forget tea, I know where my Granda keeps his secret stash.

JOHNNY: No.

LORRAINE: (*goes to cupboard and searches in it*) Yes.

JOHNNY is surprised and delighted when

LORRAINE produces a bottle of whisky from the cupboard. She takes a couple of glasses from a higher section and pours JOHNNY a drink.

JOHNNY: Oh my God.

LORRAINE: Told you.

JOHNNY: Take it easy.

LORRAINE: Is that fear again?

JOHNNY: This is the last thing in the world I would be frightened of.

JOHNNY and LORRAINE sit on the settee. As they talk they move closer together.

LORRAINE: Don't worry. If my Granny comes down, I'll jump up.

JOHNNY: I bet that's one of your Da's fears. Your Granny.

LORRAINE: Don't think so.

JOHNNY: Well, are you going tae tell me then or no'?

LORRAINE: It was a day like this.

JOHNNY: Go on.

LORRAINE: Of course it was the taigs that were rioting and my Da got caught up in it. Do you remember the two soldiers that got caught up in the IRA funeral al?

JOHNNY: Was it then?

LORRAINE: No, but it was like then.

JOHNNY: What do you mean?

LORRAINE: My Da's vehicle was badly damaged and they got trapped.

JOHNNY: I never heard about this.

LORRAINE: Well he never really speaks about it.

JOHNNY: What happened?

LORRAINE: Within two minutes they

were completely surrounded by a very crazy mob of taigs. Hungry for blood, their blood. My Da says he could see them at the window and of course they could all hear them climbing onto the roof and banging the sides. They even started to rock it, trying to turn it over on its side.

JOHNNY: How the fuck did he get out of that?

LORRAINE: He was lucky. A helicopter dispersed the crowd far enough and long enough for backup to arrive and pull them out of there.

JOHNNY: No wonder he's the way he is after that.

LORRAINE: It changed him. Not everybody notices but I do. And now and again it comes back to him. I'd come down here during the night and he'd be sitting there with his gun.

JOHNNY: Tell me no more.

SILENCE

LORRAINE: So?

JOHNNY: What?

LORRAINE: What scares you?

JOHNNY: Your family for a start.

LORRAINE: Oh come on. You're a big man. Don't let me down like this.

JOHNNY: I mean it.

LORRAINE: Don't talk like that.

JOHNNY: Why not?

LORRAINE: Because I don't want to think of you that way.

JOHNNY: What way do you want to think of me?

LORRAINE: The way I have done since I was a little girl.

JOHNNY: What way was that.

LORRAINE: Like a warrior. Like Braveheart only Protestant.

JOHNNY: Away off that with you.

LORRAINE: I did. And so did Ricky.

JOHNNY: Stop mocking me.

LORRAINE: You must have noticed. God knows our Ricky was never very good at hiding it.

JOHNNY: He likes me. He likes all of us coming over for the twelfth but that's all it is.

LORRAINE: It's more than that. It's much more than that – especially to him.

JOHNNY: You're doing my head in.

LORRAINE *finishes her drink and fills the glasses again.*

LORRAINE: My Granny's the same. We're all affected by you. You just don't get it.

JOHNNY: Explain it to me then.

LORRAINE: I don't know. It's hard to explain.

JOHNNY: Give it a go.

LORRAINE: It's like we've always looked across the water. You know like that wee piece of land that you can see from the hill.

JOHNNY: What about it?

LORRAINE: Thousands of people looking across the water and ...

JOHNNY: And what?

LORRAINE: It's the link. The Ulster Scots thing. Do you know what I mean?

JOHNNY: I don't see how this is connected.

LORRAINE: You're all heroes to us. Half the time I think that's the main reason for the twelfth. To keep the link between Ulster and Scotland strong. You must feel it or you wouldn't come over all the time.

JOHNNY: Of course we feel it, it's our heritage like.

LORRAINE: It's the link.

JOHNNY: Have you been drinking before this? Have you a wee stash in your room?

LORRAINE: If I had would you share it

with me?

JOHNNY: Why are you so determined to get me into trouble?

LORRAINE: Come on, Johnny.

JOHNNY: Come on what?

LORRAINE: Let's go outside and you can show me how brave you are.

JOHNNY: Lorraine?

LORRAINE: It'll be a laugh. Come on.

JOHNNY: It's too late, Ricky'll be gone by now.

LORRAINE: We don't need Ricky. I know exactly where they're going to be.

JOHNNY: Ah no.

LORRAINE: Come on, Johnny. For me.

JOHNNY: No.

LORRAINE: You have to.

JOHNNY: I dunnae have to.

LORRAINE: I bet I can make you.

JOHNNY: How?

LORRAINE: If I go you'll have to come after me. I mean you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if you let me go out there and something bad happened.

JOHNNY: Don't say things like that.

LORRAINE: The time for talking is over.

JOHNNY: You're doing my head in. Let's go to bed.

LORRAINE: Yours or mine?

JOHNNY: Both.

LORRAINE: In which order?

JOHNNY: Separately.

LORRAINE: That's no fun.

JOHNNY: Sweetheart, listen...

LORRAINE: No. The time for listening is over too. It's time for action.

LORRAINE *goes out of the room. JOHNNY becomes resigned to his responsibilities and goes after her.*

LORRAINE: Knew you would.

LORRAINE *laughs.*

Playing the Community

Community theatre is a powerful force in Northern Ireland; it has maintained a continuum of activity even during times when the professional sector all but shut down.

CLAIRE COCHRANE looks at two very different, recent, high-profile community projects and the issues they raise, while three participants in the productions offer their personal impressions.

Forced Upon Us and *The Wedding Community Play Project* were performed at the end of a decade which had increasingly seen theatre used as a means to address issues of identity and collective concern in Belfast's communities. The important, if familiar, questions raised by the significant

differences between the two productions — the role of theatre as community intervention and the relationship to the targeted audience; the debates about the privileging of process over product and amateur over professional needs — were intensified considerably by the unambiguously political agenda behind each enterprise. Both became public events which resonated far beyond the usual community boundaries.

It is impossible to avoid the politics. A combined JustUs/DubbelJoint production, *Forced Upon Us* premiered at Féile an Phobail, the West Belfast Festival, in late July, little more than a month before the

publication of the British government-commissioned Patten Report into the future of the RUC. Beginning with the modern-day rape of a Catholic girl and what is clearly a deeply-held view that the police cannot be trusted to administer justice, the play then looped back to the origins of the RUC as the outcome of a relentless pattern of Protestant-inspired pogroms on Catholics. The play functioned as an impassioned mouthpiece for all those who continue to clamour for the disbandment of what's seen as an irredeemably-Loyalist instrument of state control.

Days before the first performance, the Northern Ireland Arts Council threatened

to withdraw a promised grant to DubbelJoint which would have helped facilitate the production, initially on the grounds of non-submission of an inspection script, and then on those of poor artistic quality, prompting widely-publicised cries of political censorship. The result: high-profile protests, a gratifying influx of audience, and a wrong-footed Arts Council, who, it seems, did eventually cough up most of the money.

This was the third JustUs/DubbelJoint production for Féile an Phobail. While

theatre on the threshold

DubbelJoint's primary objective is the creation of theatre with pan-Ireland appeal, albeit with a special commitment to Northern Ireland, JustUs was formed in 1995 specifically to give a voice to the working-class Republican women's perspective on the demonisation of their community.

The first of these collaborations, *Just a Prisoner's Wife*, won a Belfast City Council arts award in 1996. Pam Brighton's 1997 production of *Birldis*, however, which depicted the brutal killing of a British soldier — an act cheered by elements of the local audience —

I WILL NEVER DO ANOTHER LARGE-SCALE COMMUNITY PLAY AGAIN!

Maureen Harkins played Tilly in The Wedding Community Play Project and served on its organising committee.

So many times, I questioned my involvement with this project. So why did I come so far with it? The challenge of something as unique as this is the driving force.

Getting people involved was the most important aspect of the project for me. Maybe I was naïve to think that people would be totally supportive of it, but then again I probably always knew that it would take some hard work to get people from my own community to take to the stage. Protestant people and communities have never grasped the power of telling their own story through the medium of theatre.

I had already gone through this experience in 1995 when my own group staged *The Mourning Ring*. *The Wedding Community Play* was the next step in moving that forward in a positive way. As a cross-community play, the subject matter, whatever it may have been, would always be controversial... I struggled with the desire to make this play work, but was tormented with getting the

balance that I knew was of the utmost importance. I was outraged that the community that I came from had been portrayed unfairly in other local theatre productions throughout Belfast.

The project workshops and devising process was very well structured, but it was difficult to deal with some concerns in large workshops. The discussion of the script content proved immensely difficult when readings were held with all members involved. This is when the Ballybeen group decided to meet outside of the main project structure, and made very conscious recommendations regarding the script... This proved a source of strength for me, as I had a more hands-on involvement with the development of the project, and I felt I was too close to the centre and needed outside eyes.

...How right can we get it? Never totally, but if the audience left the performance asking themselves questions about perceptions they were previously certain about, then all the hard work was worthwhile.

This article originally appeared in a longer form in The Wedding's programme.

provoked accusations of publicly-funded incitement to violence which reached the pages of the *Daily Telegraph*. There could never have been any doubt, then, in the minds of ACNI officers as to the uncompromising stance JustUs would take on the RUC in *Forced Upon Us*. But professional funding dependency linked to bureaucratically-constructed artistic criteria weave a very tangled web when the artistic product is predicated on non-professional endeavour. If the pressures imposed by the creation of any devised theatre are compounded by the relative inexperience of actively-learning community writers like JustUs's Brenda Murphy and Christine Poland, funding conditions based on the early completion of a finalised script are problematic to say the least.

Forced Upon Us spoke very directly to its immediate constituency within the determinedly local Féile an Phobail. The inclusion of *The Wedding Community Play Project* in the prestigious, international Belfast Festival at Queen's signalled the Festival's developing efforts to break down their elite image. But in the case of *The Wedding*, the glossy, widely-disseminated promotion also meant that a political statement would be made, not so much to the communities intimately involved with the dramatised issues, but on behalf of those communities to the audiences privileged to attend. Under normal circumstances, the collaboration of seven community groups, two high-profile writers, Protestant Marie Jones and Catholic Martin Lynch, and four directors would have guaranteed substantial local audi-



A LOOK INSIDE: A scene from *The Wedding*

MERVYN SMYTH/BELFAST EXPOSED

ences. As it was the logistics of the exercise meant that rapidly sold-out tickets had to be limited to 72 for each of only eight performances. The plans currently afoot to revive the production derive from an acute sense that the community itself was denied access.

The audience were invited to be "guests" on the day of a cross-sectarian, wedding played out in real time in four separate locations, and in particular witness the parallel arguments and anxieties in the Catholic and Protestant family households, directed respectively by Jo Egan and Gerri Moriarty. This theatrical demonstration of compromise in action

was performed at weekends throughout November, as the negotiations proceeded which culminated on 2 December in the devolution of uniquely-shared powers from Westminster to Stormont. In the reception scene which concluded the performance, the Protestant father of the bride (played by Catholic Terry Brady), who spoke about the mixed marriage as a symbol of hope, was castigated by his wife for not relying on the usual pleasantries. Who did he think he was? George Mitchell? As I write, the Northern Ireland Assembly is suspended because of the deadlock over IRA decommissioning of arms, a concession passionately denounced in the

theatre on the threshold

reprise of past brutality which was central to the rhetoric of *Forced Upon Us*.

What struck me most powerfully, as an English theatre historian, was the historical and cultural resonance of the scenography integral to each production. The JustUs performance space, Amharclann na Carraige (Theatre on the Rock), is located in a former school, now a branch of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, off the Falls Road. The visual convergence of the post-war, concrete brutalism of the BIFHE building with the expanse of the City Cemetery directly opposite, both overlooked by the grandeur of the Black Mountain beyond,

THE PROFESSIONALISM WAS AN EYE-OPENER FOR ME

Gerry Moriarty played numerous characters including RUC Inspector John W. Nixon in Forced Upon Us.

I act as a hobby, mostly with the Derry Repertory Company. Pam Brighton had seen me perform and asked me if I'd audition for *Forced Upon Us*. I relocated to Belfast for five weeks for the show.

The play was a series of short sketches on the history of the formation of the Northern state, based on autopsy reports, eyewitness reports, and inquests. It had to be factually correct in terms of that historical information, but we as actors definitely had input into the scenes where we were playing fictional characters.

We only had about 15 days to put the production up, so when [the controversy about the production's funding] happened that was very much kept away from us; I have to hand it to Pam and DubbleJoint because they handled all that very professionally and let us get on with our business.

As far as the content of the piece is con-

cerned, at the end of the day you are a performer and you play the parts you're given, even if you have to play rapists and all the rest. When we were discussing the play we were shown all the historical facts — the data behind the script. In order to get into Nixon's psyche I had to do a lot of historical reading, and I was convinced that the script portrayed him accurately. Overall it was up to the writers to determine how they wanted to represent the history in the piece and I think they did all right.

It was an intense piece, but again we're only acting, so as soon as we got to the pub afterwards it'd be forgotten about. In talking about the material, we agreed that there was at least another play in there, about the fictional characters the play represented, how people actually lived in those times, what they said when the doors were closed.

I'd definitely be interested in working with DubbleJoint again; their professionalism was an eye-opener for me. I got a lot out of *Forced Upon Us* as a performer and a person; it was a great experience.



MERVYN SMYTH/BELFAST EXPOSED

BALCONY BEAUX AND BELLES: *The Wedding*

seemed thick with complex, silent significance. Inside, the set, designed by the West Belfast Artists Collective, compelled the actors to negotiate the precipitous rake on either side of the huge traverse stage which ran the length of the hall. Magnified plans of Stormont were hung behind a large Union Jack-draped table, from whence Unionist political rhetoric and machinations were seen to control events from the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912 to the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by Protestant reprisal squads in the 1920s. At the extra matinee performance I attended, the audience was literally packed thigh-to-thigh. The sheer passion of the actors combined with the physical and emotional pressure of the surroundings compelled a standing ovation which seemed folly to refuse.

For *The Wedding* the mediation between tourist/spectator and performance was infinitely more decorous. The

audience was bussed from the quiet environs of St Anne's Cathedral to the narrow, terraced streets of working-class East Belfast. At once protected and exposed by the coach windows, and subdivided into small groups, we absorbed the implications of sectarian murals and slogans, barbed wire and boarded-up houses while talking to our friendly project guides/shepherds who ensured a breathtaking efficiency of audience movement round three simultaneous performances in each house.

The disconcertingly short distance from the Protestant house in Madrid Street to the house in Beechfield Street off the Catholic Short Strand, prompted the thought that walking might have been more salutary, if arguably even more voyeuristic. Spatially, the intimacy of the playing areas created a dynamic performance tension with discrete groups of observers scarcely daring to breathe in

the presence of unselfconscious, modulated, naturalistic acting.

The sight of the great Harland and Wolff shipyard cranes framed by the window of the Madrid Street front room signalled a temporal journey which would take us from the emblems of a stormy industrial past to the oddly reassuring homogeneities of urban redevelopment — the reception was held at a new super-pub in the Lagan Waterfront area. In between, we would travel to the ceremony, held at the First Presbyterian Church in Rosemary Street, a site which resonates with its origins at the tolerant spiritual heart of the 18th-century United Irishmen's movement.

Both plays addressed the legacy of history. *Forced Upon Us* struggled with the big events and personalities of the past, as

theatre on the threshold

though refusing to let go of that history in the interests of the future. While acknowledging the production's absolute ideological integrity, the main problem for me lay in the difficulties of reworking copious archival material for the production of coherent drama. This was too complicated for the hit-and-run strategies of agit-prop. Brighton's production elicited some stunning performances, but from the professional male actors. The disjunction between the language of unedited historical documents and original dialogue served only to present women characters as a succession of female victims, and cruelly exposed the technical weaknesses of the community actresses who frequently could not be heard. JustUs, formed out of the lives of

I AM A COMMUNITY ARTIST AT HEART

Joe McDowall played the Groom, Damien Kelly, in The Wedding Community Play Project.

The whole idea of the play, the way it was going to work with the different locations, was the thing that really appealed to me. But even if it had just been in a theatre, I would have been interested. Most of the people involved in it I knew anyway, through the community theatre scene. I am sure there were some people on the project who were mixing in a way they never had before, but that aspect personally didn't bother me at all.

The devising process was very scary sometimes — the thing that sticks out in my mind was a time the writers and directors put us in our groups, Protestants and Catholics, and then made us say the worst things we could say about each other. It wasn't embarrassing, but it was really scary. To hear what they were saying as well — it was like, is that what they really think of us?... it was a

strange exercise but it really did work to loosen us up.

The play ended up being a huge amount of work and logistics — there were separate rehearsals for each of the four locations and if you weren't called for one you'd be for another. We worked 5-6 nights a week and at the beginning we didn't have a sense of the whole picture. We were all really surprised with how well it went at the end.

Talking to people in the bar afterwards, there were some who couldn't get over it — they said you didn't feel the four hours go by. There were a few people I talked to afterwards who are in mixed marriages and they said we hit it, we got the right ideas in there. For me, the show was there to prove that you shouldn't put community artists down. We're just as good if not better than a lot of stuff that's out there. I do a lot of amateur plays and I'm looking into getting my Equity card ... but I am a community artist at heart.



MERVYN SMYTH/BELFAST EXPRESSED

HAPPY DAYS: Outside the bride's home in *The Wedding*

West Belfast women, should, above all, empower women.

The micro-histories and familiar, commonplace preoccupations woven into *The Wedding* created the surface texture of a depiction of a family/communal ritual event, where both process and product were about mediation and compromise. To be sure, the piled-up references to previous cross-sectarian relationships, and the neat symmetry of parallel, paramilitary activists could come across as overly-schematic. But in the generally low-key representation of the anxieties generated in a strife-torn city, the kick in the gut came from the recognition that characters and scenarios made hackneyed by 30 years of reportage can derive, after all, from lived experience.

The final impression was of therapeutic play. The surreal and hugely enjoyable all-singing and dancing wedding ceremony, directed by Michael Poynor, swept us on a wave of bonhomie to the

Buck's Fizz and wedding cake of the reception. Some awkwardness in staging was evident here, perhaps evidence of director Stephen Wright's unfamiliarity in working with community actors. Still, the stories staged in the reception charmed: one of a plot to whisk the happy couple to a safe distance in Birmingham, another the tentative negotiations between two middle-aged former lovers long-separated by the consequences of sectarian allegiance. The final image was of a line of exhausted, but triumphant actors facing their equally-exhausted audience at the end of an ambitious, optimistic journey.

Claire Cochrane teaches in the English and Drama department of University College Worcester and is currently researching a book on twentieth-century theatre practice across the British Isles. She thanks Ophelia Byrne and Molly Brown for their help with this article.

NORTHERN

Some have come from elsewhere; some have returned home.

Some have headed off; some never left. **MARK PHELAN** and

KAREN FRICKER asked various theatre artists and professionals to talk about their relationship to Northern Ireland.

Tim Loane

ACTOR/DIRECTOR/WRITER/FILMMAKER

I WENT TO SCHOOL IN CORK, MY parents are from Dublin, but I've spent my adult life in Belfast. It's definitely home! I started Tinderbox with Lalor Roddy and Miche Doherty back in 1988, mostly because, at that time, there was no work for many of us who didn't have easy access to the Lyric. So we started it for selfish reasons, but we also realised that there was a niche — Belfast didn't have a culture of independent theatre apart from Charabanc, and new work wasn't being produced.

I was talking to [the actor] Conleth Hill recently, who is going away from Belfast for a year with *Stones in His Pockets*; he was saying that this wasn't him leaving... that he *was* coming back, which is a feeling I think that people didn't have before. If you left, you were never coming back. In my generation there is a definite feel-

ing that it's not a negative thing to say "I live in Belfast." There are more options now, and more belief that individuals can make a difference.

But I don't think there is a sense of optimism or excitement beyond a tentative positivity. The arts in Northern Ireland have massive potential but the infrastructure isn't there, and that follows from the fact that we don't have a solid, stable government,

"It's not a negative thing to say 'I live in Belfast.' There are more options now."

that no one can see six months ahead. The Arts Council and theatre managements have got to sort themselves out. There's a distinct lack of imagination and leadership and too much side-stepping instead of taking off shirts and getting dirty.

VOICES

Ali Curran

DIRECTOR, DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL

I'M FROM NORTH BELFAST, BUT went to boarding school in Portstewart, and got involved with a very good drama group there. My work experience was with Michael Poynor at the Arts Theatre and in Portstewart with Big Telly, both of which were brilliant. After school, I got involved with Gauntlet Theatre Company as an actor and general admin person. It was a really exciting time — travelling, touring, learning, drinking...

But I always felt out of the loop of the local theatre community, and left the field for a while. I was quite unhappy in Belfast, feeling the pressure of the political environment very intensely... being stopped three times by soldiers while I was crossing the city to my parents' home. The political climate was the main reason I left — also around that time I'd met a guy from Dublin; when we moved there I felt that I would never go back to the North.

While I felt a little restrained and restricted in terms of my identity in the North, the first few years down here I really had a sense of blooming — I feel like I discovered my "Northern



Irishness," which is so different from other kinds of Irishness. Now I'm developing a liking for the North, as opposed to just a tolerance. I've made a lot of contacts and friends in Dublin, but I've also realised that both Dublin and Belfast are very small communities.

I'd like the relationship between the North and South to be more fluent. There should be more work crossing over — more dialogue and communication.

Brian Singleton

LECTURER IN DRAMA,
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

THEATRE-GOING WASN'T PART OF MY family when I was growing up in Armagh in the late '60s and early '70s — there were curfews and it was dangerous to trek to Belfast. The most formative thing for me was a group called Interplay, a TIE company that toured to different schools. Working with them transformed my life.

I wrote to the Arts Council when I was 17, and demanded some drama provision



for young people in Armagh, because there wasn't any, and they put me in touch with some individuals in Newry and Portadown. I also later met David Grant and did some work with

him at the Group Theatre. During the '70s my only other theatre experience was coming down to Dublin regularly — I saw everything... and felt liberated going over the border.

In London, where I went to university to study drama, I went to the theatre all the time — I soaked it up but I had no sense of belonging there. Escaping Thatcherism in England was part of why I came to Dublin in 1990; also, I was offered a permanent job here.

There's been a seismic shift in the Republic in the last ten years, which we are seeing in the theatre, but those kind of major changes aren't really happening yet in the North. But there does seem to be a new public for theatre in Belfast, and there's now a social space in town, with shops, restaurants, bars... People are starting to travel up from Dublin to see theatre in Belfast, which is quite new. And it looks like the Market Place Theatre in Armagh will contribute to the cultural fabric of that city — that's something to applaud. Parish and Orange halls might have had their day!

Zoe Seaton

**ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,
BIG TELLY THEATRE COMPANY**

I WAS BORN IN PORTSTEWART, AND was first involved in the Riverside Youth Theatre here, which I helped found with James Nesbitt. I then left to study drama in England. After university, I came back to Portstewart and started Big Telly in 1987. To come back was as much of a lifestyle choice as anything... I think I'd find the theatre atmosphere in Belfast or elsewhere claustrophobic, but here I've had a nice balance. I do six or seven shows a year in England and then come back and

**theatre
on the
threshold**

do maybe two or three with Big Telly. I'm very happy with that. My family are all here and I'm delighted to have control of my own life with my own company.

In terms of status, profile and funding, there are not great career opportunities in the regions, but I want to create interest in drama in these areas. We want to make connections in local communities, so we've been doing a lot of outreach work as well, and touring is our top priority. I feel there's a lot of complacency today, and I want to bring back the idea that theatre is magical — like the days when the circus arrived in town!



Karl Wallace

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, KABOSH PRODUCTIONS

I'M FROM NORTH LONDON AND I came over here to university at Coleraine simply to get away. When I graduated, I set up a theatre group with six others to produce alternative work in the North. We started out in 1994 and I'm the only founding member left — the others left to work in the independent professional sector elsewhere. Only two are still based in Northern Ireland.

I feel it would have been a different story for Kabosh if we had been in a city which embraced theatrical culture; if we had been based in Dublin, we would have fast-tracked more. Belfast, as a city, has been left outside, with the emphasis

on Dublin, Edinburgh, London, and Glasgow. But we do feel very loyal to Belfast — we grew up here and want to heighten the profile of the city, and demonstrate that there is alternative drama here... The regeneration of the city is fantastic but I don't think the profile of the arts, especially theatre, will become stronger. I'm here ten years and have roots here, but I'll go where the work takes me.



Lynne Parker

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,
ROUGH MAGIC THEATRE COMPANY

MY FIRST INTEREST IN theatre stemmed from my uncle, Stewart Parker, and from drama at school. I was born and raised in Belfast and knew I wanted to go to Trinity for university — there was no formalised degree course in drama then, but the student drama society, Trinity Players, was a very active breeding ground for people interested in theatre. I also wanted to leave Belfast and experience life in a different city, and Dublin was close — not as far as England.

After I graduated from Trinity, I worked for a few months as a stage manager in London, but I was already committed to come back to Dublin, where I



set up Rough Magic with some of my contemporaries. I've been based in Dublin since 1979, and that's just the way things have turned out... I haven't considered moving back because here's where the work has been for me. We've toured to the North with the company, and I've done some work there with Charabanc and Tinderbox. I've also recently been in contact with the Lyric, and that's something I'd very much like to continue.

Jo Egan

COMMUNITY DRAMA FACILITATOR

I'M FROM THE REPUBLIC, AND I came to Northern Ireland for a completely different reason than work. My partner, who's Northern Irish, asked me to move up — it was romance! But also, I had been working in community theatre in Dublin and I



felt I was at the end of something there. I knew I'd find it very easy to get community theatre work in the North — there was more of it around.

I had assumed, before I came up, that community

theatre was held in far greater estimation than it actually was, but I found that there was a bit of the idea of occupational therapy about it — "keeping idle hands busy." The idea of belonging was something central to the work I was doing in Dublin, and I came to Belfast completely full of insecurity because I knew I would never belong. I knew that I hadn't lived through the Troubles, and I couldn't make that okay for people. For

Catholics, I was a Free State bastard and for Protestants, well, I wasn't a Protestant!

But it's been OK. I'm an outsider, but I never bothered trying to bridge that. It's actually a great thing, because you're permitted to ask questions that a lot of people can't ask... There was a whole code you had to learn here, which I was particularly concerned about as regards my children... it can be very upsetting — the energy here every summer can be wearing. I feel more settled now, but it's hard won, a step at a time.

Jackie Doyle

**ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,
PRIME CUT PRODUCTIONS**

My degree is in English and Drama, and I trained as a stage manager in London. While I was working there, a director, Vanessa Fielding, invited me over to work on a project in Belfast for six months... and I've been here since! That was seven years ago. I didn't really plan to stay, but I got involved with a group of people and we founded Mad Cow, which became Prime Cut.

At first, I was quite surprised at how little theatre happened in Belfast. There wasn't much independent theatre, but that sector has flourished over the last eight years or so — the scenery has changed rapidly. There are more opportunities for work in the North now than ever before, more confidence, greater crossover between Dublin and

theatre on the threshold

Belfast, new audiences who want to be challenged... but still there's not as much interest or respect for artists in the North as there might be in the South. Perhaps Belfast doesn't nurture them as much...

Even now, the infrastructure is poor.

I didn't intend to stay long-term, but we had potential, and I've enjoyed it. I've also got a child now, and I'm a lot more settled. I'll take each day as it comes, but I'm absolutely committed to Prime Cut and our work. I'll stay as long as it continues.

David Johnston

LECTURER, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

I'M FROM NORTHERN IRELAND, BUT I left in 1979, simply because there was no alternative in terms of work. Also, I'd been very affected by six months I spent in Spain — Franco had died in 1975 and there had been this huge shaking of the flesh. I had seen how a society could change. 1979 was a very, very dark time in Belfast, and I thought, why stay in this dark haunted place? I got myself a job in England and then Scotland and was actually determined not to come back.

I got involved in theatre in 1988 when I translated Lorca's *Blood Wedding* for Communicado in Scotland. I worked in Glasgow from 1981 – 1991, while it was the European Capital of Culture, and I saw the place flourish in a remarkable way. I know it's a cliché, but I always felt that Belfast could and should be like that.

I came back for personal reasons in 1991, and Belfast still felt like an impoverished Glasgow, culturally and politically. That's begun to change on both fronts. Exciting things are happening at the Lyric, in the Cathedral Quarter... We have a period of about four or five years

"The sector
has flourished
over the last
eight years.
The scenery
has changed
rapidly."

to do something with this place, or we're going to stay a backwater. Things are building, and I feel there's a contribution that I can make professionally, with the drama degree starting up at Queen's. I certainly want to stay now.

Pauline Hutton

ACTOR

ST. CECILIA'S IN CREGGAN, WHERE I went to school, was fantastic — drama was as important as any other subject. The first play I saw was Field Day's *Making History*; I saw lots of Charabanc's productions as well. I clearly remember the first production of *Carthaginians*; afterwards the cast came to our school to ask what we thought of it! Things like that, I really cherish.

I intended to go to university, but a week after I finished my A-Levels, I went to an audition for "Glenroe" and got the part. So I came down to Dublin, and did "Glenroe" for two years, but wasn't doing any theatre and knew that there was so much I had to learn. So I enrolled in the acting course at Trinity, which I absolutely loved.

For the first year that I was in Dublin, I lived in a B&B and came home every weekend. It was so different for me... the sense of humour was different, and there was also a class thing, about what part of Dublin you came from or lived in — I really hated that. But I've been here seven years and really put down roots here. Now I love it — I don't see myself going back to Derry to live. When I'm

"When I go
back I realise
...we've got
to get more
people into
the theatre in
Derry"

back visiting, I realise how little there is there for professional theatre. This new Millennium Theatre is going to be a big challenge, just in terms of audiences. There's a great pub scene in Derry, and music, and dance, but we've got to get more people into the theatre.

Janice Jarvis

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, REPLAY PRODUCTIONS

WHEN I GOT THE JOB WITH Replay four years ago, at first I didn't want to come here — I'd just returned to Yorkshire, where I'm from; my contacts were in Dublin; and I didn't know Northern Ireland. But the job was in a well-organised and established company, so I took it.

As an English person, I have experienced racism here for the first time, but through isolated incidents, a passing remark. In terms of the political situation, I have occasionally felt that I'd like to leave. The first year I was here was the first Drumcree standoff, and the atmosphere on the streets that summer, the unofficial curfew, was shocking. What's kept me here is the job — I haven't stayed because I fell in love with the situation!

What I've found attractive here, in comparison to the rest of Britain, is that the work of Replay, as a theatre in education company, had a higher status in the arts scene — we've had good coverage, as equals, with other pro-

fessional theatres and that's gratifying. There are a lot of good things happening here, but it's impossible to know how things will turn out because of the political instability, which dominates everything.



John Sheehan

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, LYRIC THEATRE

I'M FROM NEW YORK AND MADE my career as a director there, before coming to Ireland three years ago to work as artistic director of Siamsa Tíre, the national folk theatre in Kerry. I've only just taken my place at the Lyric, less than two months ago.

I can't pretend to be knowledgeable or expert about the repertory or the traditions in Northern Ireland. But I was encouraged by the Lyric's board in the interview process that they were looking for someone who might have a fresh approach, a broader vision.

What attracted me to Northern Ireland is that it is ready to move forward from its troubled past. I served in Vietnam; I know what conflict is about — there's excitement and a ferment of activity here. The fighting is over here now, but it's a place where people are on the edge and that contributes enormously to artistic output.

I was able to accomplish a great deal at Siamsa because I have professional theatre skills which are applicable to practical problems and goals, and I feel I am bringing the same thing to the Lyric. The differences of writing style, of culture, can be absorbed along the way. I don't mean to sound naïve or ignorant, but my job is to focus on doing the work of theatre at the highest possible standard.

I think the Lyric is poised historically and geographically to be a centre of activity, and I hope it will be a centre of excellence. There is a fantastic team here, and there is no reason why we can't attract the very best writers, directors, and actors. I do have a concern about audiences opening themselves up to new kinds of work; we'll have to see about that. But I want to put the word out that if you think you're good, come on up.

Mark Phelan

POSTGRADUATE STUDENT

HERE WAS NO DRAMA programme at Queen's when I went there, so I did English for my degree — but I immediately got involved in Dramsoc.

None of us had any background in theatre, but we had a huge interest. Drama was quite under-resourced at that time; we lobbied the University for a course, a facility — some kind of outlet — but nothing much happened on that front while I was there.

I only realised when I came to Dublin how theatre mattered so much more here than in the North.

"We're on the cusp of things but there's no one with a vision at policy level."

It was completely alien to me. When I went back I'd get even more frustrated: why was there nothing on? There's a repository of raw material and human resources that's not tapped. I think the undergraduate drama course in Queen's is going to have a massive effect. In five years there will be the makings of an indigenous community. I just hope some of them will get trained in criticism because that's a huge gap.

There really is a sense of promise now; it feels like the North is on a cusp of things. But there's no one with an overarching vision on a policy-making level. We need someone to do in the North what Michael D. Higgins did in the Republic — to bring things together under a rhetoric, a vision.

All interviews conducted by Mark Phelan except for the final two, which were conducted by Karen Fricker.

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ALL EYES ON I.A.P.A.

Details about the Irish Academy for Performing Arts have finally been revealed. EIBHLIN NI RUAIRC reports on the initial implications of the announcement for the theatre training sector.

ON 12TH JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, LECTURERS, TUTORS, STUDENTS, arts professionals, and government ministers gathered at the Irish Museum of Modern Art for an historic announcement: the commitment of £35 million from Government towards the creation of the first-ever multi-genre performing arts conservatory in

Ireland. The new Irish Academy of the Performing Arts (I.A.P.A.), scheduled to come on-line in 2005, will have its primary premises on the campus of Dublin City University (D.C.U.) in a purpose built building, with satellite campuses at the University of Limerick and at Ireland's only dedicated dance venue, Cork's Firkin Crane Dance Development Agency.

The I.A.P.A. will offer support and recognition for performers from a diverse range of disciplines, and will absorb existing programmes from the Gaiety School of Acting (G.S.A.), the Royal Irish Academy of Music (R.I.A.M.), the Irish World Music Centre, and Firkin Crane. Hand in hand with performance training, students will also be offered "conventional" academic

arts classes. They will graduate from the Academy with recognised certification, as the I.A.P.A is planning to implement its own new national qualifications system.

The establishment of an Academy has been on the cards for some time and was identified as a priority in the 1997 Programme for Government when Fianna Fail laid out its stalls for the benefit of the electorate. So no surprise at the announcement of the Academy's foundation in January 2000 — just surprise at the actual form which the Academy would take.

There had been much planning and discussion spearheaded by the Departments of Education and Science, and of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, and

The 12th January announcement made clear that the Gaiety School is the chosen institution to lead the I.A.P.A.'s drama programme. Founded in 1988 by Joe Dowling (who is now the School's chairman), the G.S.A. is a private conservatory run since 1994 by Patrick Sutton. While the school's reputation is high and its faculty impressive, it is fundamentally a private, profit-making enterprise that offers a Diploma in Acting to its two year students rather than an externally monitored accreditation; being absorbed into the I.A.P.A. will provide the G.S.A. with the internationally acknowledged official status it has long sought. Although elements of the G.S.A. will be absorbed into the Academy and

That there is a need for further provision of actor training is inarguable.

no small measure of speculation among the arts community as to how such an Academy might be structured, where it might be located, and — most importantly — how it would fit into the existing provision of arts training in the Republic. As specifically regards theatre, that there is a need for further provision of actor training is inarguable: For their courses beginning last year, the Republic's three existing third-level actor training establishments, Trinity College, Dublin, the G.S.A., and Dublin Institute of Technology Rathmines Road (D.I.T.), received 400, 140, and 320 applications respectively; all told there were less than a tenth of that number of places actually available. The prevailing concern as the idea of an Academy was mooted was the relationship it would have to these existing institutions.

will be located in D.C.U., the G.S.A. will continue to operate a commercial drama school in its present Temple Bar premises.

And so, Gaiety School 100 points — Trinity and D.I.T., nil.

Trinity College, which has a three-year Bachelor of Theatre Studies (B.T.S.), is the only institution in the Republic which currently offers a degree in acting. The B.T.S. course was established in 1996 and is run in conjunction with the Abbey Theatre. D.I.T offers the largest provision for arts training in Ireland, with courses in music, art and film as well as theatre. D.I.T. has offered a three-year diploma in acting since 1983, and is currently seeking to develop a four-year degree programme. Neither institution was mentioned anywhere in the 12th January announcement, nor, it seems, did either figure with any prominence in the

planning and consultation process towards the I.A.P.A. Heads of the drama programmes at both D.I.T. and Trinity say they are disappointed at their exclusion from the plans, and express concern that the I.A.P.A. could distract funding, resources and interest away from their courses.

Just where does this story begin?

In July 1998, the Government founded a Working Group on the Establishment of an Academy for Performing Arts in Dublin. The Working Group published advertisements in the newspapers inviting "interested organisations and individuals" to make

structure" and that "further discussion" should take place with all interested parties. However, the study did suggest that there could be serious implications for all involved in performer training if the I.A.P.A. was to come on line. One passage in particular clearly indicated that the new Academy could well be vested with the power to absorb and subsume existing programmes: "(should the recommendations be accepted) ...follow-up action would be as follows... (ii) Examination of the potential for rationalisation of existing courses in e.g. R.I.A.M. and D.I.T. and other institutions..."

Heads of the drama D.I.T. and Trinity say at their exclusion

submissions to them. From the outset it was stated that one of the chief objectives of the group was to examine the suitability of Earlsfort Terrace as a home for the Academy, so a structural engineer's report of the Earlsfort Terrace site was commissioned; meanwhile, D.C.U. president Danny O'Hare sent a letter to the committee offering his campus as a potential alternative.

The Working Group, chaired by Noel Lindsay, former chairman of the Higher Education Authority, subsequently published its findings in an Interim Report. The D.C.U. offer was not featured at this stage, and the group concluded that Earlsfort Terrace was still the optimum location for an Academy. The tone of the report was encouraging, acknowledging that the establishment of an Academy would provide a "vital addition to Ireland's training/infra-

In response to the call for submissions for the new Academy, over a year later a consortium of organisations spearheaded by Patrick Sutton and R.I.A.M. director John O'Conor commissioned a preliminary feasibility study from the consultancy firm Deloitte and Touche. Sutton says he and O'Conor had been exploring the idea of forming a centre of excellence for quite some time, and wanted to present their own study to ensure that the Government knew how deeply interested and committed they were to the concept. The study explored the idea of an Irish "centre of excellence" in performing arts training, and included suggestions on how and where such a centre should be located. It proposed John O'Conor, Joe Dowling, Patrick Sutton, Joanna Banks, Ester O'Brolachain, and Finola Cronin as

possible leaders of and advisers to an Academy and suggested that O'Hare's offer of a "home" for the Academy at D.C.U. should be accepted.

This report, dated 21st May 1999, was sent to Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's office and not to the offices of the Ministers most closely associated with the project, Arts Minister Sile de Valera and then-Education Minister Micheal Martin. This is perceived as a "secret study," probably because a letter from de Valera's cultural division, dated June 2nd 1999, noted that de Valera's officials "...were not aware of its preparation." This seems surprising

including Sutton. Renshaw had seen a copy of the original G.S.A. submission to Noel Lindsay's Working Group as well as the subsequent Deloitte and Touche study. Sutton believes that it was the vision presented in these reports and the "passionate pitch" that he gave which led to his bid ultimately being successful. Renshaw had one meeting with D.I.T. (on 21st May), but made no attempt to contact Trinity — an extraordinary omission, given the high profile of the B.T.S. degree. The course chair of D.I.T.'s drama program, Victor Merriman, is highly critical

programmes at both they are disappointed from the plans.

considering de Valera's connection with the Academy project; that the report went straight to Ahern's office seems likely to be a result of Sutton's established working relationship with the Taoiseach — he serves as Ahern's voice coach under the aegis of his consultancy company, Communicate.

Meanwhile at Government offices, the Academy scheme continued to gain momentum, when both Ministers and the Taoiseach agreed that an independent assessor should come on board to help develop the project further, and named Peter Renshaw, Head of Research and Development at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, to the post.

During that summer, armed with the original submissions that had been presented in 1998, Renshaw set up meetings with various people to discuss ideas,

of the consultation process that led to the Ministers' decisions, and he argues that "the title 'report' can not be applied in the normal sense to Dr Renshaw's work. He did not survey the existing field..."

Renshaw presented the final draft of his report to the Government on 15th July 1999 and copies of it are available from the Department of the Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. A key element in the report is the suggestion that the Academy should involve a range of institutions, rather than basing itself exclusively in one location. The report also recommended the acceptance of the offer of a site in D.C.U. and suggested that the University of Limerick and Firkin Crane in Cork could be two constituent campuses. These recommendations thus dismissed the idea of using Earlsfort Terrace as the sole location for an Academy.

Renshaw's report clearly states that "in the course of preparing this report a preliminary feasibility study on an Irish Academy of Performing Arts was received ... (which was prepared on behalf of)... the Royal Irish Academy of Music, the Gaiety School of Acting, the College of Dance and Dublin City University" — referring to the Deloitte and Touche study which the Taoiseach had received in May. This addition is significant as Renshaw's report is the foundation on which the Ministers' final plan was based, and some of his suggestions were first introduced in that Deloitte and Touche study.

Sutton says he is delighted with the pro-

Academy did not account for them and is emphatic in his belief that "the next stage of planning must include serious consultation with the School of Drama at Trinity."

D.I.T.'s Merriman is singularly unimpressed with the current developments. He points to the fact that D.I.T. have recently strengthened their provision in drama with key full-time and part-time appointments and says, regardless of the I.A.P.A. plans, he is looking forward to the development of a new campus for D.I.T.'s Faculty of Applied Arts in Grangegorman, Dublin 7, which was approved by the cabinet in December 1999.

At this stage Trinity and D.I.T. are

Sutton stresses that consultation is a "primary responsibility."

posals regarding the I.A.P.A. thus far. He has been invited to participate in the Academy's Planning and Steering Group and is keen to stress that he considers consultation one of the group's "primary responsibilities." Sutton's plans for the I.A.P.A. drama programme are wide-ranging, and include a course in directing, a television and film acting course, and a diploma in technical theatre, none of which are currently offered at third-level Irish institutions, although Trinity does offer a directing option in the B.A. drama programme and is keen to develop this strand in the future.

T.C.D. Professor of Drama Dennis Kennedy welcomes the government's new commitment to arts training but insists that Trinity's programmes must be accommodated in the plans in a meaningful way. He regrets that the initial planning for the

keeping a close eye on developments in the Academy discussions — but will this attention be of any benefit to them? In an interview on Lyric FM's "Artzone" (21st January 2000), Minister de Valera said she is going to offer these institutions another opportunity to present their case. While she stated that exclusion of such institutions as D.I.T. and Trinity would be a very "wrong thing," she reiterated Patrick Sutton's belief that "The Planning and Steering Group... were branching out for consultation and views... from those involved in performing arts already..."

We can only hope that this next stage of consultation leaves its contributors feeling more valued than they have previously in this saga.

Eibhlín Ni Ruairc is a theatre director and works as a reporter on RTÉ's "Today with Pat Kenny."

Entrances and Exits

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

MARY COLL, executive director of Limerick's Belltable Arts Centre since 1992, is leaving her position at the end of May. She plans to pursue a freelance career and to concentrate on writing. **OONAGH O'SHEA**, the centre's assistant director for the past 18 years, will also retire in May. **RACHEL**

MURPHY has been appointed as the Centre's press and publicity officer.

DEIRDRE ENRIGHT has left the post of executive director of Cork's Triskel Arts Centre. The position was re-advertised recently... At the City Arts Centre, **SAMANTHA O'BRIEN** has replaced **AUDREY BEHAN** as General Manager, **VICKI WREFORD-SINNOTT** has been appointed the new director of Very Special Arts, and the position of production manager remains vacant... **KIERAN MURPHY** is leaving his position as technical manager of the Samuel Beckett Centre; the position has been advertised... **RICHARD SEAGAR**, formally of the Beckett Centre, has been appointed theatre manager of Waterford's newly refurbished Theatre Royal... **HELEN CAREY** is the new director of Galway Arts Centre.

New initiatives at the National Theatre include the establishment of an associate directorate, initially comprised of Druid's **GARRY HYNES** and Rough Magic's **LYNNE PARKER** along with freelance directors



CONALL MORRISON and **DEBORAH WARNER**.

All four will have formal links with the theatre but will continue their individual careers. A further four appointments to the associate directorate are anticipated. **LOUISE DRUMM** of Common Currency Theatre Company (pictured) and freelance actor/director **DAVID PARNELL** (pictured) have been appointed as staff directors. **TONY WAKEFIELD** moves to the newly created position of technical director; **KEN HARTNETT**, formerly of the Ark, assumes the role of production manager; and **PETER ROSE**, the Abbey's master carpenter, has been promoted to the position of construction manager.

At the Gaiety, **VAUGHAN CURTIS**, previously of the Lawrence Batley Theatre, Yorkshire, replaces **GAIL WORTH** as technical manager. Worth has resumed a freelance career in the UK. **ÁINE McCANN** is vacating her position as marketing manager to assume a similar post at the Hot Press Hall of Fame (HQ). Her position is soon to be advertised along with that of box office manager.

ROBERT AGNEW has retired as executive director of the Belfast Festival at Queen's. A new position of festival director has been advertised and **ROSIE TURNER**, the Festival's assistant director, will deputise until an appointment is made... **DOMINIC CAMPBELL**, formerly a freelance director of large outdoor spectacles, is the new artistic director of the St. Patrick's Festival... **EMER McGOWEN**, previously of Team Educational Theatre Company and the City of Dublin Youth Service Board, replaces **JEAN PARKINSON** as director of Galway's Baboró International Arts Festival for Children... **FELICITY O'BRIEN** returns to the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival to assume a new role as programme co-ordinator. O'Brien, who has a long association with the Festival, spent the past two years working as stage director of Riverdance's Lee Company. Also at DTF, Bedrock's **IRENE KERNAN** has been appointed as the Festival's new General Manager. Kernan will remain associated with Bedrock.

At the Northern Ireland Arts Council, chief executive **BRIAN FERRAN** has announced that he is to retire in October. The position will then be advertised. Performing arts director **PHILIP HAMMOND** is on sabbatical leave until at least September; during that time, **IMELDA FOLEY** will replace Hammond, and **DAVID GRANT** will replace Foley as drama officer.

Following the resignation of **BRIAN FARRELL**, **P. J. MURPHY** has been appointed chairman of The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon. **DR. THOMAS N. MITCHELL**, provost of Trinity College Dublin, and **CLAIRE DUIGNAN**, Head of Independent Productions at RTÉ, have also been appointed to the Council following the resignations of **PAUL MCGUINNESS** and **JANE GOGAN** respectively. Also at the Arts Council, **MARY HICKEY** has replaced

JACKIE CASEY as drama assistant; Casey has moved to the Revenue Grants unit. As the position of drama officer remains vacant, **PHELIM DONLON** has returned to the brief until an appointment is made. **TONY Ó DALAIGH**, former director of the Dublin Theatre Festival, has been appointed as a member of the task force of "Auditoria," the review of arts infrastructure North and South, which Donlon is chairing.

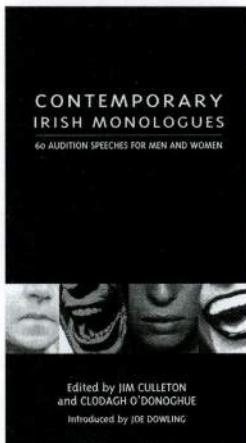
Tinderbox Theatre Company have advertised the position of artistic director, following the departure of **STEPHEN WRIGHT** who has been with the company for 11 years. Wright, a founding member of Tinderbox, has taken up a new position as a producer with BBC Northern Ireland's drama department... **ORLA O'DOHERTY** is leaving her position as company manager of Dance Theatre of Ireland. Her position has been advertised along with that of outreach and marketing manager and administrative assistant.

VINCENT McCANN, formerly administration manager of Belfast's Lyric Theatre, is the new administrator of The Market Place - Armagh Theatre and Arts Centre which opened in March. The centre includes a 397-seat theatre and performance space... **THE CORN EXCHANGE** are looking for an administrator.

At press time an announcement of a chief executive officer for the **BALLYMUN ARTS AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTRE** was imminent. Construction began on the Centre in January; it is expected to open in late 2000-early 2001. The Centre will include a 200-seat black box theatre in which visiting productions as well as local work will be programmed. Interviews are to be held in April for the already-advertised position of arts manager of the Centre.

Volume Control

JOCELYN CLARKE *thumbs through the latest theatre books — and recommends an old favourite.*



CONTEMPORARY IRISH Monologues (New Island Books) is a much-needed and welcome resource for Irish actors. Edited by Jim Culleton and Clodagh O'Donoghue, it includes 60 monologues (30 for men, 30 for women), from the works of nearly all the best-known Irish writers, from Friel, Murphy, and Keane, to McGuinness, Carr, Barry and Mercier, to McPherson, O'Rowe, and McDonagh. Each monologue is two to three minutes long and all come from published works, which is handy for further research; the volume also includes brief introductory notes for each entry. *Contemporary Irish Monologues* will no doubt prove indispensable for students and teachers, actors and directors, and is a handy primer of Irish playwrights of the last 30 years — with the exception of Hugh Leonard, who is strangely absent...

LISTEN TO THIS: "STANISLAVSKY wrote that the difficult must become easy and the easy habitual before the habitual can become beautiful." It is probably one of the smartest things Stanislavsky ever wrote about acting and

the theatre. And perhaps only David Mamet could manage to tie that quote into the experience of moving house and pull it off. He accomplishes this feat in his latest book of essays, *Jafsie And John Henry*, which finds Mamet at 50, feeling like an "old fart." Sometimes he gets a little peevish about new things in his life — the computer, the Internet and television — and at other times he is consoled by old things, like a favourite knife or a black cashmere sweater. He rages against the stupidity of Hollywood producers and the iniquity of the American legal system, and he is comforted by the curious rituals of the Scotch

Malt Whisky Society or by a day's hunting in the woods. This is not to say that Mamet in *Jafsie And John Henry* is a soft and sentimental slob. He is as truculent and fierce as ever — particularly about feminism and anti-Semitism — but he is also more reflective and introspective than in his previous non-fiction writings. His sharp wit and his spare but lucid writing make *Jafsie And John Henry* a fascinating read, as much for their humour and provocation as their insight.

SPEAKING OF STANISLAVSKY... ALL THIS talk of theatre books puts me in mind of one of the all-time greats: Mikhail Bulgakov's *Black Snow* (Harville), a caustic satire on the Moscow Arts Theatre, whose director was none other than the great Konstantin. Though known and loved in the West for his wonderful novel *The Master And Margarita*, Bulgakov was also a

playwright of some renown — Stalin banned his plays *Days of the Turbins* and *Flight*. It was the long and unhappy rehearsal period of *Days of the Turbins* and his daily encounters with Stanislavsky and his System which inspired Bulgakov to write *Black Snow*. The book concerns a hapless and suicidal author, Maxudov, who is commissioned to turn his failed novel into a play and is torn apart by the political infighting and monstrous egos of the Independent Theatre. Funny, witty and not a little cruel, *Black Snow* is a delightful antidote to the cult of Stanislavsky, all the more so for being a contemporary account, and should be a must for all theatre students, particularly of the "psychological" approach to character. Also check out Bulgakov's wonderfully compassionate biography of Moliere, simply entitled *Moliere*. I'm telling you: there are few things better than Bulgakov.



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What's happening on the North's vibrant youth theatre scene?

NAOMI CONWAY reports.

YIPPIE-HI-YAY Around 250 participants aged 14-25 will take part in the huge "YOUTH DRAMA 2000 - THE COWBOYS" Festival this year. In Stage One, which has been supported by the LINEN HALL LIBRARY, participants will prepare a short performance based on the work of an Ulster playwright. Stage Two is a 10-day residential programme in July at which each participating group will present its short script. An intensive series of workshops will follow, culminating in a public performance at the WATERFRONT HALL. In Stage Three, the participants will perform their scripts from Stage One at the Linen Hall as part of its Millennium Festival, creating a live timeline through the old and new parts of the Linen Hall building.

WE LOVE KEN The Ulster Association of Youth Drama manages two award schemes supported by its Patron KENNETH BRANAGH (pictured). The Renaissance Award, previously administered by Ulster Youth Theatre, assists a young person in attending drama school. The Renaissance scheme is open to UAYD members and past members of the Ulster Youth Theatre who are under 25 years old; applications are due on 31 May. More recently UAYD has linked up with the Ken-Friends organisation which has enabled the introduction of a second bursary scheme, aimed at supporting young people and their leaders attending one-



off drama training programmes at home or abroad.

TIDY DOING NOTHING AS USUAL!

The TIDY THEATRE COMPANY's latest production, *Nothing*, is an original black comedy that utilises innovative visual and technical media, and incorporates drama, dance and movement. *Nothing* tours the North through March and April and plays the Big Youth Theatre Festival in London on 14 July 7pm. For further details on TIDY Theatre Company and *Nothing* telephone (from the Republic) 00-44-28-7032-7269.

ULSTER THEATRE COMPANY AUDITIONS

The ULSTER THEATRE COMPANY will shortly be running its annual music theatre training course, the only one of its kind in Ireland. This year's production will be the Irish premiere of the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of *The Wizard of Oz*. The course runs for nine weeks from mid-July. Four weeks of intensive rehearsals and workshops led by a team of ten professionals culminates in performances at in Derry, Belfast, Birmingham, Oxford, and York. Auditions will take place at Easter time for performers aged between 16-32: ring the UTC on (from the Republic) 00-44-1396-830-166 to register.

Naomi Conway is the administrator of the Ulster Association for Youth Drama; UAYD can be reached on 00-44-184-662-8864.

HAMLET

Second Age Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 4 November 1999 at
The Tivoli Theatre, Dublin

THE TEMPEST

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin
8 December 1999 - 29 January 2000
Reviewed 29 January

AS YOU LIKE IT

The Gate Theatre, Dublin
10 February - 1 April 2000
Reviewed 22 February

BY DEREK WEST

IN RECENT MONTHS THERE HAS been a flurry of Shakespearean activity on the Dublin stage, with each production prompting the question: How well do we "do" Shakespeare? Can the Irish theatre offer something special in its interpretations, or is it simpler to book a

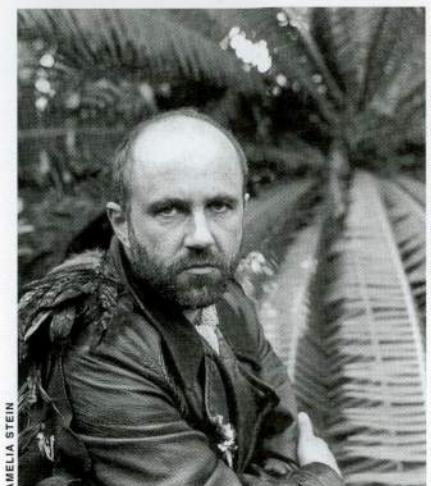
cheap flight to London or Stratford and leave it to the English?

Historically there has been little consistency and no distinctive style about Shakespeare production in Ireland. The assurance that marks most work on classic or contemporary Irish texts seems to waver in the face of the Bard. There are pockets of excellence and promise, but too often the experience is one of promising fragments, or of fatal flaws shrivelling potential. These problems have again been apparent in the three most recent productions.

Last autumn Second Age gave us a *Hamlet* unashamedly targeted (as is most of its work) at Leaving Certificate students. Directed by Joyce Branagh, it was well-paced and workmanlike. Branagh's apparent determination to give the production a contemporary feel was underlined in Chisato Yoshimi's design. The stage looked like a checker-



YOU TALKIN' TO ME? Anthony Kernan and Mal Whyte in Hamlet



AMELIA STEIN

BIRD MAN: Lorcan Cranitch as Prospero in *The Tempest*

board, and scene changes involved the moving of blocks from one spot to another. The battle of wits between Hamlet and Claudius was well marked, and the political intrigues found a convincing setting.

The casting, too, made for a production that had a sense of place and time. Anthony Kernan's Hamlet was identifiable as a sharp young man pitting himself against Michael Grennell's menacing Claudius. The world they inhabited was casual, fashionable and ruthless. Robert Price played Laertes with intensity; Jennifer Barry made a poignant Ophelia. The cast overall seemed at home with the dialogue — a key element in Shakespeare, but usually one of the besetting problems for Irish casts. Here the lines were delivered with an ease that elicited meaning, though sometimes at a cost to the iambic pentameter. There was an illusion of ensemble playing — with one significant breakdown. While Angela Harding conveyed a sense of Gertrude's vulnerability, her performance remained an intelligent,

respectful reading of the lines. The flesh and blood of Gertrude did not come through.

Overall it added up to a starter-kit *Hamlet*, transparent in plot and characterisation, but not adding greatly to any adult perception of the play. There was a sense of reverential tiptoeing around the play which is indicative of a fundamental flaw in our work on Shakespeare. Our roots do not lie deep enough in his texts, and the timescale for productions usually militates against profound ownership of lines.

The Abbey's Christmas-season *Tempest* revealed both the potential we have with Shakespeare, and the pitfalls we so often encounter in staging him. The production was full of sound and fury, dance, music and spectacle, but too often it seemed to signify little or nothing.

Monica Frawley's magnificent setting dominated the stage and offered an evening of visual delight. She gave us a Celtic Twilight theatre, stranded in ruins on an island. The setting offered powerful symbols, but they were not exploited as they might have been. If the island is to represent a watershed between usurpation and reconciliation, greed and forgiveness, it is hard to find reason for a theatre to be there. If it marks Shakespeare's valedictory, the theatricality needed to be more pointed. The disjunction between the designer's forceful vision and the uncertainty of the schema for the production was laid bare.

As with the Second Age *Hamlet*, there was a fatal error in casting: Lorcan Cranitch floundered as Prospero. This was a bitter, disgruntled magician. Even when he was forgiving those who had wronged him, he appeared to be begrudging in his benedictions. As an actor whose subtlety had been well illustrated on the small screen, he was left to bellow out lines with

a level roar that flattened any nuances. He was not given — or did not find — the quiet moments. Shakespeare calls for a vocal harmony equivalent to that called for in Synge or O'Casey. Get the sounds wrong and you scupper the thing.

Where Conall Morrison showed the potential for our Shakespearean work was in the casting of some of the minor roles. Presumably drawing on his Ulster connections, he found three actors who were in no way inhibited from using their accents and at the same time showing a marvellous capacity to bring life and colour to their lines. Frank McCusker and Lalor Roddy as the villains of the piece, Sebastian and Antonio, were in total control of their interpretations. They both showed a capacity to make use of pauses and to tease out single significant words, to give form and shape to the characters. Michael Colgan, as Ferdinand, demonstrated that broad Ulster vowels can ride easily over Shakespeare's English and give it vivacity and clarity. While the production failed to attach any consistent significance to the accents, the capacity of the Northern "sound" to encompass the meaning for the lines and to imbue them with individuality and richness was a strong pointer to how Shakespeare might be managed on this island. We are better off accentuating the identity and the musicality of our regional sounds, rather than aping received standard pronunciation. This is a strength on which our Shakespearean productions could build to effect.

Most recently, the "other" Michael Colgan brought the famed British director Dr. Jonathan Miller to stage As

You Like It at the Gate. Miller's direction displayed the confidence of long experience. He gave us a concept piece in modern dress, attractive but glib. The Court-Arden axis was identifiably Irish: It appeared to bring us from the sharp suits and dark ties of the city to the Glen o'the Downs (populated, however, not by Eco Warriors but by tweedy refugees from the Kildare St. Club on an extended country stroll).

The direction pursued the logic with a fine sense of detail, as Miller had done with his Victorian *Merchant of Venice* (Old Vic, 1980). The production bore the visible signs of an active intelligence at work. There were some sheer delights: Peter Byrne, an extremely refreshing bouncer-wrestler Charles, talking himself up a social notch or two; Pat Kinevane, a lugubrious stand-up comic Touchstone and an excellent foil to Jacques (one of John Kavanagh's best and most disciplined portrayals). Mark O'Regan (Oliver) and Gerard McSorley (Duke Frederick), like their counterparts at the Abbey, were creditable villains.

Miller had a strong local cast to work with. He let them play to their strengths;



TOM LAWLER

BOY MEETS... BOY?: As *You Like It*

he gave the airy nothing a name. The characterisation was based on a rationale — the sharp, pushy world of acquisition and usurpation, contrasting with a more genteel escapist world.

But that old demon Shakespeare sets traps: while this *As You Like It* gained much by its parts, the sum did not add up. Rosalind is at the heart of the play and Donna Dent failed to penetrate it. Her Rosalind was a throwback, a principal boy for the millennium. She had all the prerequisites for a Rosalind — taller than her coz, strikingly handsome in overthrowing Orlando's affections, articulate in her repudiation of Frederick's wanton cruelty. But in order to pass muster on the road to the forest she became an irritating rapper, a shoulder-twitching self-absorbed youth with a silly goatee. It was hard to credit that this Ganymede would have the nous to conduct the love therapy that feeds and at the same time refines Orlando's passion. Her playing was feminine braggadocio when it should have been charged with emotional and sexual tension.

Mark O'Halloran was an engagingly handsome Orlando, adept at overthrowing Charles the wrestler, but somewhat simpering in his lovemaking (being smitten seemed to produce an inane display of teeth). Once he was in Arden he seemed incapable of appreciating the slightest irony in his situation.

The production failed to engage with the play's exploration of gender, in so doing ignoring a practical body of dramatic research that has accumulated over the last four decades. In the mid-'60s, Vanessa Redgrave fathomed the depths of the Ganymede/Orlando tryst. Her portrayal conveyed the surge of emotion that underlay the transsexual eroticism of the lovemaking. The National Theatre's all-male production at the Old Vic in 1967 connect-

ed to a whole series of currents running between man and man, woman and man, woman and woman. These were further explored in Cheek by Jowl's potent, racially mixed all-male production in 1991.

But all of this past work on the play seemed to pass this Gate production by. Thus was revealed another of the problems facing Irish productions of Shakespeare: Our intermittent forays into the canon lack a sense of continuum or engagement with an international dialogue about Shakespeare's work. We return to the drawing board when we should be moving on. Here Donna Dent's playfulness begets a sense of shallowness. Are we fighting shy of a serious treatment of sexuality? Can we not approach it except through broad strokes? This *As You Like It* seemed to suffer from the Gate tradition of smart frocks and brittle lines. It looked for its creativity to the visitors — English director, Austrian designer — and missed finding its true métier.

We need confidence in the sound of our native voices requisitioning the verse; we need to shake ourselves free of our tendency to mimic our neighbours (we're a long time post-colonial now, lads); above all we need to encourage and promote our own creative directors who will combine local knowledge and scholarship to give us our own Shakespeare.

Derek West writes about theatre for The Irish Times and is principal of Newpark School in Blackrock, Co. Dublin.

THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE

by Martin McDonagh

Druid Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 26 February at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin by SUSAN CONLEY

MARTIN McDONAGH'S *THE BEAUTY*



YER MAMA: Anna Manahan in *Beauty Queen*

Queen Of Leenane, now in its fourth year of production, is making a victory lap of some of Ireland's major booking houses. Its reputation precedes it, via hit runs in London and on Broadway; kudos in the form of four Tony awards are hard to ignore. Equally impossible to miss have been the queues waiting to collect their tickets on South King Street. The production's done such great box office at the Gaiety, in fact, that Druid have re-booked the venue for yet another run in July.

So much has already been written about this now-overexposed production; but at last the dissenting, questioning voices are starting to be heard, primarily in the non-mainstream press and specialist journals. Add my voice to their number: As a play that has been representing Irish theatre in the big leagues, *Beauty Queen* offers a simplistic, violent, and dated vision of life on this island. It is a deeply disturbing vision that, most disturbingly, leaves its audiences laughing themselves silly.

The plot, for the uninitiated: Maureen Folan is an unhappy 40-something woman charged with caring for her mother, Mag. Almost exclusively in each other's company, they torture one another

relentlessly, Mag through child-like demands and sabotage, Maureen via verbal and physical abuse. The return of friend and neighbour Pato Dooley from America disrupts the (im)balance of the Folans' relationship. When it appears that Maureen may actually escape Leenane, Mag ensures that her daughter will remain by destroying a letter containing Pato's marriage proposal. A poker, much admired throughout the play, gets its 15 minutes of fame when Maureen realises what her mother has done. But murdering Mag only serves to trap Maureen completely.

Of the several themes at work in the play — emigration, sexuality, the romanticisation of the West of Ireland, Kimberley biscuits — the most problematic is this mother/daughter relationship. Mag and Maureen are trapped not only on a boreen in the desolate wilds of the West, but also in a hateful yet symbiotic bond. Their interdependence is apparent in Maureen's inability to leave Leenane. This is pathos — it is played as panto. Every insult is greeted with gales of laughter. The threats, the curses, the sheer unadulterated nastiness is delivered and accepted as a joke. Even the instances of physical abuse inspire nervous titters. These flashes of violence are meant to be provocative; instead they merely provoke, leaving one to feel cheapened by the event rather than lifted into catharsis.

Laughter is a form of catharsis, but *Beauty Queen's* humour is as low as a bucket of wee dumped down the sink. The audience's wholesale enjoyment shocks on yet another level: Under the cosmopolitan circumstances (Dublin's city centre) it becomes smug, superior chuckling at those ignorant culchies who haven't got the spunk to get out and

make it in the big city. As the history of Irish theatre was built on the country plays of Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory, this is tantamount to cultural insult. As part of that history largely figures Ireland as a woman (i.e. Cathleen Ní Houlihan), the vengeful, immature, stunted women presented by McDonagh are even more disturbing.

Yet the audience laughs and laughs. Is Irish theatre so devoid of representation of the collective? The product references alone swept the audience along on waves of glee. The Complan, Dettol, and Zip Firelighters dotted the set as cannily as cans of Coke in a Hollywood blockbuster. The easy vulgarity suffices as indigenous language for the punters who embrace it. The whole endeavour smacks of elitism and smugness. It is clear that this play fills some void: The Irish wants to see themselves onstage, and this fact guarantees a place in the canon for this highly-lauded but mean-spirited piece of theatre.

Susan Conley is a filmmaker, holds an MPhil. in Irish Theatre Studies from T.C.D., and is art director of this magazine.

CHAIR

Kabosh Productions
Old Museum arts centre

1 - 4 March 2000

Reviewed 1 March by

ASHLEY DUNNE and MICHAEL LEONARD

THEATRE IS A SHARED ACT OF imagination between the performers and the audience. No two individuals ever "see" the same performance. *Chair* is a piece which illustrates these points to near perfection.

Kabosh's latest venture is billed as a piece of physical and visual theatre. In a non-verbal performance, three actors open up the somewhat quirky world of



the "ordinary" chair. Designer David Craig's set consists of a stack of sofas piled high; watching the actors clamber over the teetering tower made for some uneasy moments among the audience. Suspended from the ceiling in one corner is a "special" sofa, an unreachable red and yellow checked twin-seater, which remains in darkness for most of the show.

One of the aims of this production, according to director Karl Wallace, was to challenge people's perception of the theatre space. People can watch a film in a comfy chair while eating and drinking — why not theatre? To this end Kabosh replaced the normal theatre seating with inflatable sofas and kept their performance to a very manageable 30 minutes. As well as creating a more comfortable and informal environment, the inflatable chairs also served to locate the audience within the world of the piece. Keeping the performance short ensured that it moved well, although one or two of the sequences, especially the final, were a little drawn out.

Visually, *Chair* was great fun — disappearing dust covers, magically sprouting

flowers, smoke, lights, disappearing people — not to mention the comic genius of Paul Dinnen's facial contortions. The costumes seemed to suggest chairs themselves — beige trousers and waistcoats with looped fringeing hanging down. A pile of rags from which the principal actress emerges seemed to suggest a giant person collapsed in a heap — as if the actress was that person's "inner self."

One of the most interesting things about *Chair* was the freedom and variety of interpretation its structure invited. It could be read as the story of a lost child, a metaphor for life, a tale with the performers as chairs, or an enactment of all the uses we find for these ordinary objects. One short sequence managed to reconstruct the horror of the forced politeness of a waiting room to hilarious effect. Somewhere in the middle of all these "stories," the performance manages to be funny and moving all at once.

If *Chair*'s main aim was to make a theatre space more comfortable and approachable, it succeeded. Kabosh also succeeded in creating a vibrant and emotive piece of theatre which glimpses the fantastical world that surrounds the humble chair. —ASHLEY DUNNE

IN THE MARKETING OF *CHAIR* the audience was invited to "sit back and relax" and to prepare to be "seriously entertained." There is something essentially liberating in these invitations, and stylistically the production encouraged its audience to yield itself up for 30 minutes and respond imaginatively to the stimulus before it.

As the viewers squeeze and recline into their inflated orange seats, they are confronted with a cacophony of motley sofas and armchairs on stage, rising in an apparently haphazard fashion. As the

lights went down and characters emerged from piles of rags and behind cushions, the audience was consumed in a world of fantasy and fun. The three performers flitted about the pile of furniture, popping up and disappearing in carefully choreographed scenes. *Chair* involves no verbal interaction between characters and so visuals, movement and music are the primary tools used to evoke meaning. The piece is therefore highly democratic, encouraging a range of responses and interpretations.

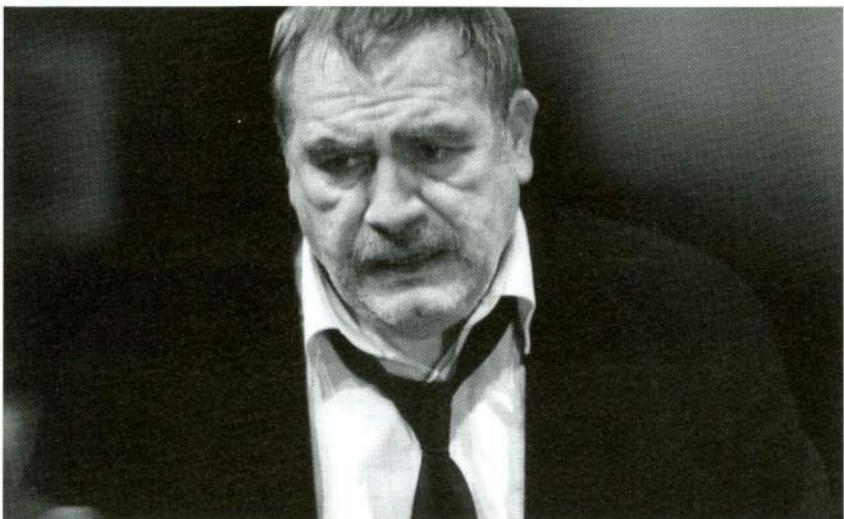
As the piece progresses, tragic elements become increasingly evident. Out of despair and isolation the main character embarks on a journey in pursuit of comfort and solace. Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" accompanies her gradual ascent towards a "platonic" chair, suspended in isolation above the cacophony below. However, the chair remains elusive, a vivid dream rather than an achievable reality. —MICHAEL LEONARD

Ashley Dunne and Michael Leonard are first-year drama students at Queen's University, Belfast.

A DUBLIN CAROL by Conor McPherson

Royal Court Theatre Company
14 January - 18 March 2000
reviewed on 31 February
at The Old Vic Theatre, London
BY MARK FISHER

CONOR MCPHERSON'S LATEST ASSAULT on the London theatre scene is less a play than a character study. If it weren't for the inconvenient detail of it requiring three actors, you'd be tempted to call it a monologue. That central character is John Plunkett, a middle-aged undertaker from Dublin's Northside, whose alcoholism has given way to mere heavy



IVAN KYNCL

SLAVE TO THE BOTTLE: Brian Cox in *A Dublin Carol*

drinking. In Part One of this 90-minute play directed by Ian Rickson, John parries with his new 20-year-old assistant, Mark; in Part Two with his estranged daughter, Mary; and in Part Three with Mark again, the conversation rarely straying from the subject of this man who has exchanged everything — family, possessions, dignity — for the bottle.

It's not that McPherson hasn't given the other two anything to do, more that what they do is primarily designed to further investigate John. The part of Mark is a shrewdly observed portrait of the modern sensitive male, young enough to listen respectfully to his elders, old enough to know his own mind; resolved enough to try to chuck his long-term girlfriend, human enough to be consumed by guilt about it. In Andrew Scott's subtle performance, he is charming and vulnerable, but never soft-centred, largely a sounding-board for Brian Cox's John, but also a firm presence whose

youth and emotional rootedness are a challenge to the older man's evasiveness.

Mary, the grown-up daughter, a figure from the past who serves to break John's pattern of boozy denial, is more sketchily conceived. Played by Bronagh Gallagher, she scowls a lot in a hard-bitten kind of way, describes her history of childhood neglect, yet concludes that she's always admired her father's panache, his mastery of excess, and still loves him deep down. Abusive relationships are contradictory things, but McPherson doesn't let Mary get close enough to the heart of the play to explore those contradictions in full.

Mark might be the better fleshed out of the two characters, but they both can only be seen as supporting roles, in the pure sense of that phrase, for Cox's John. It's as if a couple of actors had strayed into McPherson's *St. Nicholas* — a monologue about a Dublin theatre critic in which Cox also starred — forcing the

writer to find something for them to do. John is a man who needs to be listened to and that's the function they fulfill. He's not maudlin, not indulgent, not seeking sympathy, but he's burdened by a sense of his own life wasted and other lives abused, crimes for which he knows the word "sorry" is inadequate. With greying hair, shop-keeper's moustache, and shabby trainers beneath his funereal garb, Cox brings a wonderful air of spontaneity, forever interrupting his own busy movements and playing on the disjointed quality of the writing as if each thought was being minted anew.

McPherson writes vividly about heavy drinking, as he did in *Rum and Vodka* and *St. Nicholas*, capturing both the compulsion and the degradation of addiction, a vision that is grim without being moralistic, funny without being flippant. Like those earlier plays, *Dublin Carol* is concerned on a deeper level with the emotions behind the drinking, the fear of death, the regret at missed opportunities, the guilt at the hurt caused to others, things that resonate with us all whether drunk or sober. This is the human level at which the play grips us.

It seems, though, that McPherson wants the play to stand for something more than this. The title refers both to an off-stage character (John's forgiving girlfriend, Carol, desperate for his friendship) and to the play's Christmas setting. The characters' names — John, Mark and Mary — are unobtrusively biblical, though not symbolic as far as I can tell. And the story culminates on Christmas Eve with John redecorating the tree he has just stripped bare, a gesture of hope, perhaps even epiphany. These clues are there if you happen to spot them, but they're too little developed to take on the significance I suspect McPherson would like.

That's true of the play as a whole too.

Consider this line spoken towards the end by John: "You know if you're listening to the radio and there's all static and you put your hand on it — and there's a clear signal. It'd be great to be able to do that, wouldn't it? To people, I mean. To people." It's a striking thought (and there's no question that McPherson writes beautifully), but it seems only half-related to the rest of the play — John's problem is his own "static," not that of other people. In another context, the line could be electric; here, it is simply good. And in the absence of such electricity, the absence also of significant dramatic conflict, McPherson has a play that is very good, but not major.

Former chief theatre critic of The Herald (Scotland), Mark Fisher is the newly appointed editor of the Scots entertainment magazine The List.

JAMES JOYCE'S THE DEAD

**by Richard Nelson and
Shaun Davey**

The Belasco Theatre, New York
Open run; reviewed 21 January 2000

BY JOHN ISTEL

"THE MUSICAL IS DEAD." "THE American play is dead." "The theatre is dead." For one night at least, let the cliches rest. For James Joyce's *The Dead* is very much alive. This new musical, which recently transferred to Broadway's Belasco Theatre after a run at Playwrights Horizons off-Broadway, is a work of terrible beauty, exquisitely wrought by its creators, playwright-director Richard Nelson and composer Shaun Davey, and a crackerjack ensemble cast. The proof of its power? It survives a trio of glaring missteps in writing and casting, and by the final curtain delivers a cathartic, emotionally draining experience. Who would

have thought such a result possible from a theatricalisation of Joyce's masterful story, which depicts the bittersweet lives of turn-of-the-century Dubliners gathered at the home of two elderly sisters for a holiday party?

The Dead succeeds by being contrary. It's an anti-musical. Davey's original compositions (some adapted from Irish parlour songs and folk tunes) exist primarily behind the imaginary fourth wall, a fairly shocking theatrical gesture on Broadway these days. The result is an intense intimacy: the songs are performed for the other characters, not belted to the balcony. In fact, many are not even sung to the audience. The only times the fourth wall descends is when Gabriel Conroy (Christopher Walken), the central character, occasionally steps out of the onstage action as a narrator to offer exposition or commentary. This is a necessary theatrical device that gives Joyce a voice in the proceedings (his original story is written in the third person.)

In an interview in the program, Nelson reveals that he "had been wanting to write a realistic, almost-like-a-Chekhanov-play musical." He and his collaborators have succeeded. The show begins fairly faithfully to Joyce's story, as we watch the erudite and fatuous educator Conroy and his wife Gretta (Blair Brown) arrive at Gabriel's spinster aunts' Christmas gathering held annually at their Victorian Dublin home. Their niece, Mary Jane (Emily Skinner), a music teacher; her Aunt Kate, also a music teacher; and one of their students begins the musical entertainment onstage by singing "Killarney's Lakes" as a trio — with their backs to the audience.

The raptures Strindberg might have felt! It's as if Nelson studied the preface to *Miss Julie*, in which Strindberg wrote, "Of course, I have no illusions about getting the actors to play for the public and not at

it, although such a change would be highly desirable. I dare not even dream of beholding the actor's back throughout an important scene, but I wish with all my heart that crucial scenes might not be played in the centre of the proscenium, like duets meant to bring forth applause."

Nelson's naturalism delivers huge dividends. The music becomes simply part of the milieu; and we watch this opening song through the expressions of the onstage characters, assorted guests and students, all unerringly performed. Emotion isn't released onto the audience; it's passed around, incubated, and reflected off the faces of the rapt ensemble. By the time this first of four scenes is over, the characters have been revealed by their behaviour before their peers (this initial scene seems to last as long as the next three combined). The lyrics don't matter since they've been relieved of any narrative or character-building burden. The actual Broadway audience suddenly feels like it's peeping into a nickelodeon.

And what rapturous performances. The ensemble achieves a harmonious whole, spotted by standout turns: Alice Ripley's jut-jawed nationalist Molly Ivers, Stephen Spinella's wobbly, puppy-dog boozier Freddy Malins, and Sally Ann Howes as the frail angelic Aunt Julia, in whose room the third scene occurs and where she's serenaded by both a visiting opera singer (played by experimental theatre artist John Kelly) and by the ghost of her youthful self (Daisy Egan). The cast is topped by Blair Brown's Gretta, who radiates a warmth and lustre that makes Gabriel's devotion to her understandable. It's only Walken's typically eccentric Method-like mannerisms that seem a bit out of place. While that style would seem to suit Nelson's naturalistic aims, one can't help wondering what Stephen Rea or Gabriel Byrne might have done with the role. For here Joyce is

let down. Instead of a fawning, self-important prig we get Walken. Instead of a husband utterly devoted to his wife (which would make the ending betrayal doubly devastating) we get Walken.

The second misstep materialises in the second scene, as the guests are arranged around a dinner table. Freddy and company do a musical theatre number, "Wake the Dead," that has no reason to exist except as musical theatre convention. Perhaps the creators felt the audience needed a rousing full-company shindig, but it only breaks the thrall under which the audience has been kept. A similar mistake occurs in the final scene, in Gretta and Gabriel's hotel room that night. Although beautifully delivered, Gretta's song about her dead boyfriend Michael Furey also breaks the spell by foraying past the fourth wall and into a more traditional musical theatre land.

After Gretta falls asleep, Walken softly sings the final song, "The Living and the Dead," based on Joyce's famous last line: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." All is forgiven in this wondrous strange musical finale. Walken's croaking tenor, unpolished but perfect in its imperfection, gives vibrant voice to all the repressed yearning and heartbreak and folly that Joyce heaped up in his story. We forgive Walken's somnambulant performance, the lines thrown away upstage, the twitchy off-beat readings. For the snow falls equally, on the living and the dead, on the amateur and the professional, on the Victorian and the contemporary. And thanks to Nelson and Davey's savvy channelling of Joyce's spirit, we feel blessed. Theatre lives another night.

John Istel is the New York-based editor in chief of Stagebill magazine and writes about

theatre for publications including the Atlantic Monthly, American Theatre, the Village Voice, and Opera News.

KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

by Samuel Beckett

The Gate Theatre (Dublin) at the New

Ambassadors Theatre, London

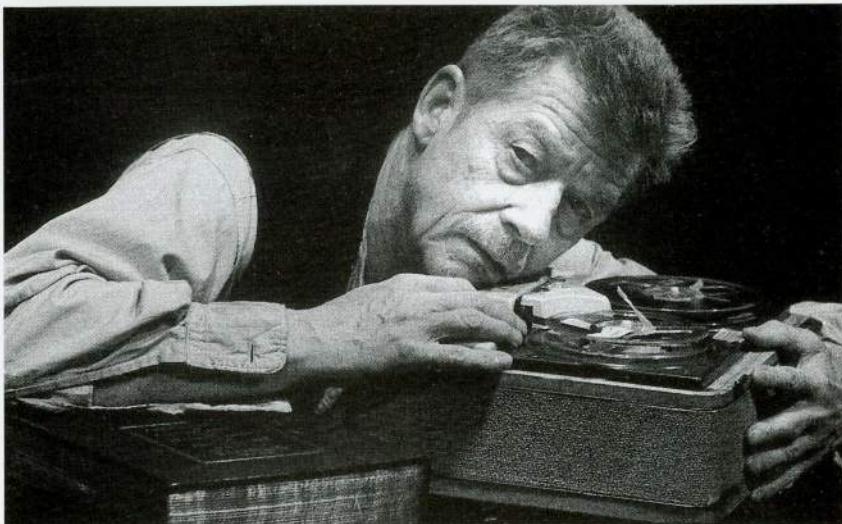
27 January - 11 March 2000

Reviewed 10 February

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

THE LATE 1990S WERE A GOOD TIME for Krapp's in the theatres of these islands. In Glasgow, Giles Havergal relentlessly wrung out every drop of pathos and pain from his agonised, unobtrusively *triste* portrayal of Beckett's protagonist. Then came Edward Petherbridge's slightly distracted Krapp (not least on the performance I saw, at which his co-star, an elderly tape recorder, decided instead to impersonate Winnie's parasol in the same author's *Happy Days*, and began to emit smoke from its innards), less a man raked with the bitterness of failure than one who has simply run out of steam and cannot tolerate the preciousness of his lyrical younger self on the tape recordings.

By common acclamation, though, the laurel goes to John Hurt. His wonderful performance, in Robin Lefèvre's Gate Theatre production, was first seen in London last September as part of the Gate's Beckett Festival at the Barbican, and has now returned for a seven-week run in the West End. With his grey, spiky-cropped hair and furrowed face, Hurt is, in what is reckoned to be among the most personal of Beckett's plays, almost the spitting image of the author himself; even his ears seem to partake of Beckettishness by sticking themselves out further than usual. He is discovered sitting at his bare desk beneath a single



JOHN HAYNES

LISTENING INTO THE VOID: John Hurt in Krapp's Last Tape

electric light, staring pensively, grimly, perhaps (we think, mistakenly, at this early point) a little remorsefully into the middle distance. It is more than a minute before he so much as moves.

At 55 minutes, this is a long version of the play, but not a slow one. The early laughs, as he plays with the squeak in his boots and slips on a banana skin, are minor key; there are no slapstick noises off when he retires briefly to his "cubby hole"... in fact, no ostentatious sense of theatricality at all (although he does eventually throw the banana skin off the front of the stage rather than in the more discreet direction specified by the script). Hurt commands through his iron stillness: He pauses, bent over, short of breath, for a moment after plugging in the recorder, then, when sifting through his ledger of the tapes' contents, reads "Farewell to...", turns the page, peers, reads, and only after a few seconds of not at all wistful consideration mutters, "...love."

It makes for a heightened jolt when this rigid self-discipline momentarily breaks down. We can see that Hurt's Krapp is physically pained by his 30-years-younger self's taped account of his major epiphany — the "memorable equinox" — and pained perhaps by the element of delusion, but more directly by the fact that in those days he could feel any kind of passion at all — but there is no nostalgia in his agony. Our shock, then, is so much greater when he finds himself goaded into actual movement: spitting "Let that go!" at the tape recorder in disgusted rage, he almost bounds to his feet and takes a couple of paces away from the table, his back to both the machine and the audience.

There is no *tristesse* here to let us off lightly, just an undimmed, undimmable self-loathing, hydrochloric in its corrosive strength. This Krapp manages to find particularly deep irritation even in

the inevitability of the sum of "One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt." (For younger readers, 6/8 was exactly one-third of a pre-decimal pound.) He may almost rest his head on the tape machine as it recounts his own past, but this is less in an actual, tender recollection of times and feelings he has since lost than a brief, vain, utterly void attempt to imagine himself the person who lived through the events described. In the final sequence, when replaying the closing moments of the 39-year-old Krapp's tape, he gives the lie to the venom which has preceded it but refrains from putting anything in its place, his face utterly immobile, his eyes not even glistening immoderately, powerfully personifying the core-deep, fundamental absence of what his younger self callowly believed was "the fire in me now." The last shock of all is when, at the curtain call, this immemorially emotionless face breaks into a smile.

Originally from Belfast, Ian Shuttleworth writes about London theatre for The Financial Times.

THE MUESLI BELT by Jimmy Murphy

The Peacock Theatre

10 February - 25 March 2000

Reviewed on 16 February

BY CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

JIMMY MURPHY IS A WRITER whose use of irony deepens with every new play. His theme is the little man against the establishment, the powers-that-be however they be defined. His sympathies are working class: Like O'Casey and Behan in this country, Wesker and Bond in the UK, he rages against injustice and the effects of power-hungry and corrupt capitalism. This is lonely territory nowadays. Rough Magic's

Boomtown bravely tried it and failed during the last Dublin Theatre Festival.

After *Brothers of the Brush* (1993), which wove its politics out of the dynamics and betrayals within the building industry, Murphy broadened his scope to investigate the state of the working-class family within the newly affluent Dublin, in *A Picture of Paradise* (1995). Here he joined the ranks of Dermot Bolger and Paul Mercier as outspoken urban historian and commentator on the horrific social and moral problems facing the unemployed, the alcoholic, and the drug addict in an increasingly soulless society. In an afterword to the text, Murphy already indicated where he was headed for his third major play: "With the end of the century around the corner, Dublin is hurtling towards it in fourth gear... the natives are getting restless, finding themselves being pushed out further into the suburbs, their ancient corporation flats being revamped and sold off to become part of 'the Muesli Belt'... But that's another play."

Indeed it is, and now we have it at the Peacock, directed by Jimmy Fay. While nobody could argue with Murphy's thesis — that Dublin is in the grip of a new breed of voracious developers — what he sets up is a *fait accompli*. The Black Pool Pub is a gonner, beached as the tide of prosperity rises all around it in the form of huge office blocks and fancy apartments. Likewise the grotty hairdresser's down the road. Some time is spent in Act One crying out against the shame of destruction, rather on the one note of complaint, and one's spirits sink at the obviousness of the point.

But a welcome twist comes when pub-owner Mick (John Olohan), who has clearly let the place go down so badly over the years that his clientele is chronically reduced to two regulars — retired binman Tommy (Mick Nolan) and the



AMELIA STEIN

LAST ROUND: John Olohan (left) and Mick Nolan in *The Muesli Belt*

alcoholic hairdresser Nora (Veronica Duffy) — announces that he has not only sold the pub, but the little attached cottage which Tommy has long rented from him as well. And there was poor Tommy thinking he'd make Mick's day by offering him his lump sum on retirement (£21,000) to buy the little cottage and end his days where they began. "They can't take away a man's home, can they?" Tommy rhetorically asks as Act One ends. But of course they can. Or, specifically, Mossy Plunkett (Don Wycherley), one of the new breed of entrepreneurs, can.

In Act Two, each of Mick's regulars forces a way in for a last drink as he makes to shut down the pub, and in the confrontations Mick shows his true colours. A Mayo man who went young to England to make money on the buildings, he always had this

dream of a "pot of gold" and now he cannot see why he shouldn't take it when it is shoved at him. For her part, Nora thinks back 25 years to her engagement party in this very pub, and relays a story of broken promises meant to dovetail with Mick's exposure as one more male chauvinist.

But Nora's story can only by force be integrated with the main theme. Her engagement ring, the loss of which she laments, is sitting on the counter even as she narrates, found that very day as Mick was cleaning out, but it's never referred to and it passes by like those other bits and pieces of local history which turn up (a bullet casing from 1922 is another). To Murphy, such relics are the real keys to human solidarity. The difficulty is that such an emphasis comes perilously close to sentimentality, and this play, openly pit-

ting nostalgia against greed, teeters on the brink of banality at all times. For Tommy recovers his spirits and heads off to live with daughter and grandchildren in Bluebell, and the barmaid Sinead (Deirdre Molloy), a most unlikely chorus figure and wise counsellor, sails off bright-eyed to face the future unafraid.

What saves the play finally is the eloquence and panache of the villain Mossy, who runs away with the whole moral argument as surely as Richard III runs away with the stakes in that particular history of upwardly mobile villains. As played by Wycherley this Satanic figure is heroic. Of course, it's all ironic, all tongue-in-cheek, and yet his villainy is so nakedly on view and so energetic and witty that he oozes cool, charm and charisma. He thus forces the audience to rethink their loyalties in a way which mirrors the very subject of the play.

"What is there more?" Wesker famously ended *The Kitchen* (1960) with the repetition of that question ringing in his audience's ears. There, the capitalist/heartless owner of the microcosmic restaurant who refuses to see more to life than making money, is genuinely puzzled at the challenge to his authority which comes from one of his workers. But Mossy isn't blind or puzzled. Mossy is the embodiment of a far more accomplished materialism, and he is a "finished" figure, not one who has anything to learn. Instead, that responsibility is handed over to Murphy's audience. So far as the play is concerned it is a case of *fait accompli*. The enemy is not only within the gates but entirely in charge. Game over. The microcosmic Black Pool (i.e Dubh Linn) has had it. Thus the play is a cry of despair, dressed up as an Arthur Miller venture into the American Dream newly translated onto Dublin soil, sorry, concrete. But it is also quite funny — comedy being, of course, a primary means of deconstruct-

ing what seems like fate and can be revealed to be only changeable history. With excellent performances and honest direction, this is a show which should not be missed and should in addition be seen for what it is: A nightmare masquerading as an episode from a TV soap opera. Boomtown it ain't, for it is not so Brechtian, nor so ambitious, but it'll do for now.

Christopher Murray lectures in the English department at University College Dublin and is the author of Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation.

MYSTERIES 2000

The Machine

SFX Theatre, Dublin

1 - 20 November 2000

Reviewed 3 November

BY ALAN FLETCHER

FOR THE FIRST TIME ON RECORD in 1498 (although it had probably already been taking place for many years) a procession of pageant wagons made its way through the heart of Dublin, along what is now Dame Street, out through the city gate that used to stand there, and then up South Great Georges Street. The procession proceeded to a chapel dedicated to St George, long since demolished, where the pageant wagons halted. Possibly, plays were performed from them on biblical subjects such as Adam and Eve and the Crucifixion. These Dublin mystery plays (if such they truly were) have been lost. But other mystery plays, from medieval cities with which Dublin had cultural ties, like York and Chester, have survived, and they perhaps give us some idea of the kind of thing that the citizens of medieval Dublin had a chance of seeing each year on the feast of Corpus Christi.

These Corpus Christi plays were in full swing in the 1400s, but the Protestant

Reformation put paid to that. But now, some five hundred years later, these mystery plays have been resurrected in a pioneering production mounted by The Machine at the SFX Theatre. Just like a book lover facing some filmmaker's attempt to transfer my favourite novel to the silver screen, I approached *Mysteries 2000* bristling with preconceptions. But the whole experience disarmed my prejudices, starting with the programme notes: Their author, Michael McCaffery, had evidently done his homework. (One small niggle, Michael, if you ever read this: The last recorded performance of mystery plays was not in Chester in 1574 but here in Ireland — in Kilkenny, in fact — in 1637.)

Beyond the programme notes, what really impressed me about the production was that the people behind it didn't just know what these early plays were about, in the ardently academic sense of "knowing" — they had understood what their spirit was meant to be. They had taken their pulse beat. For the mystery plays were, at root, a celebratory, communal experience — a huge annual street party, if you will. This open-air riot of festivity in former times was what the SFX Theatre was asked somehow to contain, without traducing or belittling the original experience.

And on the whole, it did so remarkably well. We were ushered in backstage, where in a dim blue twilight (was it dawn or dusk?) we milled around with other audience members waiting for something to happen. Then high above us angels, visible darkly but with sparkling halos, sang a song of creation. This numinous, tingle-factor opening made for a breath-stopping moment of theatre, but it lasted only a moment. I would have been happy to have revisited that magical height just once more before the production came to an end, but sadly, that was not to be. We had fallen with

Lucifer (played stunningly well by Klaus Hassel), and our next move brought us firmly down to earth, as the curtain went up to reveal the yawning barn of the SFX's auditorium. We were shepherded down into our seats, which we occupied for the rest of the performance.

The evening presented us, just as the mystery plays originally would have, with the key Bible stories in a serial order until the Day of Judgement, except that the scale of ours was abbreviated. Even so, the show was still a very long one — nearly four hours from start to finish — yet it never once palled or lost momentum. This was largely due to the fact that, again like the original mystery plays, different playwrights were responsible for writing different episodes, and the individual style of each playwright brought variety. It may be that some of the audience would have experienced this variety as a very uneven theatrical ride, but I found the rough edges and bumpy transitions authentic, close to the spirit of what I imagine a medieval performance would have felt like.

From a string of authors (Michael McCaffery, Aidan Matthews, Fergus Linehan, Johnny Hanrahan, Joe O'Byrne, Derek Chapman, Pat Kinevane, Declan Gorman, Brendan Kennelly, Joe O'Connor, Gavin Kostick, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Michael Scott, Deirdre Purcell, with Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill adding a "Song of Songs") I must single out for honourable mention the two splendid contributions of Aidan Matthews, his version of *Cain and Abel* and of *The Last Supper*. Matthews certainly knows how to write dialogue, and to twine a rich poetic fibre around the practical necessities of dramatic writing. He's a natural playwright, if ever I saw one.

In all of this kaleidoscope of authorial styles and staging routines, characters came and went with dizzying speed, swapping roles riotously. But two key ones,

Jesus, played by James Watson, and Satan, by the aforementioned Klaus Hassel, gave a crucial centre of gravity to all the peripheral giddiness. A sensible move.

And what a valiant attempt it all amounted to! To be sure, we can't replicate all the circumstances of original medieval performance; this production wisely avoided the letter of these plays and went for their spirit. At the end of the evening, it hadn't really mattered whether anyone watching *Mysteries 2000* was Christian or not. Certainly, the original audiences were: The plays were unashamedly the products of Catholic Christendom, after all. But what was remarkable in the production was the way in which, no matter what one's beliefs or lack of them, these modern mystery plays still conveyed some of the timeless power of the ancient ones.

Alan J. Fletcher lectures in the department of English at University College Dublin.

OEDIPUS

by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy

Storytellers Theatre Company and the Cork Opera House
Cork Opera House (1-5 February 2000)
and Gaiety Theatre, Dublin (8-19 February)
Reviewed on 8th February at the Gaiety

BY STEVE WILMER

STORYTELLERS THEATRE COMPANY lived up to their name in their recent co-production of *Oedipus* with the Cork Opera House. Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's version turned the ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex* into an accessible narrative about Oedipus, his family, and fellow Thebans and Corinthians. Burke-Kennedy pruned the long speeches of Sophocles' original, and added new scenes, such as Oedipus' birth and abandonment on the hillside, his killing of Laius, and his solving the riddle of the



TOM LAWLER

MY SON, THE MURDERER: Stephen Brennan and Susan Fitzgerald in Oedipus

Sphinx, to create a clear and visible story line. Much of the storytelling was useful in clarifying the plot, but too many additions seemed clichéd or poorly executed, such as Laius' rape of Jocasta, and Oedipus' killing of Laius.

The most surprising change to the original drama followed the revelation of Oedipus' identity. As opposed to the Sophoclean version, in which Jocasta retreats into the palace in horror and hangs herself — an action which is described but not actually seen on stage — Burke-Kennedy inserted a scene where Oedipus and Jocasta met privately to decide what to do next. They discuss their fate, with Jocasta insisting that she still loves Oedipus despite the revelations about his past. On the opening night at the Gaiety

Theatre, members of the audience gasped audibly when the couple kissed as a sign of their continuing affection, in spite of having discovered their dual relationship as mother and son, husband and wife.

Although entertaining, the production did not convey the aura of the original tragedy. There were many cheap jokes and some of the tragic moments were played for laughs. The production seemed to take its cue from the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus myth: Freud's influence has so normalised the love relationship between mother and son that the plight of Oedipus and Jocasta seemed unfortunate but not unusual. Their tragedy was not that they had broken taboos by sleeping together and having children, but rather that they would have to separate because of Oedipus' impetuous decree to banish Laius' killer. One needs to ask how such an interpretation is possible in the context of recent revelations about incest in Ireland. Has the plethora of reports about fathers, uncles and grandfathers abusing young girls led to a dulling of the public horror at such actions? Or does a mother/son sexual relationship seem less disturbing in the wake of such news?

Alan Stanford's direction was generally effective. Stephen Brennan played Oedipus as an impetuous bully who refused advice from others. Barry McGovern provided a nice contrast as a pragmatic Creon trying to keep any family misdemeanours hidden from public view. Susan Fitzgerald emphasised Jocasta's dismissal of religion and her devotion to Oedipus as wife/mother (clutching Oedipus to her bosom maternal-ly as a fitting close to the first act). None of the principals, however, approached a sense of horror at discovering the truth about Oedipus' past. The closest the production came to a moment of real tragedy was when Oedipus gathered his daughters/sisters to explain his concern for their

fates, but this was quickly interrupted by an intervention from Creon.

In sympathy with a simplified and more accessible text, Bruno Schwengl designed a simple set, with a rotating white platform and a white cyclorama backdrop. The ancient Greek theatrical convention of all-male cast was updated, with the male and female members of the chorus doubling as narrators and Theban elders in modern grey dresses and trousers; some of the actors looked occasionally ill-at-ease as they moved between roles as chorus, narrators and minor characters. I regretted that more had not been made of choreography and music. An athletic Olwen Grindley as the Sphinx climbing a rope and menacing the local citizens indicated the potential for choreographed movement to convey the sense of tragic ritual as in the work of such international directors as Purcarete, Mnouchkine and Taymor.

With more of a sense of ritual, the production could have seemed less commonplace and melodramatic.

Steve Wilmer lectures at the School of Drama, Trinity College.

ON MCQUILLAN'S HILL

by Joseph Crilly

Tinderbox Theatre Company

On tour, reviewed at the Lyric Theatre,

Belfast on 23 February 2000

BY PÓL Ó MHUIRÍ

ON MCQUILLAN'S HILL, IN THE townland of Gentry, they have it all: Alcoholism, incest, violence, gay love, burnt-out rebels. Everything but lesbian mudwrestlers. It's that kind of play. The first act is an overly long introduction to the lives and problems of the Maline family. Immature and confused 21-year-old Theresa (Niki Doherty) is the "daughter" of Fra Maline (Niall Cusack), a recently

**FREEDOM FIGHTER?** Niall Cusack in *On McQuillan's Hill*

released "freedom fighter" and lover of Dessie Rigg (Kieran Lagan), a local Protestant businessman. Fra's sister Loretta (Anne Byrne) has just returned from England, whence she had fled after pocketing the proceeds of the sale of the family pub. She now asks her ex-beau Ray McCullion (Seán Rocks), who she hasn't seen in 20 years, to renovate some property for her, while goodly Mrs Tymelly (Helena Bereen), the stock nosy neighbour with a heart of gold, looks on with the gossip's greedy eyes but none of the guile.

While Act One is pure soap, Act Two is pure Fenian farce. Revelation after revelation is piled on. Yes, there's incest, but not as we know it. Yes, they fall out with each other, but their bark is worse than their bite. No shoving bottles in each other's face for this crowd. Not when the bottle is full and a quick shot of whiskey is usual-

ly enough to cure all ills. X shot Y, and Y forgives him. Better in the leg than in the head. Aye, true enough. A betrays B, and B forgives him. Your heart wasn't in that business. Aye, true enough. It even manages a happy ending for most of the characters. Family and lovers are reconciled.

It's hard to know exactly what the play was trying to explore. It doesn't address familial betrayal with any great conviction. It doesn't address republican betrayal with any great conviction. It doesn't address lovers' betrayal with any great conviction. Added to that is an innocence in the writing which is truly astounding. Are we seriously to believe that an Orange businessman walks back into the arms of a convicted Provo without as much as a backward look over his shoulder to see who is watching? And the daughter who fakes incest to get

away from mum and dad? What? Don't they have a DHSS office in Gentry offering accommodation to single mums?

It is unfortunate that the set and lighting did not give the work a darker mood. The brightness and open nature of the hall did not give the impression of gloomy mid-Ulster. Indeed, given the themes of sexual and political imprisonment that Crilly set out to explore, an opportunity was missed to show the Malines were returning from the prison of London and Long Kesh to another kind of jail. There was little sense of claustrophobia in what was supposed to be a claustrophobic wee world.

One thing which is worth saying: Crilly has an ear for dialogue which is excellent. There are passages in the work which are razor-sharp and delivered with aplomb. However, it is not enough to keep this venture afloat. The cast ply their trade with dignity and, given the thin nature of much of what they are working with, that is no mean feat.

Pól Ó Mhuirí is a poet, critic, and is Irish language editor of The Irish Times.

SIVE

Brown Penny Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 22 February 2000 at

The Civic Theatre, Tallaght

BY DEREK WEST

AT THE END OF FEBRUARY, THE Civic Theatre in Tallaght received a production of *Sive* from Cork's Brown Penny Theatre Company, an apparently laudable and enlightened piece of program-



MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER: Donal Courtney and Gary Murphy in *Sive*

ming. Since its inception in 1996, Brown Penny has produced a varied and interesting touring repertoire. Judging by the programme biographies, it has strong ties (formal or informal) to the performing arts courses at Colaiste Stíofain Naofa in Cork, so this production can be viewed as a testing ground for aspiring and emerging talent. However, the enterprise left a lot to be desired in terms of professional theatre. There was an earnest competence which muted and emasculated the impact of the visceral elements of Keane's disturbing folk-tale.

Even the visual presentation of the play was a crucial part of the sanitisation. The cottage setting was crisp and antiseptic, a far cry from rural deprivation and an unconvincing backdrop for Mena and Mike Glavin's savage grasping. It exuded a kind of smugness, exemplified by the clatter of matching Carrigaline (circa 1999) pottery, which was shuffled from dresser to table and back, but never used. A perfunctory turf fire that barely glowed exemplified the production's scant acknowledgement of its primal roots.

The setting deprived the central characters of the motivation that makes the story of *Sive* both credible and gripping. Mena and Mike want to be rid of the illegitimate niece and sell her on to an elderly lecher. In this production Sive was a harmless enough schoolgirl; simply a nuisance, cluttering up the trig and trim cottage. She was swept aside by extremely tetchy foster parents. Sandie Sheridan tried to invest Mena with vituperation but her monotonously grumpy delivery simply made her a bad-tempered bitch. Donal Courtney's Mike lost any of the character's soul-searching; there was no sense of the conflicting forces of greed and conscience at work on him. Here he was simply a doormat to his nagging wife.

Christine Horgan was a Sive to die for — in the glittering eyes of child-abusers, a pretty schoolgirl with gym-slip and schoolbag. She made a lovely corpse (the closing moments were moving), but there was a quality of sensual femininity missing. Sive is a young woman awaking to a passionate and appropriate love of her young man. It diminishes her if she is simply the innocent victim of the paedophile's delight.

This production did achieve some moments of honesty: The tinkers (Kieran Hurley and Mark Tallon) and the matchmaker (Gary Murphy) caught the colour and energy of their parts. The acts were ushered in with atmospheric music. There was a clear consciousness of movement. But these are peripherals: Ben Barnes, in his work on Keane, lifted the plays from the booming rhetoric of early productions. Not only did he bring Keane firmly into the canon of Irish classical drama, but he released the psychological truth of the characters. There's no turning back from that.

TIME BEFORE SLEEP

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

The Factory, Sligo

16 - 26 November 1999

Reviewed on 17 November

BY IAN KILROY

THINK OF LYING ON YOUR BACK and looking at the clouds in a blue sky. It is a summer's day. The clouds drift through your vision and you begin to daydream. There is a feeling of distance and restfulness. You occupy a space between logic and dream. It is calm and gentle — the kind of atmosphere achieved by Blue Raincoat Theatre Company in *Time Before Sleep*.

The simple plot of the piece is that four strangers meet sheltering from a storm. They talk, interact, and then go their separate ways when the rain ends. The short programme note tells the audience that their "stories are told" and that the nine scenes "interchange between their present and past lives." But such clarity is nowhere to be found in the piece. Who are these two men and two women? What do we know of their lives, either past or present? At the end of the piece we are none the wiser — not that that matters. Just don't raise my expectations with a misleading pre-show note summing up the story.

Once you have ditched the idea of narrative, *Time Before Sleep* can be received like a nocturne, a kind of night music that never quite sends you to sleep. You stop resisting, looking for a coherent meaning, and start to let it wash over you. Its repetitions become mildly hypnotic, as each scene bears a resemblance to the last and the same moment is played over and over, gathering the poetic force that comes from recurrence.

That repetition is found firstly in the language and secondly in the scenes,



Lighting conventions are being experimented with. Here reality as it is captured on film (real footage is used) is more ghostly and fading than the stylised presence of the actors on stage.

Time Before Sleep is a piece concerned with the poetic truth of the past, of memory and distance, of looking, the relationship between the looker and the looked at — beyond that it is difficult to say. At one stage one of the characters says, "I like to talk about nothing." In a play that says nothing straight but everything slant, it is hard to sum the experience up. It is like attempting to describe the experience of a Satie "Gymnopédie."

What can be said, however, is that Blue Raincoat Theatre Company fully deserves credit for attempting to introduce Irish audiences to a new theatrical language.

Ian Kilroy is a poet, playwright, and critic.

DREAM SPACE: *The cast of Blue Raincoats' Time Before Sleep*

which entail a kind of variation on a theme. Polite discourse is pushed toward the absurd as niceties are repeated. An old black and white home movie is played over and over again, nostalgically showing the domestic intimacies of a family in ghostly Super-8. The characters sheltering from the storm talk in circles. Then there is a repeated dance scene, where a woman moves gracefully in a white dress — almost a wedding image. The lyrically pure piano soundtrack and the recurrent images give a dream-like feeling to the piece that is backed up in its mise-en-scène.

In short, we are a long way from the rashers and sausages of the Abbey stage that Behan used to slag off. This dream world is full of stiff, stylised characters from a Magritte painting. There is something of an alienation affect at play.

Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick
27 January - 5 February 2000
Castradiva and *Berkoff's Women* reviewed on 27 January, and *Foley* on 5 February

BY KAREN FRICKER

IN EARLY 2000, THE THEATRICAL GENRE to ponder was the solo show: between the Belltable's UnFringed and Fishamble's Y2K Festivals we saw no less than nine solo turns in the Republic alone. Monologues tend to be cheap and cheerful to produce, which is doubtless one of the reasons why we're seeing so

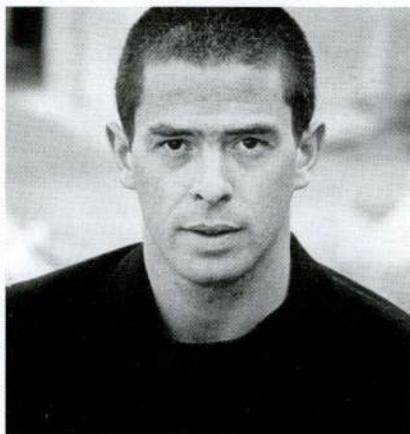
many, but too often we're also seeing sloppy theatrical thinking and cut corners in the way writers and production teams approach them. Most basically, monologues necessitate "nominating an addressee" (in the able phrasing of Brian Singleton, who looks specifically at the Y2K plays later in this issue). Who is that person up there talking to, and why?

By apparently not considering that question, UnFringed's first two productions, imports from Britain both, functioned as straightforward direct address, and in so doing, both undermined their theatrical potential. In the complicated fiction of *Castradiva*, an opera-theatre show from Wales' Theatr Mwldan/Opera Cocktail, mezzo-soprano Buddug Verona James plays six *commedia dell'arte* characters, primarily castrato Pedrolino il Magnifico, a 17th century male singer who holds women in his thrall by singing as though he were a woman. Onto that already provocative notion is layered the final "hook," that Verona James is herself a woman playing a man singing like a woman. Notions of the erotics, dynamics, and performativity of gender-swapping are present in Shakespeare (for crying out loud!), and have been conclusively launched into the popular consciousness through recent films such as *The Crying Game*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and *Shakespeare in Love*. But these ideas seem to have totally passed *Castradiva* by, and by addressing the audience directly without acknowledging them, the show assumes we're as thick as it is.

By contrast, the assumptions behind Berkoff's *Women*, a compilation of excerpts from Steven Berkoff's plays performed by Linda Marlowe, are elitist: Marlowe just turns up on stage and starts talking. Who she is, what she's doing, who this Berkoff is who's mentioned in the title: all this the audience is presumed

to know. It all feels surprisingly unframed and terribly in-groupy; it's hard to tell what the production's trying to say, if anything, about Berkoff's writing and women's psychology. Both Marlowe and Verona James are talented and appealing performers, but unasked questions and uninterrogated assumptions obscure any true appreciation of their skills.

I approached UnFringed's second week, therefore, with some trepidation. I regretted not getting a chance to see Bedrock's already-acclaimed and now award-winning *Night Just Before the Forest*



THE LAST OF THE LINE: Andrew Bennett in the title role of Foley

nor Rich Hall's well-reviewed music-comedy piece *Otis Lee Crenshaw* — but had the good fortune to be present at the first staging of a truly fine solo piece, one whose content and form necessitated and enhanced each other, one in which excellent writing created a platform for superb performance, and one which — this is the best part — is a home-grown product which says something new in a genuine-

ly new way. Michael West's beautiful play *Foley* suggests that the monologue form, in an Irish context, might be particularly suited to an exploration of the Protestant psyche. In George Foley, the unwilling proprietor of Castle Owen, West has created a compelling and believable individual character, whose own story at the same time suggests that of all who share his background.

For all his connections to the past, George is completely, intrinsically alone: Alone on stage, and alone in his life. His relations are dying off, and his wife has left him: All that remains is to tell us his story, revealing himself as being brilliantly able to describe the patterns and situations that have led him to this point, but unable to take control of his place in those patterns.

Stage depictions of Irish Catholic life, by and large, teem with characters, families and the continual push and pull of guilt and divine forgiveness. *Foley* echoes: You can practically hear George's voice bouncing off the walls of his deserted Big House, as he tries and fails to activate the free will that is his birthright, and his life and mind slowly spiral inwards. At first, it's not clear who George is talking to; the unfortunate choice of a rickety table and chair as the only setting sent perhaps unintended Spalding Gray messages — were we, the audience, meant to be direct targets of his neurotic self-interrogation? But as his story plays out it becomes clear that he is performing himself to himself; his lone presence on stage is central to what West is trying to say.

There is plenty of rich material in *Foley*, and it is easy to imagine this story expanded into a novel. And yet it fits perfectly into its 90-minute stage form, thanks to what appears to have been an intimate collaboration between West, director Annie Ryan, and performer

Andrew Bennett. West's writing is gorgeously well-crafted and observed, but his flights of description never feel overwritely; instead they inform and define the way the character of George is constructed, or rather constructs himself. That Bennett has perhaps the best speaking voice in the business is no secret; here he reveals a highly affecting ability to communicate constrained emotion, which only comes close to breaking free at the play's end, a tragically-not-quite-cathartic moment that Ryan, in tandem with composer Vincent Doherty, controls perfectly.

This first staging of *Foley* (produced by Ryan and West's Corn Exchange company in association with the Belltable) is quite bare-bones, technically and in terms of design, and there are a few minor dropped stitches in the story as well. *Foley* will doubtless continue to develop, but even in its premiere form, it is one of the best and most original pieces of new Irish dramatic writing to emerge in several years.

THE Y2K FESTIVAL

Fishamble Theatre Company
The Civic Theatre, Tallaght; the Crypt Arts
Centre; and the City Arts Centre
7 February - 4 March 2000
Reviewed at the Crypt on 18 February
and at City Arts on 22 February

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THE "NEW PLAYS FOR A NEW millennium" brief from Fishamble to six experienced playwrights resulted in two dialogue and four monologue responses, the latter in the manner of Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, featuring cracked characters at the cusp of change, struggling emotionally to come to terms with their past and fearful of moving on without the solace of crutches: Memories, rituals, and alcohol. The notion and concept of time

(how it is marked, how it marks, and how it affects) was writ large throughout, trapping the writing in doom-laden anticipation of change. Y2K produced a theatrical seriousness which could seriously damage characters' health.

The two duologues were diametrically opposed in form and style. Deirdre Hines' *Dreamframe* (directed by Jo Mangan) is an allusive and alliterative dreamscape trapping in stage time two female vagrants absenting themselves from troubled pasts, dislocated from real time and real place, their musings punctuated by a choric voiceover discourse on the nature of time and its Y2K association with apocalypse. The style turns characters into literary creations, and, despite their songs and dances, a lack of emotional interaction hinders spectator engagement. Sharing food and space is not sufficient for an on-stage relationship, and a theatrical tone poem is not necessarily the best way to connect with an audience.

Dermot Bolger's *Consenting Adults* (directed by Jim Culleton) features similarly estranged characters in a very real situation acting out a fantasy. Husband and wife use weekly S&M sex games in order to connect with each other, while in the real world their relationship totally has fallen apart. Bolger treads heavily on Jean Genet territory in both his choice of "game" and in his structure of unpeeling the apparent onstage situation. The seeming erotica is overturned by the constant kaleidoscopic refraction of the couple's relationship, which reveals the role-playing as a sad form of escapism, the only point of connection in a failing marriage. But the 40-minute time constraint traps the characters into fixed role types and it might be more interesting had the wife not been the cause of the marriage breakdown and the husband not been represented as victim. Challenging the

S&M stereotypes in the real situation would have been an interesting development in Bolger's journey.

Two of the four monologues — Nicholas Kelly's *The Great Jubilee*, directed by Bríd O'Gallchóir, and Jennifer Johnston's *Moonlight and Music*, directed by Caroline Fitzgerald — feature rooted, familiar, stock-in-trade alcoholics: a priest who has lost his faith and a schoolteacher who has lost her job. In the manner of Michael Harding, Kelly's priest, played



BROKEN: Gina Moxley's Tea Set

by Garret Keogh, muses on time (and Catholicism) as a man-made construction, as he drinks himself into oblivion on millennium eve. The third secret of Fatima and the nature and purpose of prophesies and visitations haunt his thinking, and the gouged-out eyes of Our Lady in a portrait testify to his inner torment. The play is structured as an ever-

revealing confession but what is left in doubt is to whom is he confessing? Neither text nor direction situate him, and only a reference to listeners jamming the switchboard indicates that he might be speaking on radio, suggesting two questions: why wasn't the play set in a radio station, and might it have been better served as a radio play, as its journey is purely verbal? Similarly, Johnston's schoolteacher, played by Catherine Byrne, struggles with her liveness as we discover her in her living room talking directly to us. But why would we be there in the first place? The beautifully crafted prose failed to communicate fully to a live audience as it had no inherent onstage listener, and reasons for her sacking and hints at possible abuse as a child were lost in a sea of Bushmills and Ella Fitzgerald.

Gavin Kostick's *Doom Raider* (directed by the author and performed athletically by Fiona Browne) escapes the tired convention of confessional, self-pitying monologue and presents us with a cyber-character in a computer-game play. The play explores themes of empowerment and reincarnation; as in the game it represents, the Heroine here serves as agent for ourselves — she shoots, kills, and is killed in her/our quest for the golden key (the sole purpose of the game), but always we/she can start the game anew and can live longer as our skill in survival and killing improves. The idea is fascinating to contemplate, but to watch beyond 15 minutes without any possibility of direct intervention is frustrating. The game as game is a solitary activity over which we exert control, but the game as theatre, given the passivity of spectatorship, does not mirror this satisfaction. Maybe we could have been given a joystick and decided her/our fate?

One play excelled in terms of its issues, its structure and its emotional engagement.

Gina Moxley's *Tea Set* (directed by Noeline Kavanagh) features a young girl (played by Pauline Hutton) employed for £2000 to granny-sit over the millennium. She recounts the contractual engagement and then, as she describes her relationship with the granny, starts to recount the old woman's story: of her husband's death, how she had to put her dog to sleep at the 1999 summer eclipse, how she was raped by an intruder and the letters Y2K gouged into her legs, and how she decided to put herself to sleep on this very significant night in the calendar. The girl's own trauma is compounded by her questioning the woman as to the details of the rape. This play is so engaging because we do not see the victim but see the effect of both her story and her actions have had on the onstage girl. Her telling of the story doubles the anguish. The girl's suffering interacts with the suffering of another and the text binds the two together and touches chords. And to top it all, Moxley reveals at the end that this monologue is not just a theatrical form but is a direct confession to the police. Writer, director and actor all take us on an emotional journey; the hurdle at which others stumbled is surpassed because of the clear decision of nominating an addressee.

Addressing that problem in the other plays needs the authors to reconfigure their characters within the context of live performance (and not write for radio), to use them to communicate rather than express ideas; it needs the directors to take a hard look at pacing and the multiple signals for directions within the texts themselves (and I don't mean stage directions); and it needs the producers seriously to consider the importance of confronting authors nose to nose and not be afraid to challenge and edit scripts.

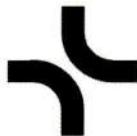
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The Arts Council supports organisations and individuals working in drama to produce excellent and innovative work and to develop participation in, and audiences for, drama.

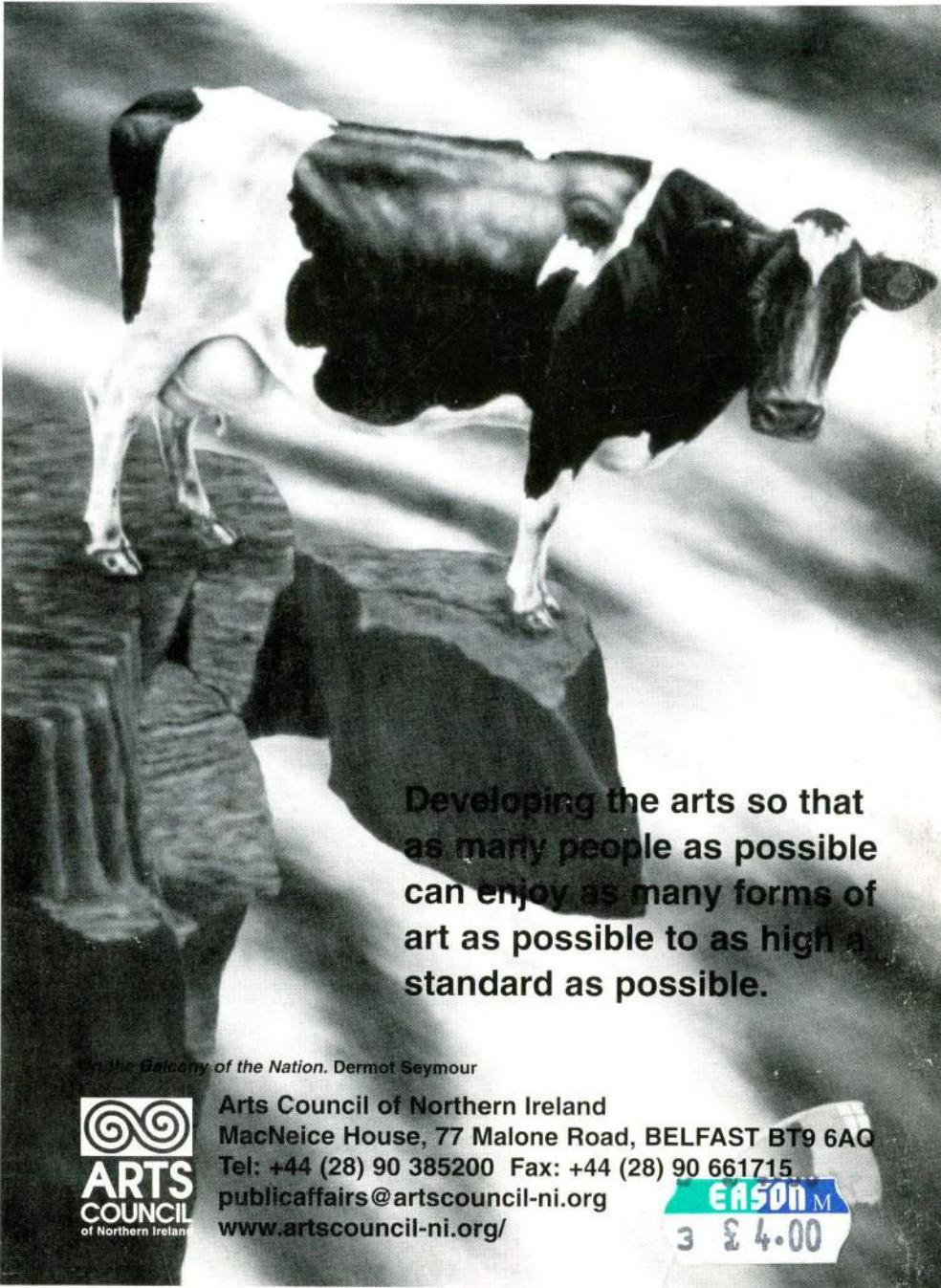
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A brochure providing details of grants available from the Arts Council for individuals working in drama is published in January, and information can be obtained from:

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