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MAGAZINE



Enda Walsh in rehearsal

Gina Moxley in Manhattan

Barbara Brennan incognito

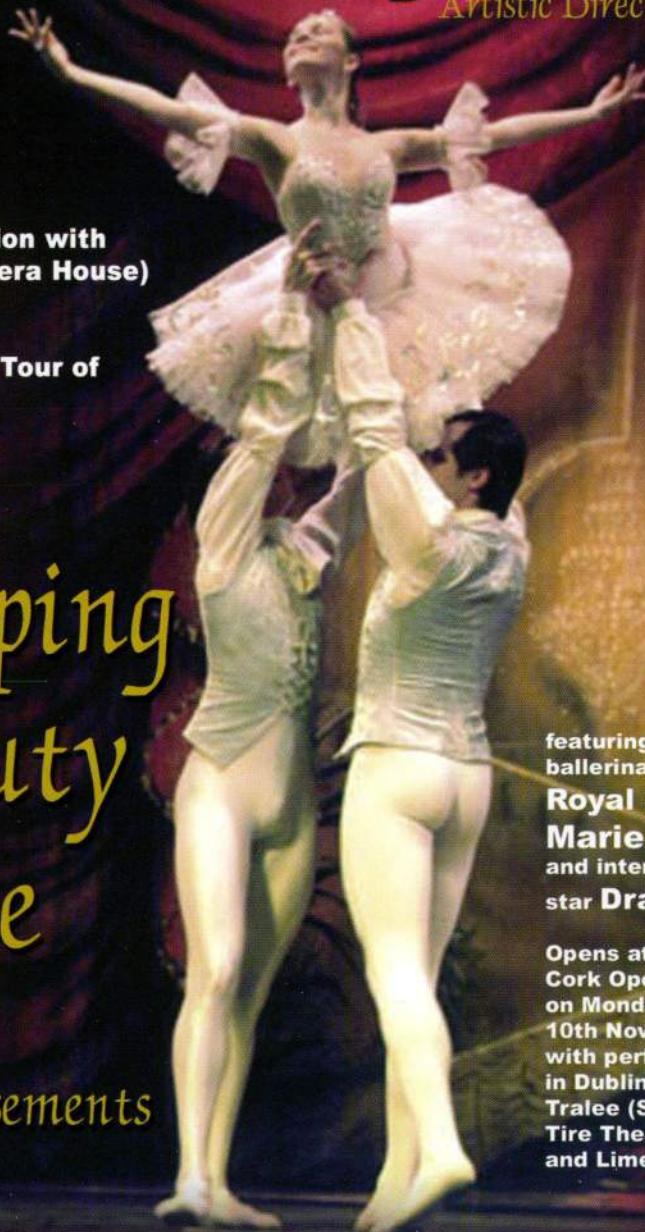
Cork City Ballet

Artistic Director Alan Foley

(in association with
the Cork Opera House)

presents
its National Tour of

The Sleeping Beauty Suite and Divertissements



featuring the prima
ballerina of the
Royal Swedish Ballet
Marie Lindqvist
and international ballet
star **Dragos Mihalcea**.

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Tire Theatre)
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Beyond Bricks and Mortar

THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE Forum on Acting Training, which published its report after many months' deliberation, are exciting and ambitious. As we report in *What's News?*, the group advocates the establishment of a national academy of theatre arts, which would offer a programme of actors' training, and also provide the equally necessary training for directors, designers and technicians. The idea that all the disciplines of theatre would be integrated is a recognition of the importance of collaboration in the performing arts, but it seems questionable whether this needs to take place within the proposed purpose-built 'flagship' building.

In the changed economic climate, there is a danger that the aspiration for such a building would make the entire project unrealisable. Why not use the variety of premises and spaces already

Does the proposed new academy need to have a purpose-built, 'flagship' building? Why not use premises and spaces already available?

available? The success of the building-less National Theatre of Scotland is a reminder that innovative work does not necessarily need imposing, centralised structures. There are already plans for our flagship National Theatre building, with three stages, in Dublin's Docklands, and that has yet to be financed. If we really want it to happen, it might be both more pragmatic and creative to think about other ways of forming an academy of the performing arts.

Thank you to everyone who completed our Readers' Survey, and if you'd still like to do so, please visit our website. Your feedback has been heartening as well as instructive, and we'll be making some changes in the autumn in response. In the meantime, comments on anything in this issue may be sent to admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie.

what's news?

PETER CRAWLEY reports on the latest news - on the future of actors' training and new directions for the Dublin Fringe Festival

RAYMOND SCANNELL'S 'MIMIC' AT KILKENNY ARTS FESTIVAL



All for an Academy

THE FORUM ON ACTING TRAINING – THE GROUP OF THIRTEEN theatre-makers and stakeholders convened to investigate “how to achieve the best possible acting training in Ireland” – teased out a large problem and came away with an even larger ambition. It advocated for the establishment of a national academy of theatre arts – to be accredited by Trinity College but not housed within it, with its own flagship

building, and encompassing an integrated series of programmes beyond actor-training, including directing, scenography and production.

The Forum was never going to offer a quick-fix solution to an intractable problem. Nor was it empowered to do so. Although initiated by the Provost of Trinity in the wake of the controversial decision to axe its Bachelor of Acting Studies (BAS) programme at the beginning of 2007, the Forum was never offi-

cially sanctioned as a subcommittee of the college; and Trinity had no obligation to act on its recommendations.

“This was really set up as a think tank,” the Forum chair, Prof. Nicholas Grene told *ITM*. That explains why its report is acutely aware of the high expense of running an actor-training programme, but does not address the costs necessary to establish an Irish Academy of Theatre Arts – entreating the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism to set

up a working group to investigate.

"We didn't see that as our business, I'm glad to say," Grene says. Nothing if not optimistic, the report suggests that funding be sought from private bodies, public/private partnerships and "leading Irish figures in international film and theatre". The potential for an academy now rests on a favourable re-

seen as an interim solution but as a course that would serve the desired Academy."

Privately, sources in Trinity have expressed no desire to resurrect the BAS, given its inadequacies, and the Task Force's labours are likely to centre on constructing a business plan for an academy within Trinity, perhaps positioned

as a wholly owned subsidiary body. It is unlikely, then, that there will be any interim solution before an academy materialises. One conservative estimate for such a timeframe was five years.

Although the Forum's duty concluded with the delivery of its report, the group has agreed to remain together, informally, as Grene puts it, "to try to continue to lobby in any way we could to advance what we see as the way forward." That the group includes such figures as Michael Colgan,

Fiach MacConghail, Garry Hynes, Tania Banotti and Anne Clarke suggests that they may have some influence in securing the ear of the Minister and assisting in fundraising efforts. But the clear benefit of the Forum has been to unite representatives of the theatre as stakeholders in the future of actor training. Although debate among the members was vigorous, the idea of an academy was unanimous, and that accord is in marked contrast to the

TRINITY ACTING STUDENTS IN 'LOVE'S LABOURS LOST'



sponse from the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, although according to a department spokesperson, the Minister is "still considering" the report and has yet to issue an official response.

The Forum has succeeded in stimulating a College Task Force set up by TCD Provost, Dr John Hegarty. Charging this Task Force with the responsibility of "investigating the possibility of delivering a new, revised and expanded acting training course", Hegarty says: "Such a course is not being

disharmony and public opprobrium – some of it voiced by Forum members – at the time of the BAS course's demise.

"Unless the sector as a whole takes on the issue of actor training, in the long run nothing's going to happen," says Forum member Tania Banotti, the CEO of Theatre Forum. With The Abbey, The Gate, Druid and Rough Magic involved with the Forum, the responsibility has broadened: "They feel a sense of ownership of it now."

Asked whether the Forum's academy proposal was more aspirational than realistic, Grene replied, "It remains to be seen. Because it will depend hugely on Government. I realise this is not economically the best time. On the other hand, this is potentially a very eye-catching project and by Government standards it mightn't cost a huge amount of money. It would take a long time, a lot of negotiation and a lot of fund-raising. But I don't think it's pie in the sky."

AN ALTERNATIVE PLAN?

Just as the Trinity Forum has concluded that actor training may be best served outside of the university system, the Gaiety School of Acting (GSA) has suffered a set-back in its efforts to transform itself from a private school into a college-accredited degree programme. The school's long-gestating three-year course, to be validated by Dublin City University, was offered this year through the CAO system and received

almost 300 applications. In April, however, the school announced that the degree would not go ahead when it failed to agree the necessary funding from the HEA, and encouraged candidates to apply for its two-year private course. GSA director Patrick Sutton, though disappointed, remains undaunted. As we went to press, negotiations between the GSA, DCU and the HEA were ongoing, but Sutton only conceded that the degree course had been "delayed by twelve months".

Why the GSA should be able to deliver an actor training course within a university system – a white elephant in university economics, requiring more teaching hours for fewer students, so more cost and less subsidy than most courses – may not seem immediately apparent, in the light of Trinity's inability to continue to do so. The difference between the GSA and Trinity, as Sutton describes it, "is that we have a very significant ability to subsidise [a degree course] through a very extensive portfolio of part-time courses".

This private income, which Sutton refers to as "a war chest" would cover the shortfall between HEA funding and the actual cost per student – a gap that Sutton estimated at about ⠼6,000. Why, with this income available, the proposed first year should have failed to go ahead, Sutton explained, was because the course did not get "sufficient clarity from the HEA about the level of subsidy".



PATRICK SUTTON

Although the Trinity Forum decided not to include people currently running actor training courses among its membership, because of a perceived conflict of interest, Sutton remains chagrined about his lack of involvement. "I would like to think that this school knows a lot about actor training," he said. (According to Grene, Sutton was invited to make a submission, but was unable to find a convenient time.)

Sutton is broadly positive about the Forum's report, with one strong caveat. "They come up with the recommendation that actor training needs to be taken seriously in this country and I think that's terrific," says Sutton. "Where I do differ, is that this report [advocates] setting up a National Academy which is independent and validated by a university. That's the Gaiety School of Act-

ing. That it would have its own flagship building: that is Smock Alley. That it would be above and beyond just actors: that is our programme for Smock Alley, spilling into the Helix [in DCU] in terms of technical training and all the rest of it."

Indeed, although the Gaiety School is not a third-level state institution, they are edging closer towards that goal. It will soon rebrand itself as either The National Theatre School (Sutton recognises that this may in-

vide an erroneous association with The Abbey) or The National Drama School, a title Sutton describes as "commensurate with its position in the country."

Structurally, the GSA's plans sound remarkably similar to the aspirations of the proposed academy. (Interestingly, several years ago The Gaiety School and DCU were involved in a government-led plan for an Irish Academy of Performing Arts, which fell through in 2000.) Smock Alley, Sutton points out, has been allocated a grant of €3.8 million from the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism towards the rehabilitation of the site, and Smock Alley Ltd (of which Sutton is director, separate to his interests in the GSA) will lease the space to the GSA, while renting rehearsal and performance space to professional companies. Sutton per-

ceived no conflict of interest between his two roles: "No, not in any sense. Smock Alley Ltd needs determined leadership, as does the Gaiety School of Acting."

Sutton expressed doubts that the Government would lend support to two similar projects, first funding Smock Alley "which is going to be a resource for an actor training programme, and then start afresh with something else." The Government grant is for the rehabilitation of the space, rather than the founding of an academy, however, while the Trinity Forum's academy proposal seems to be of a much larger magnitude.

If there is a defensive ring in Sutton's speculation, it may owe something to the currently gloomy prognosis of economic recession and a competitive distrust that this town is big enough for both of them. Neither case currently makes actor training seem feasible within a university system. "You either do it as a national strategy or you leave it to the private sector to make money out of it," said one Forum member. The solution, perhaps, is to borrow from both strategies. But for the moment, as Patrick Sutton puts it, the game is on, and where the future of actor training is concerned, there is still everything to play for.

THE FREEDOM OF KILKENNY

It had to happen. Following Druid's public discussion in February with

Free Theatre Belarus – the performance group banned under the near-dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko – Irish audiences will get a chance to witness the company's work at this year's Kilkenny Arts Festival. Tom Creed, curator of the festival's theatre programme this year, has secured three productions from the company, staging one performance each of the monologues *Generation Jeans* and *Being Harold Pinter* (based on Pinter's short plays and Nobel speech) and *Zone of Silence*, a trilogy of documentary plays about contemporary life in Belarus.

There are certain visa complications involved with bringing the group to Ireland, but these may seem like a minor inconvenience for a group routinely forced to stage secret performances in apartments and forests around Minsk, and who have frequently been arrested along with their audience.,

"I'm interested in the interface of theatre and politics," Creed says. "And for these guys the act of making theatre is literally a matter of life and death." Beginning with the new Ouroboros production of *Translations*, Brian Friel's exploration of the politics of naming, and concluding with *Numbers*, an illustrated performance of Belarusian statistics that concludes the trilogy, Creed traces a political through-line in this year's theatre programme. "It's interesting to start with a play about language, and how we define ourselves – and colonise others – through lan-

guage, and to end with a play that reduces language to a series of statistics that imprison people, and how they try to break out of that."

On a broader level Creed sees a politics in form too, traced among several one-person performances such as Gare St Lazare's new adaptation of Beckett's novella, *The End*, Priscilla Robinson's comedy slide show *Kuddel Muddel* and Creed's own production of Raymond Scannell's *Mimic*. "A lot of the work is solo work this year and that's almost happened by accident," he says. "But most of the theatre that we do is about the individual against the world."

The Kilkenny Arts Festival runs from 8-17 August.

WANTED: NEW WRITERS

Druid and The Abbey may have been engaged in a very public spat over the rights to certain sections of the canon –

with the National Theatre's purchase of rights to the works of Sean O'Casey scuppering Druid's hopes to stage an O'Casey cycle – but the real competition between the two companies may now rest in the question of which of them can best address the perceived deficit in new Irish writing for the stage.

With relatively few new works premiered at The Abbey in recent years – Sam Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* and Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus* are notable exceptions, barely augmented by six 20-minute pieces presented as rehearsed readings in February – the national theatre has now announced plans for four new plays in its new season. These include the world premiere of another new work from Shepard, *Ages of The Moon*, scheduled for The Peacock next March, to be directed by Jimmy Fay, and a new Marina Carr play, *Marble*, on the main stage in Feb-



BELARUS FREE THEATRE

ruary, directed by Jeremy Herrin.

In addition, *Lay Me Down Softly*, a new play by Billy Roche opens in November (directed by Wilson Milam) while 2009 will see new work from Tom McIntyre, when Selina Cartmell directs his play *Only An Apple* at the Peacock in late April. Tom Murphy's new play, *The Reluctant Tyrant*, which had been anticipated later next year, is now not on the schedule, although at a press conference launching the new programme Fiach Mac Conghail said it was "in the pipeline" along with a new play by Sebastian Barry.

This heartening news may seem like a literary theatre making up for lost time, but it is more likely that the Abbey's literary department is reaping the first fruits of commissions made under Mac Conghail's tenure. The Abbey's website lists twenty-seven writers currently under commission, although it is thought that there are many more writers on its books. The Abbey would not be drawn on the extent or readiness of its commissions which, given its slow rate in producing new works, suggests a log-jam in its commitment to new writing. At the press conference MacConghail referred to working with writers as 'a private, confidential process' and said he did not want to put on new work before it was ready.

The announcement of these new plays from established writers, is good news from the Abbey, although there is a notable lack of new voices: Sam

Shepard's latest play is unlikely to have been retrieved from the Literary Department's slush pile.

Druid Theatre, on the other hand, are presenting a series of new works in rehearsed readings (Druid Debuts) from new playwrights at this year's Galway Arts Festival. Commissioned by Druid's literary manager, Thomas Conway, the plays are representative, in Conway's view, of a productive time for new writing. "There was a certain pressure building up that there were a number of plays good enough to do," says Conway. "There are a lot of young writers coming through. I'm personally very excited that really interesting writing is emerging from this island again. The perception that there's been a lull is going to be dispelled to some degree."

He includes, of course, Druid's new plays in his assessment, with Russian writer Maria Elner's *Those Yellow Boots*, John McManus's *A Look of Fierce Roars* and Stephen Jones's *A Certain Romance* being plays that "may upset, hopefully will engage, and are really pushing out the boat in various different ways. They're young people taking the temperature of their times and it should be very interesting for that."

Although no Druid Debut has yet been furthered into a full production with the company, the programme has served as a launch pad for the careers of writers such as Christian O'Reilly, Gerard Murphy and Abbie Spillane. Conway admits that Druid reserves



ROISE GOAN

the first right to stage the works, "but we wouldn't hold onto that for any longer than would hold up the writer's career."

FRINGE BENEFITS

Róise Goan is the first director of the Dublin Fringe Festival who could be described, to some degree, as a product of it. Goan, who will succeed Wolfgang Hoffman at the helm of the thirteen year-old interdisciplinary arts festival, began her professional career just five years ago when *Eeugh!topia*, her first production as company director of Randolph SD, debuted on the Fringe.

"It's interesting to us to have somebody in the Director's role who knows the Fringe from the other side, as a user almost," Una Carmody, Chair of the Fringe board, says. "I think that brings a really interesting perspective."

Goan's professional activities since 2003 have been uncommonly diverse, working as a writer, director and producer, and counting among her achievements the curation of exhibi-

tions for The Ark, producing five shows with Randolph SD, initiating the performance experiment Project Brand New, directing her play *Grounded* and writing the TG4 series *Aifric*.

"We cast a very wide net," Carmody says, with an international search for a suitable candidate. The board were attracted to Goan's experience with new Irish work, while "she convinced us of her good taste" with respect to curating international work. "She has a sensibility to match the Fringe as it exists," says Carmody, "but also to take it to some new places."

Goan will shadow Hoffman's last programme in September and has yet to determine how many of her current responsibilities she can maintain: "My new job is my main responsibility and everything else will take a back seat. All of my experience thus far, both as a producer, director, a writer and curator, has led me to this moment and I am thrilled and excited to embrace the challenge ahead."

opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks your diaries for the summer weeks ahead.

Lyric Theatre Company presents PUMPGIRL by Abbie Spallen in the Queens Drama Studio, Belfast from 1 – 20 August, then on tour, from Newry Arts Centre, 29 – 30 August, ending at Marketplace Theatre, Armagh, 10 – 11 October.

The New Theatre presents **THE TAILOR AND ANSTY** by P. J. O' Connor (adapted from the book by Eric Cross) at Gougane Barra, Cork, from 12 – 31 August.

Gare St Lazare Players Ireland present **THE END** by Samuel Beckett at The Parade Tower, Kilkenny Castle (as part of the Kilkenny Arts Festival) from 13 – 16 August.

The Abbey Theatre presents **AN IDEAL HUSBAND** from 11 August – 27 September.

HATCH Theatre Company in association with Project Arts Centre present

FURTHER THAN THE FURTHEST THING by Zinnie Harris at Project Arts Centre, from 20 August – 6 September.

The Gate Theatre presents **NO MAN'S LAND** by Harold Pinter from 21 August.

National Association of Youth Drama presents **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM** by William Shakespeare at the Peacock Theatre from 25 – 30 August.

Zelig Theatre presents **APPOINTMENT IN LIMBO** by Patrick McCabe on tour, encompassing: Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 27 – 30 August; Iontas, Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan, 5 September; Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College, Dublin; 8 – 14 September.

The Gate Theatre presents **WAITING FOR GODOT** by Samuel Beckett on extensive tour, from: Coláiste Bride, Enniscorthy, 2 September, finishing at Ardhownen Theatre, Enniskillen, 26 October. See www.godotontour.ie



Johnny Murphy, Alan Stanford and Barry McGovern in **WAITING FOR GODOT**

City Theatre Dublin presents **WHACK-ER MURPHY'S BAD BUZZ** by Edwin Mullane at Filmbase, Temple Bar, 8 – 13 September and Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, 2 - 4 October.

ANTHONY WOODS

Meridian presents **THAILAND: WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?** by Mairtin de

Cogain and Brian Desmond at the Granary Theatre, Cork from 8 – 13 September.

Gúna Nua Theatre in association with Civic Theatre, Tallaght presents **LITTLE GEM** by Elaine Murphy at the Loose End Tallaght, from 5 – 6 Sep-

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tember and 16 – 27 September; and at the Project Arts Centre, Temple Bar from 9 – 13 September.

Catastrophe Theatre Company presents **LOVE AND OTHER DISGUISES** by Colm Ma-her at the Unitarian Church, Stephen's Green, from 9 – 13 September.

Daghda Dance Company presents **DAGHDHA MENTORING PROGRAMME END OF YEAR PRESENTATIONS** at the Daghda Space, Limerick, from 11 – 13 Sep-tember.

The Performance Lab presents **ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS** by Gary Duggan and Louise Lowe (site-specific) at an abandoned senior comprehensive school in Ballymun from 11 – 22 Sep-tember.

Irish Modern Dance Theatre presents **RHYTHMIC SPACE**, choreographed by John Scott in Temple Bar Galleries from 15 – 20 September.

Bruiser Theatre Company presents **THE CASE OF THE FRIGHTENED LADY** by

Bill Scott at the Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast from 16 – 23 September, then on tour North and South of Ireland until 18 October.

Meridian presents **THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS** by Kevin Barry at the Granary Theatre, Cork from 22 September – 4 October.

City Theatre Dublin presents **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** by Susan Hill, adapted for the stage by Stephen Mallatratt, on tour, from: Civic Theatre, Tallaght, 25 – 6 September; finishing at Riverside Theatre, Coleraine, 1 November.

The Gate Theatre presents **HEDDA GABLER** by Henrik Ibsen (in a new version by Brian Friel) from 25 September.

City Theatre Dublin presents **JANE EYRE** by Charlotte Bronte, adapted for the stage by Michael McCaffery on tour, encompassing: Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 29 September – 2 October; finishing at Civic Theatre, Tallaght, 17 – 22 November.

The Irish Chamber Orchestra and Storytellers Theatre Company present **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM** by William Shakespeare with incidental music by Mendelssohn, on tour, encompassing: University Concert Hall, Limerick, 2 October; Cork School of Music, 3 October; National Concert

Hall, Dublin, 5 October.

Big Telly Theatre Company presents **THE WELL OF THE SAINTS / THE END OF THE BEGINNING** by J.M. Synge / Sean O'Casey on an All-Ireland Tour from 3 October – 15 November.

Opera Theatre Company presents **PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE** by Debussy at The Rotunda, City Hall, Dublin, from 10 – 18 October.

Ballet Ireland presents **SWAN LAKE** choreographed by Gunther Falusy at the Gaiety Theatre on 14 October.

Sole Purpose Productions presents **SEE NO EVIL** by Patricia Byrne at The Playhouse at St Columbs Hall, Derry on 15 October, then on tour.

Bedrock Productions presents **WEDDING DAY AT THE CRO-MAGNONS*** by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Shelley Tepperman, at Smock Alley Theatre Studio, Dublin, from 15 – 25 October.

Prime Cut Productions presents **ANTIGONE** in a new version by Owen McCafferty at the Waterfront Studio, Belfast from 23 October – 2 November.

Dragonfly Theatre Company presents **MARRIED TO THE SEA** by Shona McCarthy at the Roscommon Arts Centre on 4 November.

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**CARYSFORT
PRESS**

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entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN tracks the latest backstage movements in Irish theatre.

The Dublin Fringe Festival has appointed **RÓISE GOAN** as the new Festival Director, to take over from **WOLFGANG HOFFMANN** at the end of this year's Festival. A writer, director and producer, Goan is also the company director of Randolph SD.

DAVID McLOUGHLIN has been appointed as Chief Executive of Wexford Festival Opera and the Wexford Opera House. Mr. McLoughlin has been working as the Interim CEO of Wexford Festival since September 2007. He is the former CEO of Screen Producers Ireland, a film producer, and Chair of Dublin International Film Festival.

DECLAN GIBBONS is leaving the position of MD of Druid Theatre Company to become Project Manager on Druid's Chapel Lane Building Project. **TIM SMITH** has taken up the position of General Manager. **RUTH GORDON** has taken over as Company Administrator, replacing **SINEAD MCPHILLIPS** who has taken up the position of Marketing & Development Manager.



DAVID McLOUGHLIN

MATTHEW TORNEY has been appointed as the Abbey's 2008 Resident Assistant Director. He is a founder member of Randolph SD the company, and participated in Rough Magic Theatre Company's SEEDS II director training programme.

Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre and Arts Centre, has appointed **KARL WALLACE** as Director. He is cur-



KARL WALLACE

rently Artistic Director of the Castle Theatre and Arts Centre in Northamptonshire.

ROSS KEANE, former Director of Marketing and Development at the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, joins the Irish Film Institute as Head of Marketing & Communications. **GEMMA DUKE**, previously Press Officer at the Abbey is the Festival's Acting Di-

rector of Marketing and Development.

NOELINE KAVANAGH has been appointed Artistic Director of Macnas and takes up the position in September.

JOHN O'BRIEN has joined Gúna Nua Theatre Company as General Manager. He was formerly Manager of The Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge.

Draíocht Arts Centre has appointed **TERESA McCABE** (formerly General Manager with Iontas, Castleblayney) as General Manager. She replaces **JACKIE RYAN**, now CEO of Graphic Studio Dublin.

Meridian Theatre has appointed **JULIE KELLEHER**, previously Assistant Producer at Once-Off Productions, as the company's Administrator.

Irish Theatre Magazine has appointed **IAN R. WALSH** as General Manager. He is currently a PhD candidate in the School of English and Drama, UCD, where he also teaches. He takes over from **TANYA DEAN** who is embarking on a Masters degree at Yale University. 

Cracks

ENDA WALSH'S play, *The New Electric Ballroom*, was talked into existence over two intense days in Germany. He discusses collaborations with directors and dramaturgs, fractured narratives, and how he splits himself in two to direct his own work, with **JESSE WEAVER**.

THIS IS ENDA WALSH'S MOMENT. IN APRIL, HIS PLAY *The Walworth Farce*, saw its US premiere at St. Anne's Warehouse in New York, produced by Druid Theatre Company and directed by Mikel Murfi. Walsh joins forces with Druid again this month when his play *The New Electric Ballroom*, first produced by Munich's Kammer spiele, sees its Irish premiere at Galway Arts Festival in a

production he's directing, which will then go on to Edinburgh's Traverse. *The Walworth Farce* will run at London's National Theatre in September, while his adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, entitled *Delirium*, is currently touring in the UK before coming to the Peacock for the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. To top it all off, Walsh saw his screenwriting work on *Hunger* awarded with the prestigious Camera d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

in the Glass

Walsh's work is known for its finely crafted, deeply layered theatrical worlds, all of which have their own linguistic idioms. His treatment of language is not only an expression of a character's identity, but also of a character's attempt to crack the formal cadences of an established mode of language. While this is true of his earlier work, most notably *Disco Pigs*, Walsh pushes his experiments with form further in *The Walworth Farce*, where two very different plot forms overlap and compete with each other, culminating in the resurfacing of an Irish immigrant family's real reason for leaving their native Cork. *The New Electric Ballroom*, a companion piece of sorts, treads the same thematic ground, with three sisters in a small Irish fishing village trapped in an ever-present past.

In a recent conversation with Enda Walsh in London, where he lives, we discussed his success with *The Walworth Farce*, directing *The New Electric Ballroom*, and how, as a playwright, he navigates the collaborative process of bringing a play to production.

JESSE WEAVER (JW): Had you work-shopped *The Walworth Farce* before the original Druid Theatre Company production?

ENDA WALSH (EW): Originally we did a reading of it, because on the page it's very difficult to read. The reading didn't tell us that much — other than that the play was long and needed a bit of cutting. At that stage I was still playing with the idea of the play, and Garry Hynes was interested in me directing it. Now, I always thought that my directing it was a bad idea. We had this notion — I work a lot in Germany — to bring a foreign director in to see what their take would be on this Irish immigration play. And then it was like a thunderbolt: why don't we get Mikel Murfi?! Physically, he'd nail it.

What I didn't realize was that, dramaturgically speaking, Mikel's very pure and very clean. He drew the line very carefully with me. We read it and talked about it, and read it a bit more to get the balance right between the farce and the non-farce, so that by the time it went into rehearsal, Mikel had complete ownership and he knew every nuance of what I was thinking.

JW: Would you usually work that closely with a director on a play from the beginning?

EW: I think I always have, in various sorts of degrees. I know with *The Walworth Farce* it was a very specific thing because it was so physical. I felt as if it was right to work with Mikel — not from the very beginning, but by really polishing the first draft with him. But, I usually [work closely with a director], and when I



KEITH PATTISON

THE WALWORTH FARCE

don't, that's when the play falls apart. That's when I'll go back and think: I really took my eye off the ball and I'll never make that mistake again.

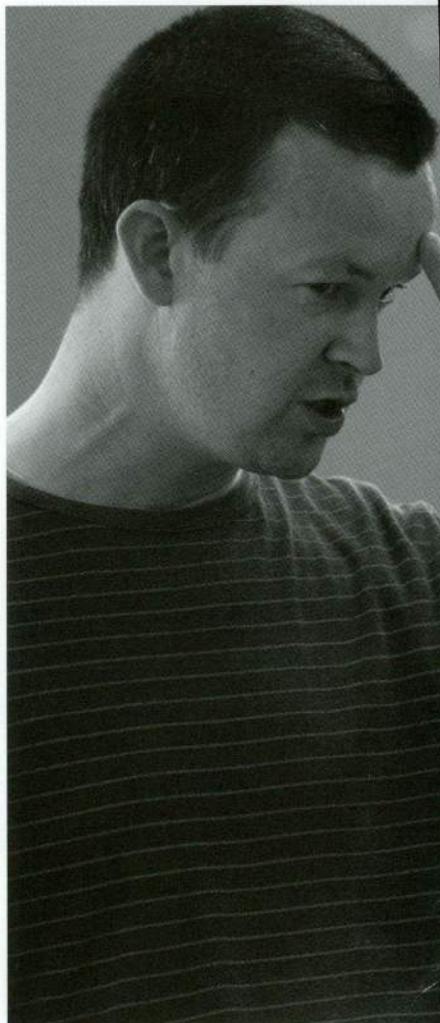
JW: What kind of pitfalls do you mean by 'taking your eye off the ball'? Just not being in touch with the director enough?

EW: Not being clear enough. I need someone, whether it's a director or a dramaturg, to argue things out, to make it clear. I'm in the process of doing a version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Dostoevsky novel, for the Barbican in October, [and it will also be running at the Peacock as part of the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival]. It's touring at the moment and I'm working with the director, [Joseph Alford of Theatre O], for the first time. We've had a chance [while it's been touring] to go back at it and rework and rewrite scenes, and throw it around a bit. At every point and on every page, we need to deliberate where we feel the mass of the audience is moving.

The New Electric Ballroom is the sister piece to *The Walworth Farce*, and it was done by a German director called Stephan Kimming for the Kammerspiele in Munich. I worked with him and the dramaturg. The way that they worked was that they just listened to me talk for hours; they questioned me again and again and they just soaked me of everything.

The dramaturg was called Tilman Raabke, who, I suppose, in the world of theatre would almost be my mentor. He would say, 'Just talk – what are your ideas, Enda?' I would start talking about my ideas, and before I know it, after two days we've created the play. Now it's just a matter of writing it down.

We played over all the aspects; we know structurally how it's going to work;





ENDA WALSH AND ROSALEEN LINEHAN IN REHEARSAL

we know the big dramatic moments; we know the images; and we know the detail of the characters and the flavour of the world, as well as the potential language of it, the sounds of it. And it's all just from talking to someone who knows your work and goes, 'Yeah, you've done that before.' I trust him in steering me dramaturgically.

The writing is easy, but for me I'm constantly interested in the structure of a play and how you move an audience... not just to tell a narrative, A to Z, but to

upset things a bit, fracture things a bit.

JW: Do you feel there's a marked difference between the way directors work with playwrights in Ireland and the UK, versus the way they work with them in Germany?

EW: Generally, I don't think they have a great amount of time for playwrights in Germany. The director is the king there and they'll do whatever they want to do to a play, while in Ireland and in Britain they still think that theatre begins with the script and the playwright. I think the combination of both those things is probably right.

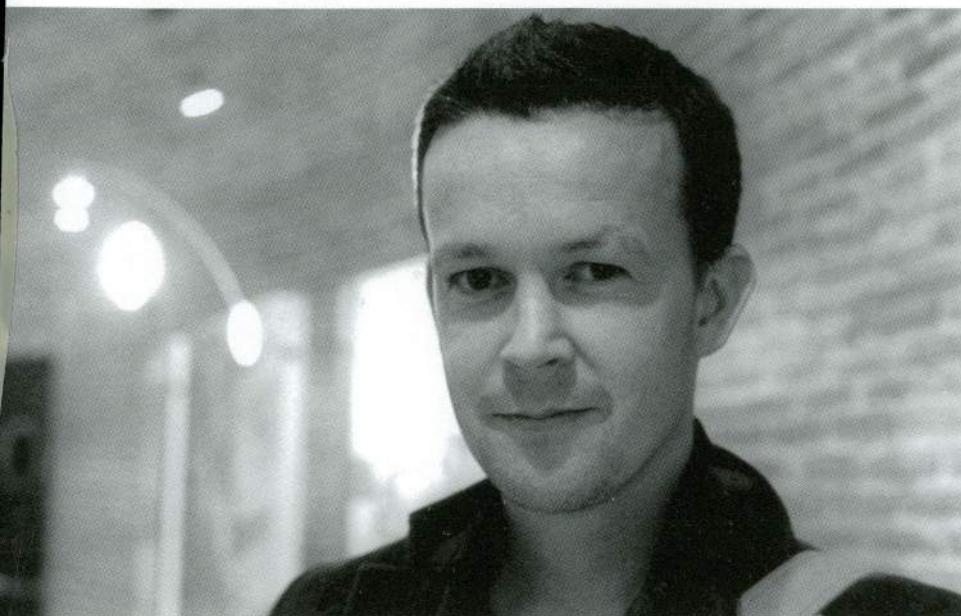
JW: How much has *The Walworth Farce* changed from its opening in Galway to its production in New York?

EW: We had a bit of a hiatus between Galway and New York because, when it originally came out, we did a tour in Ireland. A year later we knew we were going to Edinburgh and that's when we found the play. It had to do with the character of Sean, the youngest brother. We had a cast change: Aaron Monaghan played it originally and then we cast Tadhg Murphy. Aaron's a fantastic actor, but he's got completely different sensibilities to Tadhg. Tadhg actually made the play. He spread this weird love on the stage. They all love one another, and that's what was missing in the very first production. You believe there's a chance that this is going to work, and that's what you're looking for onstage – that in something so broken and fractured there's something that an audience can grasp onto and go, 'I can believe that this is a father who loves his sons. He's just got it wrong.'

JW: How present are you in the rehearsal room – from the first reading to the tech?

EW: I don't mind being there in the first week of rehearsal, but a lot of the time I feel that my work's done. I've had all the conversations with the director; I know what I want and I'm going to leave them to it. Otherwise I'll slow things down. I'll get in the way, and they have to own it.

JW: You made some cuts during the previews for *The Walworth Farce*. Do you feel the play is still in a fluid state during previews, that there is still a possibility for change?



EW: I think there has to be. That's what previews are about for me – getting it out there and trying to judge it. With the audience around, you're trying to sense where they are with the play, and when they're losing it. Certainly *The Brothers Karamazov* piece I'm working on now is great. We're using the audience and leaving them to judge where they are in the play, and when it's losing them.

JW: What kind of a hand do you have in casting?

EW: I try to have as much as possible. Casting is vital. That's where it's all at, because once the play is up and running, I don't feel as if I own it. I feel as if it's the actors' piece now. With *The Walworth Farce*, I don't think it's my play anymore. I think that the actors have made it now; it's theirs. That's what happens once it's running and I'm happy with it. My relationship with this is over now. It's even over before rehearsal when you feel as if it [the script] is the best you can do. You put on a different hat [in rehearsal], I suppose, where you craft it, where you can be quite clinical about it, and not care about Enda Walsh the playwright in his attic writing plays. Forget about him — it's Enda Walsh the dramaturg now, or whatever.

JW: Is it like an internal division of labour?

EW: Definitely. I've always thought you have to have that. You can't imagine that playwriting is some magical thing and this great, great art. It's really a dogged little craft and you need to keep a distance from it to be able to get to the heart of it.

JW: When you're directing your own work with that internal division of labour in mind, do you feel as if one role is encroaching on the other?

EW: I do. I've only ever really done it twice. I wrote this play [*Chatroom*] that did really well at the National. I've directed that and I also directed *Bedbound*. When I was in rehearsal for *Bedbound*, my father died, so I was dealing with the grief of that and directing the play. I didn't have the clarity then to direct it, as well as to argue with Enda Walsh the playwright versus Enda Walsh the director.

With *The New Electric Ballroom*, the play is done, so I don't think I'll change the text. I was really, really happy with it three years ago and I think I'll just look at it and go, 'What does this mean now?'

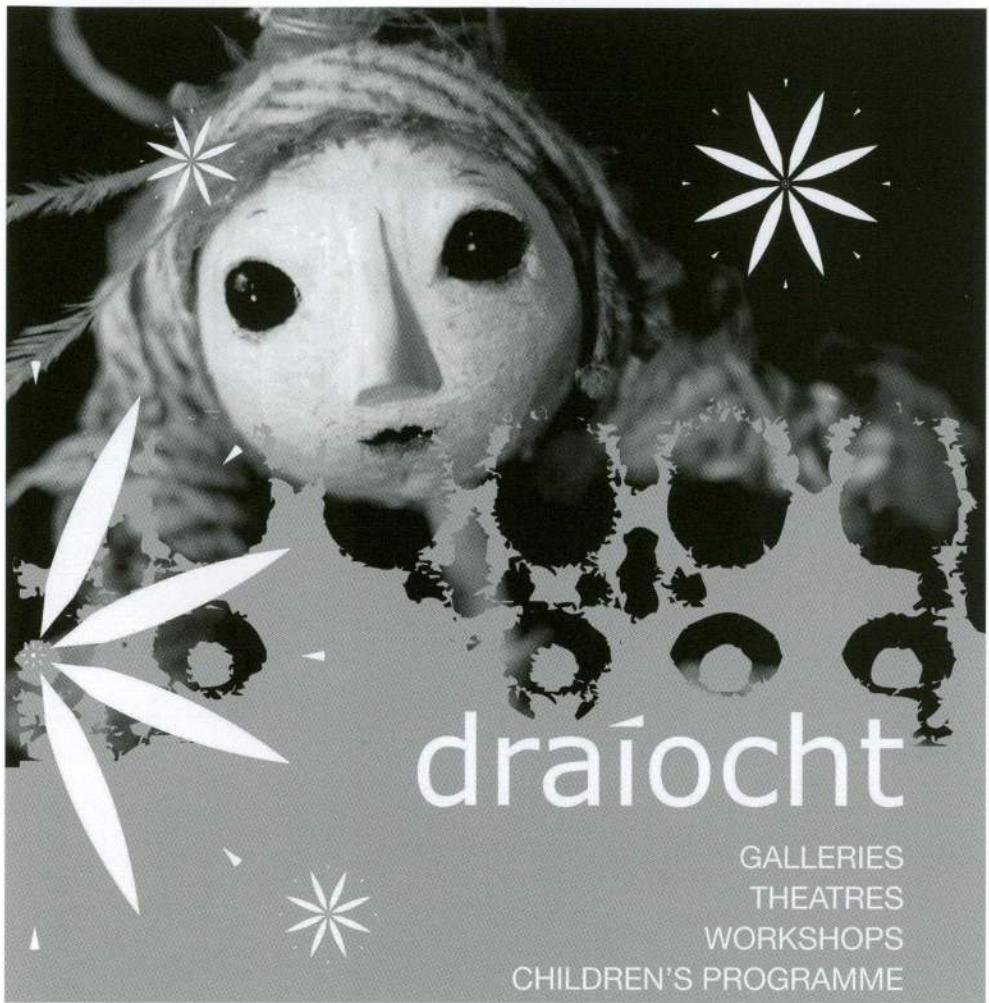
JW: How much authorial power do you think actors and directors have in bringing the play to the stage? You have the text that you've lived with, and then it's brought into this ensemble. Do you feel the group of artists who now have a stake in it also have some kind of authorship?

EW: The play actually isn't the production because it's only a set of words and it's only imagination, of course – it's all in your head. And of course you throw a load of people in a room and you physically try to embody these characters; you try to play the themes and you try to play the subtext of it; you try to find the rhythm of the language and you're doing the journey of the characters and the journey of the whole play, the structure of the play. That's a complicated thing to hold in one person's head. I don't think a playwright does all of it. There are all these different journeys: what needs to happen in the rehearsal room, the lighting and the sound, and then getting an audience to come in and sit down. There's so much on the table.

You wonder when a production becomes a production: it's certainly not on the first night, that's for sure. It can never be.



Jesse Weaver is a playwright. His latest play, Sweet Pretty Love, runs at Smock Alley, Dublin, until 2 August. This is an edited extract from an interview conducted for his PhD thesis at University College Cork.



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BRAAKLAND (COMPAGNIE DAKAR)



THE AUDIENCE HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

If it's site-specific, they will come – to streets, quarries, and empty warehouses. **RACHEL ANDREWS** examines the appeal and limitations of site-specific performance, and reports on Corcadorka's recent symposium on the subject in Cork.

ONE OF THE MORE ANTICIPATED THEATRICAL EVENTS of this year's Cork Midsummer Festival was a performance by Dutch group, Compagnie Dakar. Audiences for the show, called *Braakland*, were taken in buses to a secret location outside Cork city, where they watched, in a one-kilometre-square wasteland, a production without words that aimed to interrogate the nature of life and death. Two weeks before the festival opened, tickets for this intelligent but obscure piece of work were already selling strongly.

Festival Director William Galinsky, who championed this production, be-

lieves he couldn't have contemplated bringing it to Cork were it not for the presence of Corcadorca. Over eighteen years the city's resident site-specific company has built up a loyal following, performing work in different locations across both city and county. "It would have been much harder to bring *Braakland* here if the idea of it had been new," Galinsky says.

The poor showing for Corcadorca's most recent foray into traditional theatre forced director Pat Kiernan to reconsider how he will connect with more conventional spaces in the future.

theatre. Crowds turned out for the company's Polish/English version of *The Merchant of Venice*, performed at various locations throughout the city for the 'Cork 2005' festival. And while Corcadorca is rooted in Cork, it is as a site-specific company that it attracts its large audiences, so much so that the poor showing for its most recent foray into traditional theatre in March has forced director Pat Kiernan to reconsider how, if ever, he connects with more conventional spaces in the future.

That experience, which saw Corcadorca move into a theatre venue for the first time in three years with *Last Beauty Spot*, has also cemented Kiernan's view that audiences "most definitely" prefer site-specific theatre. "There's no pretence, no fourth wall. Audiences respond to that," he said. While Galinsky has praised the company for "building up" an audience for site-specific work in Cork, Kiernan says the productions were popular from the beginning. "People flocked to our first site-specific show in 1993. When we did *A Clockwork Orange* in Sir Henry's in 1995, there were queues outside the door."

Nonetheless, an audience has grown up with the company. Galinsky describes Corcadorca's emergence in 1991 as meeting a need for home-grown theatre "about Cork, for Cork". The company was young, energetic, hungry; so, often, was its audience. After the phenomenon that was Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* in the mid-90s, the organisation began to establish itself as a site-specific company with work such as *The Trial of Jesus* in 2000, a re-enactment through the streets of Cork of the trial and crucifixion of Christ, and its interpretations of Shakespeare performed in Fitzgerald's Park. With last year's cinematic production of *Woyzeck*, Georg Buchner's drama of existential emptiness, and its performance this year of Eugene O'Neill's expressionist play *The Hairy Ape*, the company has begun to explore less immediately accessible pieces of work, with

Cork audiences have already shown themselves willing to travel for Corcadorca's site-specific work – to Haulbowline Naval base outside the city last year for the evocative *Woyzeck* – and to engage enthusiastically with less straightforward





SENSAZIONE (LAIKA AND TIME CIRCUS)

in a site-specific framework. And its audience, including a constant flow of newcomers to Corcadorca's work, has come the distance.

Kiernan's belief that site-specific work is now more popular among audiences than traditional theatre was reflected at a recent symposium, organised by Corcadorca, which brought together international companies from Germany, the UK, Poland and the Netherlands, all working outside traditional venues. At a forum entitled 'Is This Theatre?' held on the last night, practitioners asserted that site-specific theatre draws crowds because there is a "hunger for the work", that "people crave adventure", and that "people are bored with what they are used to". Statements such as these, though genuinely felt, could be criticised for leaving the door open for people to denigrate site-specific work as gimmicky, or lacking substance. Already Michael Billington, lead critic with the *Guardian* has written that the "search for 'found spaces' is in danger of turning into a bourgeois game for those bored with conventional theatres".

A more concrete idea discussed was that by encouraging people out of the theatre building, the companies were taking back ownership of the performance from arts venues. Maxine Doyle, choreographer with the UK company Punchdrunk, said she "loved the idea that we had absolute control" over the at-

mosphere, over the way the audience was received and so on. Members of the Polish company Teatr Biuro Podrozy, which emerged during the communist era, noted that they took their work out on the streets because "nobody was going to the theatre", so they "decided to go meet their audience instead".

Difficulties interacting with venues in this country have also, almost by default, contributed to the creation of site-specific work; the Co Kildare-based site-specific company, Performance Corporation, which was set up in 2002, found it difficult as a young, unfunded outfit to access theatre spaces, despite having won two Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Awards for its first production, *Candide*, staged at the SS Michael and John Church in Dublin. "We started to have to look for spaces outside of venues," said Jo Mangan, Artistic Director of the company.

At the symposium, a greater sense of purpose was established by Guido Kleene, artistic director of Compagnie Dakar, who made the point that site-specific work "is not heaven", and that, while the rules of a site are different to the very clear rules of a theatre space, they do still exist, or at least, a company has to make them up. "We have to bring the freedom of the site back into the theatre building," he said, noting, in an echo of Peter Brook's assertion that he could take any empty space and call it a stage, that he makes no distinction between site and theatre space. "The future of theatre is both site and box," he said.

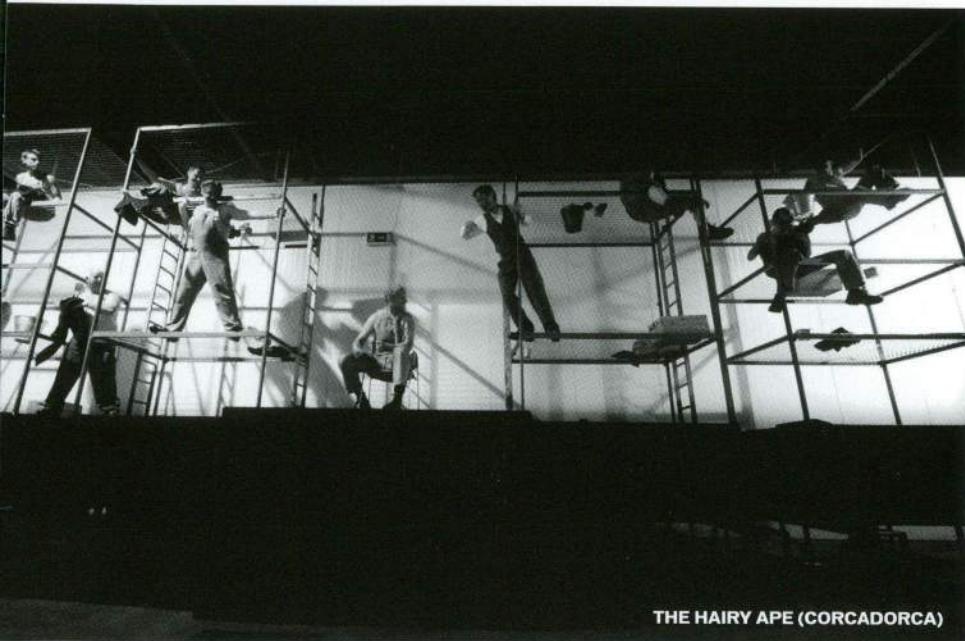
William Galinsky, who raised a question at the forum about the rationale underpinning site-specific work – about the potential considerations of "creating spectacle for spectacle's sake" – said later that he had been heartened to hear Kleene's assessment, which indicated serious engagement with the philosophical reasons for taking work outside. "I can see the advantages to working in a theatrical space, or in a found space," he said, "but it is about the space suiting the project. Not every play will stand up to site-specific treatment."

He describes a recent experience at Punchdrunk's Edgar Allan Poe-inspired extravaganza, *The Masque of the Red Death*, for which audience members were asked to don masks and cloaks and undertake an individual magical mystery tour through London's Battersea Arts Centre, becoming part of the drama in the process. It was an "unprecedented experience" and an "exceptional achievement", he says, but "not about performance or storytelling".

This view was echoed by some of the London critics, with Michael Billington observing that he "greatly enjoyed the experience" but saw it as "an alternative to, rather than a substitute for, conventional drama", while Matt Wolf, in a *Guardian* blog, wrote: "But what's it all about? Precious little, as far as I could tell, beyond providing sustenance to those theatre-phobes who wouldn't be caught dead at a so-called "normal" show where they might actually come



MICHAEL MCSWEENEY/PROVISION



THE HAIRY APE (CORCADOURCA)

away with some sort of meaning, as opposed to the scattershot assault on the senses that *The Masque of the Red Death* rather cunningly confuses with art. Nor can critics really pan such an event, lest they be seen as uncool." On the other hand, Jo Mangan considered Punchdrunk's decision to mask its audience. as "genius". "It meant that you could get right up there and get stuck in," she said.

Yet while Galinsky is cautious about site-specific work becoming a kind of "elaborate corporate entertainment", he is not afraid of it either, and programmed six outdoor theatre pieces for the Midsummer Festival this year, because "it seems to work" at this particular time of year. "Summer seems a good time to use the whole of the city," he says, noting that a show such as *Sensazione*, a theatrical fairground created by the Antwerp-based Laika, an international theatre company, and Time Circus, which specialises in building innovative theatre machines, attracts people with its promise of a fantastical world in which audiences operate the rides themselves. "We are trying to reach out to an audience with work that is visible and exciting," he says.

Unsurprisingly, the idea of 'reaching out' is frequently cited as a valid reason for exploring site-specific theatre. "For an awful lot of people, our shows are the first piece of theatre they have ever seen," says Kiernan. They come, he believes, because there is "more of a sense of an event"; it is "less formal"; there is "more of a curiosi-

ty". Last summer, Performance Corporation staged its production, *Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough*, in the sand dunes of Belmullet. Rain stopped the performance on occasions, but audiences still came in their droves. "If you choose a site of interest, an audience, particularly a festival audience, can be attracted. You are not pitching it as straight theatre, which a lot of people find difficulty going into," says Jo Mangan.

While Galinsky is cautious about site-specific work becoming a kind of "elaborate corporate entertainment", he is not afraid of it either, and programmed six outdoor theatre pieces for the Midsummer Festival this year,

The belief that those who attend non-traditional theatre do not also follow more conventional practice is not necessarily backed up by academic research. Fiona Wilkie is a lecturer in Drama, Theatre and

Performance Studies at Roehampton University in London, who has carried out extensive analysis of site-specific theatre. She has argued that there isn't such a thing as a "site-specific" audience. "I think, however, that there are those who will follow the work of one particular company, as with any other mode of theatre. And there are networks of people who keep up with particular strands of site-based work," she says.

Like Galinsky, Wilkie thinks that a clear rationale for creating site-specific work is vital – whether that is political, a reaction against the establishment, an engagement with local communities, or, as in the case of Performance Corporation, a pragmatic reaction to a young company's difficulty accessing established spaces. "Certainly this is the case in the work I've been most interested in writing about," Wilkie says. "This means, perhaps paradoxically, that the commitment of a company isn't necessarily always to making 'site-specific' work for its own sake, but that the choice to work in a non-theatre space in any particular project is a coherent decision, in dialogue with the other theatrical choices that the company makes: that is, 'it makes sense for the kind of theatre that we want this piece to be'."

At the Corcadorka symposium, a member of Teatr Biuro Podrozy acknowledged that site-specific theatre is "now in fashion". This, of course, is something of a double-edged sword. At its worst, despite its attractiveness for audiences, site-specific theatre can be accused of choosing style over substance. At its best, it can, as Wilkie believes "be a productive way of raising questions about what theatre has been, and might be in the future". The challenge for those making site-specific work is to find ways of keeping sight of that.





Aisling Ghéar
COMPÁNTAS AMHARCLAINNE



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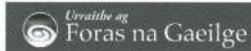
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| PLAYING AGAINST TYPE

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PLAYING

WOMAN AND SCARECROW

From panto to *Cabaret*, from period drama to the dark visions of Marina Carr, Barbara Brennan has done it all. She talks to **SARA KEATING** about her formative years in repertory theatre, and her determination to avoid being pigeon-holed.

AGAINST TYPE

BARBARA BRENNAN LOOKS AT LEAST TEN YEARS YOUNGER than the last time I saw her. In *The Deep Blue Sea* at the Gate Theatre, her shuffling characterisation of the dumpy landlady, Mrs Elton, provided a memorable comic highlight to Terence Rattigan's highly charged emotional drama. Now sitting on a high stool in the Abbey bar with a blonde bob and perfect posture, Brennan cuts a figure of mature elegance. She is in her fifties – "late fifties, actually", she says, without an ounce of vanity – and is about to complete a nine-month period of back-to-back-roles, her latest being in Charles Mee's ensemble piece, *Big Love*, currently at the Peacock.

Despite being one of the most established character actresses on the Irish stage, Brennan has a chameleon quality, and is almost unrecognisable as she moves from one production to the next. It is arguably this chameleon quality that has made her so endlessly cast-able, her most recent roles ranging from the eponymous alter-ego, Scarecrow, in Marina Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* at the Peacock, to the Mock-Turtle/Duchess in Landmark's *Alice in Wonderland*. Brennan happily admits that it is her adaptable set of performance skills that has determined the course of her career.

Growing up as the eldest daughter in a theatrical clan, Brennan has been performing professionally since she was a child. "My father was a freelance actor and my mother was in the RTÉ Radio Repertory," she says. "One day my mother was asked if she had anyone at home who could read. I was about eight at the time, and I was dragged in and did my bit, and I was good at it, so I continued to do radio plays whenever they needed a young girl. Then, when I was in my early teens, I did some TV. Those were the days when they used to do plays on TV: *The Plough and the Stars*, and all that. And I loved it. There was not really any formal training back then – there would have been the Abbey, of course, and the Brendan Smith School of Acting – but I found my love for theatre through experience, and like the vast majority of my generation, I learned everything on the job."

FESTEN



IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE NO 35



WOMAN AND SCARECROW



While Brennan is highly critical of the dearth of training and opportunities for young actors in Ireland, she is equally vocal about her belief that experience should be the foundation of any education in the performing arts. "The only real training that I had was ballet, and although it was that training that gave me my first break, everything that I learnt about acting came from experience. One day a lady called Alice Delgarno, who was doing the choreography for the Gaiety pantomime, came to our dance school and picked a number of us to do a ballet number in the panto. I ended up doing a lot of dancing in their pantos and summer shows, picking up different skills."



ANTHONY WOODS: ROS KAVANAGH; TOM LAWLER

"But even at that stage," she remembers, "I was desperately trying to avoid what everyone likes to do with performers – pigeon-hole them: 'you're a dancer,' 'you're an actor', 'you're a classical actor', and so on. So I started trying to get work in the real theatre. I was still working at The Gaiety a lot, doing variety, but I spent a lot of time trying to get into other things. I used to write letters to The Gate, getting these wonderful, very charming letters back from Hilton Edwards and Michéal MacLíammóir, but I never got any work from them."

"Then I went down to Killarney one year, and worked with a repertory company there, which was run by Pat Turner, and then with the Irish Touring Com-

pany, run by Joe Dowling. Working and touring in rep was brilliant, because one day you could be doing the box-office, the next you could be playing the lead, or doing ASM, and all of us, every morning, changed the set. The company did everything themselves and it was as good as training, or possibly even better, because it was hands-on and you were presenting it to the public and they had the say whether it was good or not.

'The real problem for young actors is that they don't get a chance to work enough. In order to develop as an actor you need to be working; you need some kind of consistency. Stopping, with months in-between jobs, doesn't let you grow.'

"The other great thing was that you were doing your training away from the big public eye, learning the ropes and making your mistakes away from the mainstream."

She wishes that young actors had more exposure to this sort of hands-on intensive experience: "It's a pity that rep has died out, because the real problem for young actors is that they just don't get a chance to work enough. In order to develop as an actor you need to be working, you need some kind of consistency. Stopping, with months in between jobs, doesn't let you grow. That was what was great about the radio repertory, and the Abbey Players, when they still existed. That system gave people a consistency, a good training ground.

"Now people coming out of drama school are really cast adrift. There are no opportunities for them. And going away doesn't always work either, because you're Irish and can be pigeonholed as that and you can have trouble finding work."

Having spent the 1970s establishing herself as a "proper actress", it seems ironic that Brennan's seminal role harked back to her variety days, when she was cast as Sally Bowles in the musical *Cabaret*, being produced by Noel Pearson in 1976. "That was a huge role for me and after that I got offered a lot more work. I really worked and worked through that period, rehearsing by day while I was playing at night. It was great."

If Brennan's range of skills gives her a versatility that many other actors would envy, she admits that "it has its disadvantages. Even still, people like to put actors in a particular box – they have a part to cast and they think of a particular actor – and that's why so many people end up playing the same roles again and again. But I thrive on variety; and the more various the role is the better for me.

"The wonderful thing about theatre is that, unlike film, you don't really have to look like your character type. When you hit a certain age, for example, the roles are all 'small dumpy women', but you'd be surprised at how you can



COME AND GO

adapt that, and find other ways of portraying it.”

“Like when I played Mrs Kilbride in Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*, she was supposed to be a small dumpy woman, but at the costume fitting, when they put me in a low-cut dress, all of a sudden we had her: what she was was inappropriate; what she actually looked like – her physical type – didn’t matter. And I suppose even Lady Macbeth”, which Brennan played earlier this year in Selina Cartmell’s production of *Macbeth* for Siren, “although you could say I was a little bit old to be playing her – that was the point. It shifts the dynamic. Theatre has that sort of freedom.”

“Going from playing Lady Macbeth to being a little housekeeper in *The Deep Blue Sea* – that’s the joy of acting for me: when the tone, the characters, the entire play, couldn’t be more different. It makes me more employable too – especially at my age. People often talk about roles drying up for women at this age, but I’ve never been busier.”

While her relationship with director Selina Cartmell, with whom she has worked three times in the last nine months, has certainly satisfied Brennan’s desire for diversity, she also finds a delight in the security of being on common ground with Cartmell. “She is such a striking talent, and to be working with her is a pleas-

ure. But there's also that great luxury of knowing how she works, and she knowing how I work, and the shorthand you can develop towards getting where you need to (in rehearsals.)"

In Cartmell's production of *Big Love* she plays a supporting rather than a leading role, but Brennan maintains that the significance of the job is the same. "When I

'I made a conscious decision that I would keep going, even if I wasn't getting the biggest parts. You can't say you will only take lead roles, because you just won't work if that's your attitude.'

started approaching my late forties I made a conscious decision to try and turn over; that I would keep going, even if I wasn't always getting the biggest parts. I mean you can't say you will only take lead roles, because you

just won't work if that's your attitude, and if you don't work you get rusty."

It's hard to imagine Brennan "getting rusty", especially considering the substantial evidence that theatre is not merely a career for her, but something "in the Brennan blood". Along with her sister Jane, her brother Stephen and his daughters Sarah and Kate, one of her own daughters, Eva Bartley, has taken to the stage. Meanwhile her brother Paul, a producer, has a daughter working with Footsbarn as she tries to raise funds to train at the Le Coq school in Paris, and another sister Cathryn, who has also worked as an actor, produces radio drama for RTÉ.

Even so, Brennan is attempting to steer her two younger daughters away from a career in theatre. "It's too hard," she maintains, "especially for women. And it is so hard to make a living. Yes, there's an Equity minimum, but there's also a top rate, and none of it is good. The truth is that actors are paid extremely badly and while seat prices go up all the time, actors' salaries don't go up; they just have not progressed as they should have. On top of that, you only work for the period of time that you're in the play and then you're on the dole, and even that's a whole lot of hassle, because people don't really understand what actors do, the shifting sands of your working life."

Of course these are factors that Brennan was aware of when she started herself, but she pursued her passion regardless, and worked consistently since childhood. "I used to think I'd do something sensible," she says, as she gets ready to go back to rehearsals. "Like take a secretarial to fall back on, before I tried my hand at theatre." Needless to say, she never did.

Big Love continues at the Peacock until 2 August. Sara Keating is a freelance journalist and critic, and a judge for the Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards 2008.





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Closing date for applications is **22 August**.



OEDIPUS LOVES YOU

OEDIPUS IN THE EAST VILLAGE

50



Oedipus in the East Village

Playwright and performer **GINA MOXLEY** comes back to earth after the final leg of Pan Pan's international tour with *Oedipus Loves You*.

MAY 2008. IF SUITCASES COULD WINCE, MINE IS about to throw a strop at the idea of yet another journey. A carbon footprint on wheels, it still has sand in its pockets from our trip to Hainan Island in the South China Sea in April – some of us had a beach holiday after Pan Pan's visit to Beijing and Shanghai. I will the case to hold together for the last lap of our tour of *Oedipus Loves You* to Columbus, Ohio and New York. We've been on the road on and off with the show since it premiered in Dublin in October 2006. Oh, all right then, I'll list where we've been: all across Canada: Edmonton, Calgary, Quebec and some places between; Bern in Switzerland, over and back to Germany where we played in Düsseldorf, Leipzig, Hamburg and Berlin, then there was Glasgow, Kilkenny and Carnuntum, outside Vienna – one of our best audiences ever, given that Freud was a local, Finland before Christmas, then London for February, followed by China in April. Is it any wonder my bag is in bits?

The cast and crew meet up at the check-in. We're slightly subdued, as if we can't believe our luck. Again. We line up at Immigration; the work visas are real, we're through. Now we're beaming, hooray, jammy jobs on tour to the Land of The Free.

We arrive in Atlanta and as we wait to board for Columbus, Homeland Security, whose motto is 'One Team, One Mission', advises us repeatedly that the security threat level is high or ORANGE. In China, where the Olympic slogan is

the less aggressive but clearly delusional, One World, One Dream, there is a similar antipathy to the colour. A bizarre symmetry: the Tibetan monks' robes, the prison uniforms at Guantanamo, and now orange is a byword for fear. Ah lads. Don't be wreckin' our buzz.

In Columbus, we play at the Wexner Center, a gorgeous purpose-built theatre

It's too weird to be worried about reviews this late in the run. The audience are completely open, generous, uncynical. They are totally into it. At the end of the show the response is amazing: whooping and hollering.

on the University of Ohio campus. The front-of-house staff pronounces the company's name as 'Paean Paean', and soon we're all saying it, like some exultation. Touring is like Groundhog Day, saying the same things, wearing

the same clothes, in different places. Rehearsals are at the same time the day after we arrive, while the crew are on dinner break. The sound check is always the following afternoon at two, followed by whatever tweaking that needs to be done. And first show that night. It's a comforting routine.

Our main concern is what type of sausages we'll be eating in the barbecue scene. Acting and eating is bad enough but some of the sausages we've had throughout the tour have been showstoppers. Vile.

It's great playing to an English-speaking audience again. Within minutes of the show starting you know whether they are with you or not. These are. They get it. They applaud, cheer and disappear. We repair to some dive bar and bemoan the lack of bars in theatres. Same thing in China, you never get to meet the audience. We pack out for the rest of the week and then we're off to New York, beside ourselves with excitement.

Performance Space 122 is run by former Dublin Fringe Festival director Vallejo Gantner. In what was once a public school on First Avenue and East Ninth Street, it's totally grungy. Very East Village. Innovation, exploration and risk-taking are its remit and what their audience expect. The ideal venue for us.

Except, the set has to be hoiked up five flights of stairs. It doesn't fit; the roof of our house is lopped off. There's a pillar in the middle of the stage. We get turkey sausages, which are almost edible. The headphones used in the show are having frequency problems; our ears are virtually bleeding.

On opening night the auditorium is peppered with heavy-hitting reviewers. Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* is on his first visit to PS122 for a few years. It's too weird to be worried about reviews this late in the tour. The audience are completely open, generous, uncynical. They are totally into it. At the end of the





show the response is amazing, whooping and hollering. They heart us. We heart them. We have a party on set. It looks like we're a hit.

It's Memorial Day when the reviews start to come out: they're uniformly great. They engage intellectually with the themes. 'Raves for Pan Pan' goes up on the board outside the theatre. It's a wonderful vindication of the work that the company does. Another ex-Dublin Fringe man, Scott Watson, very generously throws us a party. This is the life.

The two weeks fly and suddenly it's the last show. We pack up our costumes for the last time. Goodbye green dress. Thanks for the trip Oedipus. Nobody gets sentimental. We go and have drinks. Somebody gives out about the beer. Yeah, we all admit, it's crap. We're ready to go home. My suitcase is limping badly and the wheels come off as I open my front door.

HM

PHOTOS: RACHEL ROBERTS

Pan Pan's next production, The Crumb Trail by Gina Moxley, will be shown as work-in-progress at the Hebbel Theater, Berlin, in August and at the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. It will premiere in Dusseldorf and transfer to Project, Dublin, in November. Pan Pan's international work is supported by Culture Ireland.

Can We Play Now?

In a residential workshop in the spring, Performance Corporation invited directors, designers and artists to pool ideas for new work. **MICHELLE READ** finds out what's hatching from The Space Project.

Performer Alan Howley, during Performance Corporation's residency at Castletown House.

SPACE! NOT THE FINAL FRONTIER KIND, RATHER THE *crie de cœur* of the artist. It can be hard to find, particularly if you're not working on a specific production, and just want to play. But is that allowed? Jo Mangan and the Performance Corporation believe it should be and that it's essential to new work. They have set up an initiative this year called, practically enough, The Space Project, which aims to give artists the room to explore their nascent ideas as well as to hot-house cross-form collaboration.

Effectively a residency, the project was initiated in the company's new base at Castletown House, Co. Kildare in April. Eight Irish and international artists were chosen from over ninety applicants, and brought together for two-weeks of collaborations in the rooms and grounds of this restored stately home, run by the Office of Public Works (OPW).

Mangan explains that the idea behind the project was both self-serving and altruistic. Considering collaboration to be part of the company's "life-blood", she wanted to explore a way of working, which started with artistic interaction rather than a production schedule. She also felt a sense of responsibility to facilitate other emerging and established artists. "We have stuff, technical stuff, an admin base, space. We're very lucky and feel this should be shared."

A desire to initiate projects through collaboration had been fermenting within the company for a long time, and in 2006 they took a group of designers to County Mayo for a week. The idea was to explore an old power station, with the aim of developing a show for the space. Mangan reflects wryly that what they hadn't realised, was that the station was due for demolition. Undeterred by the loss of the site, they decided to go ahead with the week anyway, starting from scratch, and with only the idea of initiating something together – which ultimately resulted in *Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emmlyclough*.

But it was the Belgian theatre company Victoria, (who performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2005 and 2006), who specifically inspired the format for the Space Project. As reported in *ITM* 33, Victoria had run the 'De Bank' pro-

Dancer Aine Stapleton taking part in The Space Project.



gramme, which brought six artists from various backgrounds including dance, theatre, fine arts and film to work together for a period of two years. The artists were paid a salary and encouraged to work on a large scale and to constantly collaborate with each other. Mangan says that the Performance Corporation's programme is more modest, but that the aims are the same, "to give artists the freedom and space to create".

Beyond these admirably altruistic aims, I wonder what the company hopes to gain. Mangan explains that the "three hopes" for the programme were; "that the individual artist would find something to inspire their practice in the future; that collaborations would evolve within the group, and that some of the 'spark-s' of inspiration and collaboration might feed into the work of the company in the future".

Like Victoria, Mangan says, the company wanted to sow the seed of connection and interaction between artists. They also wanted to push the boundaries of traditional theatre collaborations by working with people from diverse art forms and backgrounds.

"We do site-specific work, we work with different technologies", she says, "we're not a conventional theatre company". In order to address this, they aimed to attract a broad spectrum of practitioners. Mangan was delighted to discover there was a lot of interest, with artists applying from as far afield as Russia, Algeria and the U.S. The final selection included a choreographer, a set designer, a lighting designer, an architect, two visual artists, a theatre director and a vocalist.

So how were the two weeks of the Space Project put together? Initially the process was "all about talking" and dramaturg Hannah Slättner, who co-facilitated the first week, says the participants were asked to "put their preoccupations on the table". This was about finding out everyone's areas of interest and artistic concerns, says Mangan, and "what got their juices flowing". The participants then discussed the nature of collaboration and were paired up and asked to explore shared working methods. Mangan adds, "the first week was also about people communicating to each other how they made their work". This was done practically, so that "everybody danced with the choreographer... all the individual artists got us working in the way they work."

In addition to space, workstations and technical equipment, the programme also supplied other professional practitioners, including two dancers, an actor, a composer, a writer and a video editor. The company also took the participants on a series of trips; to the theatre, the mountains and, (unnervingly), the dissecting room at the Royal College of Surgeons, in order to further stimulate the process.

At the end of the first week Mangan and Slättner asked each participant





Performance Corporation's previous workshop resulted in
Tom Swift's *Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emmylly-*
clough performed on sand dunes in Co Mayo

whom they would like to work with, and then drew up "a massive, head-wrecking schedule", which still tried to leave enough time for the participants to engage meaningfully. Mangan says she was surprised at how quickly things began to happen: "that's when we got down to brass tacks," she laughs, "the outcomes started coming at us thick and fast".

By the time I visited Castletown House, vocalist Irene O'Mara and visual artist

Mary-Jo Gilligan were working on a sound installation in the basement; architect Nuria Montblanch and visual artist Suzanne Mooney were making a tearoom sculpture from paper in a small ante-chamber; choreographer Konstantin Grouss was editing a film

For visual artist Mary Joe Gilligan, the residency gave her insights into her own practice, including 'the discipline of rigorous self-examination that I had lacked since leaving art college'.

of a dance sequence he had created and the other artists were finishing various projects initiated on site.

All the participants were clearly highly engaged and very positive about the programme. Sonia Haccius, an Irish set and costume designer, found the first week of "enforced collaborations" particularly helpful. "It kick-started the whole process of thinking in different ways, and forced oneself out of one's usual path". Christine Fentz, a site-specific director from Denmark, found the surroundings of Castletown House "a big source for inspiration", and Northern Ireland-based lighting designer, Ciaran Bagnall, felt that the programme had taught him to trust his instinct more to "keep on trying new things, (and) pushing new boundaries".

A few weeks later I talk to some of the participants again, but know that it may be too soon to properly gauge the experience. Mary-Jo Gilligan comments that she feels more connected to theatre practices since the programme; "I have more understanding of the practicalities and an insight into the relevant creative perspective". She adds that the residency also gave her insights into her own practice including "the discipline for rigorous self-examination that I had lacked since leaving art college".

Suzanne Mooney feels that the programme helped her reassess her ongoing relationship with a dance company. She had been creating digital scenography for some of the company's shows over the last two years and felt that she was now "much clearer about the different roles (within a collaborative process) and the potential of the *stage space*".



Choreographer Konstantin Grouss working at Castletown House.



CIARAN BAGNALL

Since the project ended images of the paper tearoom, which Mooney created with Nuria Montblanch, have been reviewed in the May/June issue of The Visual Artists' News Sheet, (the reviewer, Dr. Paul O'Brien, suggesting rather aptly that the installation piece "highlights another taboo: in a world dominated by a relentless work ethic, it is not permitted for adults to play"). Mooney is also working on another piece from the Space programme, which was part of Project Brand New 2 at the Project Arts Centre in July.

Reflecting on the programme from Performance Corporation's point of view,



Jo Mangan, artistic director of Performance Corporation

Jo Mangan believes it met all of their original aspirations, and she already plans to repeat and extend the project next year. "We want this to be the beginning of something long-term", she says, with determination. "There were great outcomes and it wasn't about it being necessarily tangible... but we are talking to two of the artists about working with us on future projects".

Mangan is a particularly tenacious and determined practitioner, but does the funding policy match her vision? David Parnell, the Arts Council's Head of Theatre, says that the Council does recognise the requirement for theatre artists to develop their art over longer periods of time, and is actively looking at ways to address this need. However, "in the context of limited resources, and in order to demonstrate an instrumental benefit to tax-payers... the kind of research and developmental work that the Arts Council is interested in supporting is the kind which is ultimately geared towards generating an artistic product... The bottom line is money, and as long as there isn't enough of it to go round, offering work to audiences will take precedence over research and development."

Mangan's experience seems to confirm this. The Space Project was part of the Performance Corporation's formal application for funding last year. "We didn't

get the money", she notes, "but we decided to do it anyway." The company shaved some cash from their other budgets and with accommodation and space provided by their hosts and the OPW, they were able to go ahead.

Mangan is undeterred, as she thinks that this type of programme is core to the company's future. "It's great to have a company around what I want to do. It's been a long struggle to get to that point, but that's just a handful of people and it excludes more than it includes". She is philosophical about the Arts Council's position: "the funding wheel is slow. You need to forge ahead and let the funding catch up".



For further information on The Space Project, see performancecorporation.com

Michelle Read is a performer and dramatist. Her company Living Space Theatre (formerly READCO) is producing You Are Here by Joanna Anderson in the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival 2008.



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OUT OF TIME



MOVING Between Traditions

The newly named Dublin Dance Festival became an annual event this year.

SEONA MAC REAMOINN looks back at a programme that was full of surprises – and home-grown talent.

HIS WAS A SLOW BURNING FESTIVAL, DELIVERING MORE than it seemed at first to promise. There appeared to be fewer familiar figures from the international contemporary dance circuit in the programme, apart from the exciting and well-anticipated performance by William Forsythe and company. The programme intrigued rather than dazzled. But the low-key approach was deceptive, as the new Artistic Director, Laurie Uprichard, had made wise choices within her short planning time-frame. Not all the companies and artists may have had a high profile, but what they lacked in name recognition, they made up for in sheer diversity and engagement. Audiences responded enthusiastically, with 6,000 people attending the diverse performances, which played from the Docklands to Dun Laoghaire.

Several hallmarks have now emerged. The youthfulness of many of the performers; the inclusion of emerging choreographers from the New Europe; outstanding, masterful performances; the coherence and stature of the Irish strand, and a sense of intimacy and participation that emanated from the festival. Curiously, some of

these points brought back memories of festivals which had gone before. Not only to the first International Dance Festivals but more strongly those now defunct, small celebratory platforms that first illuminated a path for founding Artistic Director Catherine Nunes and her team to follow. Project's New Music New Dance Festival from the early 1990s, and the Aerowaves dance strands of previous Dublin Fringe Festivals particularly came to mind. For, what marked those events in their most successful phases was the introduction of small but highly accomplished young dance-makers from less familiar places (such as Finland) and creating performance and collaborative opportunities for young Irish choreographers and dancers.

Some of this might be explained by Laurie Uprichard's own background: her years at Danspace Project in New York, creating mini festivals with huge impact, in a small venue in a cosmopolitan city. Her sense of place seems to be instinctive and her programming bore rich fruit. The young faces and new places involved and evoked this year created a range of enduring images – the children's playground in Ioana Mona Popovici's *Portrait* from the Czech Republic; the exuberant physicality of Slovenia's Betontanc in their aptly titled, *Wrestling Dostoevsky*; the controlled magic of the embryonic body of Kitt Johnson from Denmark, in her extraordinary take on creation, *Rankefod*; or the quirky yet challenging tenet of the UK company, Girl Jonah, with a duet for two very different physical bodies, one able bodied, the other not.

There was a maturity and depth to the Irish portfolio, evident in the solos of Jenny Roche, Colin Dunne and Jean Butler, but also in the Re-presenting Ireland strand, presented by Dance House, and in the collaborations elaborated in the 'Dance on the Box' screenings..

The marriage of video, film footage and photographs to performance and composition featured in both Colin Dunne's and Jean Butler's separate but parallel interrogations of their inherited Irish cultural identity. In *Does she take Sugar?* Jean Butler allowed us into her post-modern creative world as she sought to meld her highly refined Irish dancing skills, her persona as a performer, her displacement between the culture of her Irish -American origins and the changing country of her heritage. A slow dance partnering a Frankie Gavin fiddle tune underlined the moving and unexpected emotional impact of this show.

More Impact, of a literal percussive kind, came from Colin Dunne's *Out of Time*. A reflective, well-excavated personal journey to his step-dancing roots was at the heart of this piece. The archive material featuring casual male step-dancers and *sean nós* performers was carefully integrated into his exposition of how far he has travelled to feel at ease with those effortless artisans of dance. The insights into his Birmingham background, his inventive use of micro-

DOES SHE TAKE SUGAR?

CONOR BUCKLEY



phones on his shoes, his competitive prowess and *Riverdance* aura, his exuberance as a dancer, and his humorous asides made this performance mesmeric.

Jenny Roche's *Solo3* was also a highlight, her own development as a dancer scaling heights of articulation, and also showing the fruit of intuitive collaboration, mentoring and engagement with international practitioners, which festivals can underline and foster.

Her confident ease as a performer and the witty John Jasperse choreography were a perfect match. This was co-produced by Dublin Dance Festival. Dance House has also

Offering dance that was pure and consummate, the brilliance of the French Ballet Preljocaj didn't seem to penetrate the public's consciousness, and they deserved fuller houses.

so been in the business of support and research, and their contribution to the new Irish work was evident in the coherence of the young dance-makers' work showcased there. A snatch of work in progress from Liz Roche, an assured Ella Clarke foray, and a thoughtful Mairead Vaughan shone brightest.

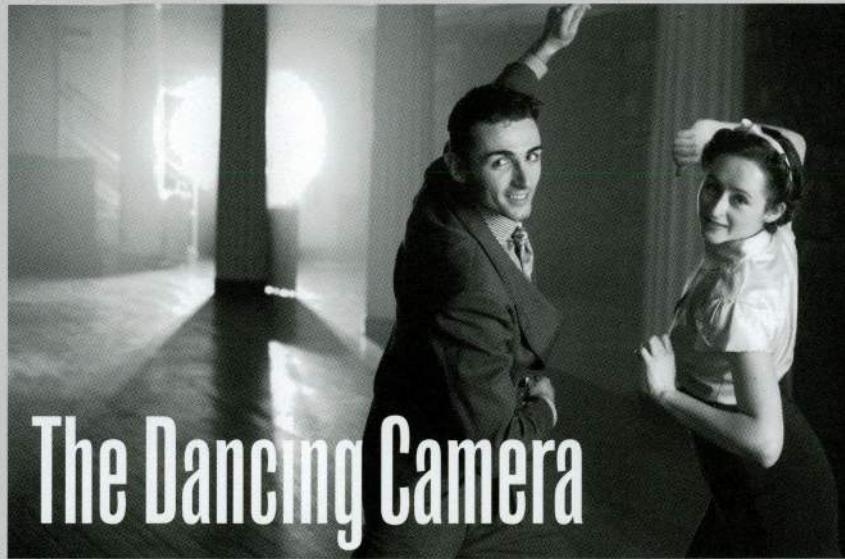
Other stars that shone in the festival were the programme's class leaders in the intellectual and modernist continental European tradition. The transplanted American choreographer William Forsythe and his superb company offered the body politic masterclass, *Three Atmospheric Studies*, which opened the festival, and the understated and underexposed French heavy-hitters, Ballet Preljocaj. Their *Empty Moves Parts 1 and 2* offered dance that was pure, polished, transparent and consummate. This was the only really regrettable omission in the festival's communication, as their brilliance didn't seem to penetrate the public's consciousness, and they deserved fuller houses.

Tere O'Connor hit all the right notes too in his *Rammed Earth*, exploring space and time, and bringing some New York verve, finesse and attitude to the performance, the concept, and particularly to the post-show discussion. These discussions, while often held, do not always work, but this year they attracted good audiences and dialogue, and were an integral part of the sense of community and intimacy that was a feature of the festival.

The venues played their part in that regard, and the partnering of particular performances to spaces contributed to the atmosphere. SS Michael and John's was a particularly successful site and the performers used the space imaginatively and effectively. Whether, as in Tere O'Connor's work, the audience shifted their chairs and perspective, or were offered plates of biscuits as part of the performance (*Betotanc*), all fused to create informality and engagement between audiences and performers that did not minimise our awe, or their imaginative power.

THREE ATMOSPHERIC STUDIES





The Dancing Camera

The 'Dance on the Box' series is a marriage of film technology and choreography that offers potential for stunning imagery.

THIS INITIATIVE IS A PERFECT PARTNERING OF DANCE AND TECHNOLOGY, of a festival and sponsorship (RTÉ and The Arts Council), and a simple way to develop new audiences. Four films were screened publicly during the festival on the big screen in Temple Bar's Meeting House Square, but also on the smaller screens of RTE television. The five or six-minute collaborations between a choreographer and a film-maker offer marvellous potential, but not everyone succeeds. The two elements need to fuse with one another: the camera needs to dance and the dance needs to be aware of the third eye.

One of the two outstanding films also dovetailed with the themes being elaborated on the live performance stages of the festival. Director Morleigh Steinberg's collaboration with choreographer Liz Roche took a look at the contiguous yet still separate traditions of dance and culture



in Ireland. The result was the illuminating *Unsung*, which featured *sean nós* dancer Nick Gareiss eloquently tapering his body and feet to a familiar tune, followed by Roche, the contemporary dancer, responding to Roisin El Safty's rendition of a *sean nós* love song. Roche danced the liquid counterpoint to the slow air with tenderness and intuition, in the unfamiliar setting of the bar, complete with black plastic stools and brown formica tables.

By contrast, in the finely edited *Monitor*, Luke Mc Manus's filmic skills took the lead as we watched the close-circuit screens zoom in on dance in unlikely locations in the urban jungle. Two young dancers perform synchronously at a petrol station; a young man (choreographer and dancer Nick Bryson) leaps from his commuting car journey and whirls freely at a roundabout, and a material girl swirls and swoons among the perfume counters of a glamorous department store. The secret lives, the scent of illicit dance, are underlined by the clever use of the bank of screen monitors being closely observed by nameless figures.

LW

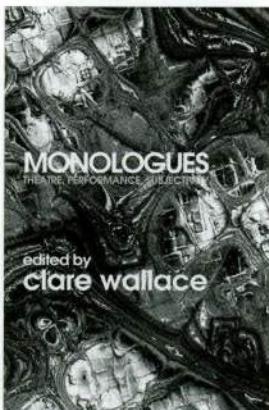
Performing the Self

Irish theatre doesn't have a monopoly on the monologue. A recent collection of essays places the form in a wider cultural context and explores its opportunities and challenges, writes **TOM MAGUIRE**.

WHILE THE dramatic monologue and solo performance have become, in Eamon Jordan's words "a staple of Irish drama", this collection of essays, edited and introduced by Claire Wallace, demonstrates that monologic performance occurs across a variety of cultural contexts and covers a range of "radically different" cultural practices. The monologue, then, need no longer be regarded as a sub-standard performance form, indicative of a poverty of resources or

imagination on the part of writers or theatre companies. Instead, the ways in which the form carries its own opportunities and challenges for both theatre makers and audiences can now be more readily appreciated, as can the virtuosity of both writers and performers able to hold audiences through the presence and performance of the solo actor.

Inevitably, as the first volume to address the form specifically, the collection is concerned throughout with issues of definition through two

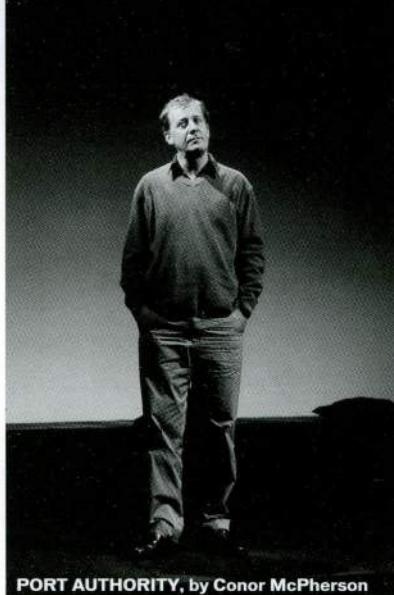


MONOLOGUES:
THEATRE, PERFORMANCE,
SUBJECTIVITY
EDITED BY CLAIRE WALLACE
Litteraria Pragensia, 2006

types of contribution: surveys of monologues within specific social contexts; and the investigation of its formal characteristics within a narrower range of works, in some instances focusing on individual writers. There is an interplay, then, within the collection overall, and to a lesser extent within individual essays, between specific examples and generalisable insights.

Wallace's introduction attempts to set some parameters, separating monologue out as a *genre*, distinct from, for example, soliloquy, which she regards as a *dramatic device*. At the same time she is careful to recognise solo performance and monologue drama as different versions of the same form. In addition, she usefully traces something of the literary history of the monologue back to the dramatic monologue in poetry and the prose interior monologue. This is augmented by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera's setting out its theatrical lineage within the nineteenth century European theatre's attempts to give expression to the interior world of its protagonists. Despite these origins, much of the work detailed here is outward looking in placing the individual and the audience within specific social structures and relationships.

This is foregrounded in Borowski and Sugiera's essay on the monologue in contemporary Quebec, where they identify the development of mono-



PORT AUTHORITY, by Conor McPherson

logue into a novel form of 'polylogue'. They argue that the form in Quebec has had the capacity to contribute to the building of communal identity, distinct from and resistant to the dominant Anglophone culture.

While David Bradby's account of the French stage of the 1980's and 1990's places the monologue within a tradition of "theatres of the self", he draws attention to how Eugène Durif, for example, was able to expose the realities of the Algerian war, demonstrating the capacity of monologue for political commentary. He also charts a range of aesthetically-driven experiments with the form in the work of writers such as Philippe Minyana. Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas examine a range of monologues within the activist theatres of Chicana/o communities, particularly as they seek to engage with dominant discourses of sexuality within that community.

This concern with sexual identity is reiterated in Brian Singleton's survey of Irish monologues that explore the multiple masculinities on offer in an Ireland transformed by economic boom. He argues that there is a limitation to both the representation of masculinity through men who are physically and psychologically damaged and to the possibilities of the form itself.

The second category of essays addresses head on this sense of monodrama as a limited form. Particularly prominent is Dee Heddon's essay on autobiographical monologues where she sets out to refute accusations that it is necessarily inward looking and self-indulgent. She argues for the political functions of autobiographical monologue in expressing pressing social matters in personal terms, demonstrating its dialogic possibilities and its capacity to engage the spectator through multiplying the performed self.

Daniela Jobertová's essay on Bernard-Marie Koltès and Mark Berninger's piece on Pinter likewise extend the discussion of the ways in which the monologue can contain a variety of voices and perspectives. The instability then of the 'I' who speaks allows the form to explore both the fragility of personal identity and the limitations of language to give expression to such identity or subjectivity. It is with a sense of inevitability then that Eckart Voigts-Vir-

chow and Mark Schreiber bring the focus back to Beckett, in an essay in which they locate his work, alongside that of McPherson and Will Eno's *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*, as part of a post-dramatic theatrical movement in which the crisis of inarticulate masculinity is the subject of performance.

The volume then provides a rich initial resource for anyone coming to the monologue as a form. It clears the ground and will encourage scholars and practitioners to look further at the relationships between narrative and the performative, particularly, for example, in the non-verbal. It provides a set of analytical terms and approaches that will allow the application of ideas and insights from these essays to other examples.

There is further work to be done to complete the genealogical process started here by providing greater recognition of the relationship between theatrical monologue and storytelling within oral cultures, such as is mentioned in relation to Chicano/a and Native American theatres here. Equally, the range of essays included here identifies the need for further work to address material from outside Europe and North America.

Tom Maguire lectures in drama at the University of Ulster, and directed Fatteh Azam's Baggage, part of ONE: Three Solo Plays for International Human Rights Week in Derry and Belfast.

CONVERSATION IN THE MOUNTAINS -**A PLAY FOR RADIO****BY JOHN BANVILLE**

WITH PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

BY DONALD TESKEY

(Gallery Press, 2008)

€100

Does the literary value of the written word increase when packaged beautifully? Certainly the monetary value - or rather the speculation on its future value - is impressive: at €100, this radio play by John Banville is only for collectors of beautiful things. Printed on 'Rives Artist' and bound in brown linen with a 'Pergamenata wrap-around', this limited edition from Gallery Press also features around eight full-colour reproductions of paintings and drawings created by Donald Teskey in response to the text.

Oh yes, the text! Banville's radio play, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4, reimagines holocaust survivor Celan's 1967 meeting with philosopher and Nazi party member Heidegger in the depths of the Black Forest, at Todtnauberg (the original title of the radio play.) It takes its title from Celan's prose work *Conversation In The Mountains*, which explored the relationship between words and images; there is reason then for this exquisite production. Only 400 copies have been produced, each numbered and signed by the author, with 350 for sale. A safer bet than investing in the property market, perhaps.

RISING WITHOUT TRACE**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN****ENGLISH ACTOR IN IRELAND**

By Laurence Foster

(Ashfield Press, 2007)

€20

Laurence Foster spins a good yarn out of four decades in Irish theatre, radio, film and television. The actor, director and one-time Head of RTÉ Drama presents a John Hinde picture of Ireland - wet hedgerows, whiskies on tarnished bar counters, capers across the countryside - as a cast of thousands streams in from the wings: Edwards and Mac Liammóir, Michael Gambon, Maureen Potter, et al. Names, dates, locations, what each person had to drink, and exact train times are recalled in overwhelming detail, interspersed with interesting photos, of irregular quality.

Foster writes with a light touch - perhaps too light: a little more reflection would have been interesting - and the writing itself is at times clichéd - 'I folded the memories and placed them back on the mental shelf of remembrance'. However, Foster comes across as a very likeable, generous-spirited individual, who views even the most challenging moments as opportunities, and believes in luck. This book reads like a collection of stories usually recounted at dinner parties; no doubt, this 'English actor in Ireland' can do the voices too. — FÍONA NÍ CHINNÉIDE

Demanding to be Heard

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

Declan Conlon in The Burial at Thebes



Into the Maelstrom

The isolated male stood centre-stage and demanded serious attention in some recent productions. Our critics obliged.

ON AN AVERAGE DAY

by John Kolenbach

Purple Heart Theatre Company

Directed by Alan King

Set Design: Martin Cahill

With: Les Martin and Dermot Magennis

The Mill Theatre, Dundrum

31 March – 12 April 2008. Reviewed 11 April

BY DEREK WEST

WRITTEN IN 2003, THIS VISCERAL PIECE about the deeply flawed relationships of sons, brothers and fathers is hyper-charged with emotion and testosterone: two dysfunctional brothers, abandoned in childhood by their father and alienated from each other for twenty-three years, are re-united in a squalid city apartment. They spend an evening circling each other, unpacking their shared past, separating fable from fact, demolishing each other's illusions.

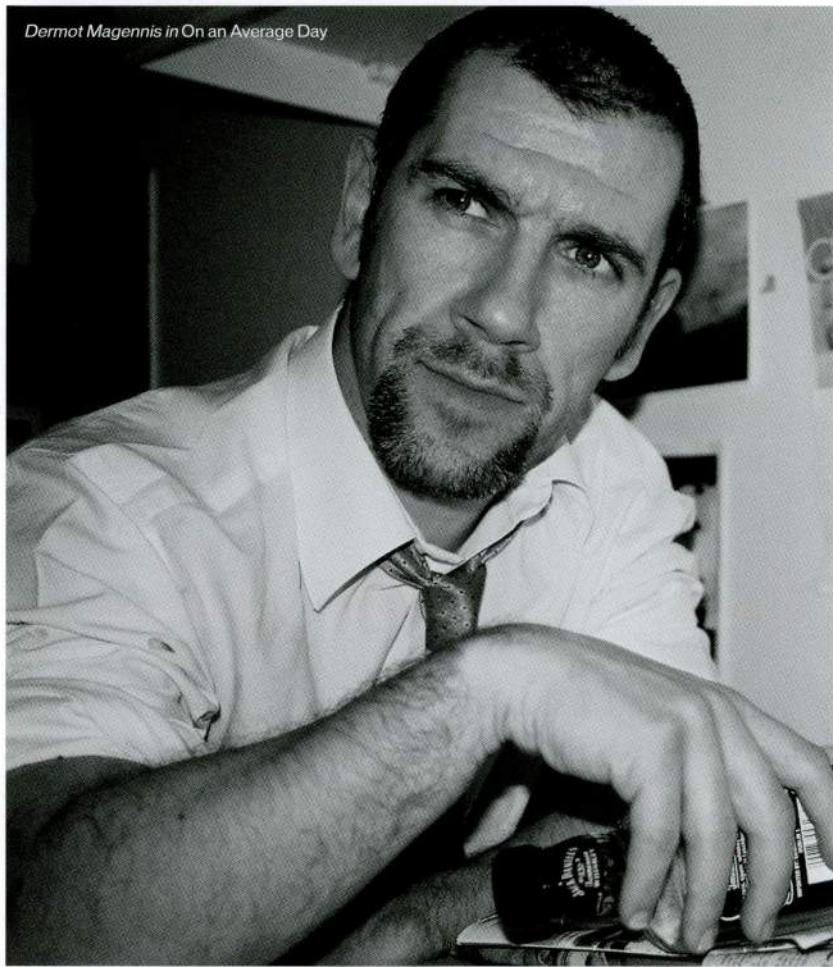
Kolenbach demands of the actors a sustained intensity. Up to the last fifteen minutes, Kolenbach is in control of a searing confrontation of siblings. The dialogue fizzles with the cracked syntax of paranoia and bitterness, echoing strengths to be found in

O'Neill or Albee. It allows a brilliant performance by Les Martin (as Bobby), a perfect foil to the more measured, controlled Dermot Magennis (Jack).

There are eruptions into violence: a stunning gunshot – the best I've heard on an Irish stage – and a spectacular fight (choreographed by Paul Burke). Martin Cahill's set is sparsely furnished with the grimmest of kitchen units - more like the home of a slovenly motor mechanic than that of an obsessive loner who hasn't done a day's work in his life - the effect slightly diminished by the obtrusive cyclorama, a blank space that contributes nothing to the atmosphere.

Structurally the play employs a drip-feed of revelations, as the past of each character, both shared and separate, unfolds. However, there is a structural weakness in the ending. In his own words, Kolenbach just tends "to draw the bastard out" to a conventional closure. The finale is ultimately sentimental: "Go home, go home to your wife and your son, go home," and off he limps into a metaphorical sunset. In the light of what's gone before, that's neither honest nor credible:

Dermot Magennis in *On an Average Day*



LESLIE CONROY

the degree of emotional damage – evident from the start in Bob and gradually revealed in Jack – is too deep-rooted for either of them to start talking rationally or caringly. It just doesn't fizz. If you unleash all this and then throw in a gun... it's hard to see it ending in anything other than blood and tears.

There's also a problem, too, about

the tone of the play. For the most part it is infused powerfully with the manic logic of the psychotic state, but then there are contrasting, inappropriate absurdities – a fridge that holds something awesomely fetid (never identified) is Monty Pythonesque. Each sortie for beer is played as the equivalent of "going over the top" at the Somme;

there's an off-stage shower full of damp newspapers, there's a gun disguised as a sandwich. It's as if Kolvenbach has enlisted appliances to serve as the symbols of dysfunction reflected in the lives of his protagonists. But they are not half as effective as the dialogue he gives, particularly, to Bob, who is gripped by a vision of his world that defies logic but which obsesses him to his roots. Jack can only stare and listen for much of the time.

The word-play becomes excitingly pedantic at times: "...which I didn't *exactly* do..." We are invited to ponder the implications of "*exactly*"; Kolvenbach makes much of "*Ooops*"; questions are parried with questions in an endless cross-interrogation (the repetitions running perilously close to tedium); fatal misunderstandings of the terminology: "Do you do *odd* jobs?" One of the strongest satirical notes comes from Bob's description of the vain lawyer, "that fat schmuck whose shirt is blushing with admiration to be so close to his skin" and the jury "putting words in my mind" in the case against him.

Alan King's direction is taut, revealed by the rapt hush of the audience that enable the magnification of every sound – was that a cicada or the stage manager filing her fingernails? – but, unfortunately, it seems to slip towards the end, in tandem with a falling-off in the writer's stamina. While the emotional force of this sec-

tion is handled very well by Magennis, in the incoherence of the grief, we essentially lose some of the plot. Tall order, maybe – to combine hysteria and clarity – but that's acting, not real life!

For having as its mission, a stated commitment to quality ("in particular, naturalistic drama") and for bringing Kolvenbach's play to Dublin, Purple Heart is to be commended. What a pity they didn't use the programme's six blank sides, to inform us more about that philosophy, the company and the playwright.

Derek West edits NAPD Le Chéile for the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals and has just completed, with Belinda Moller, an evaluation of Creative Engagement, the Association's arts scheme for post-primary schools.

THE SEAFARER

By Conor McPherson

Abbey Theatre

Directed by Jimmy Fay

Set design: Paul O'Mahony

Lighting: Sinéad Wallace

Costumes: Niamh Lunny

Sound Design: Denis Clohessy

With: Liam Carney, George Costigan, Phelim

Drew, Maeliosa Stafford, Don Wycherley

3 May - 7 June 2008. Reviewed 14 May

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

FOLLOWING ON FROM A HUGELY successful National Theatre London premiere production that recently

Don Wycherley and Maeliosa Stafford in The Seafarer



COLM HOGAN

garnered four Tony nominations for its Broadway transfer, the Abbey production had a serious benchmark to match. A last-minute cast change had forced the opening night to be postponed by a week further raising the bar of expectation. Having seen the London production, I was convinced that this was McPherson's best play to date but I always knew that its rightful home was in Dublin.

Jimmy Fay's production does not disappoint; he knows the material well and more importantly he understands fully the mechanics of how this play works on an audience. Set in a north Dublin living room of the blind Richard Sharkin on Christmas Eve, we see how men alone cope with their alcoholism, loneliness and failed marriages as they drink themselves into Christmas Day. Fay unlocks the key to this play right from the beginning directing a sequence of hilarious comic business based on some sharp observation from all his actors. As Christmas Eve dawns the house wakes up and one by one we discover the men coping with their hangovers from the night before. At the forefront of this business is neighbour Ivan Curry (played by Don Wycherley)

who stumbles around the room, half-blind having lost his glasses, and disoriented with drink and dehydration. Wycherley performs this masterfully, finding meaning in every incomplete sentence, making half-moves, half-gestures and triple-taking the situation constantly. But this is not just comedy for the gallery; this is the comedy of everyday reality based on pain and suffering, and of a life that has gone out of control.

As a wonderful counterpoint to this performance of haplessness, Liam Carney, as the returned prodigal brother Sharky, plays the 'straight' man of the double act. On the wagon for two days, Carney runs around the house coping with the mess left by the others in a sequence of the finest detail. And finally his blind brother appears (played by Maeliosa Stafford) totally dependent on the others for help. Stafford plays Richard at times as the loveable drunk, and at others as the violent alcoholic. His mood swings are the principle source of tension in the early part of the play and they destabilise much of the comedy. Later, another neighbour Nicky Giblin is added to the set; he is now living with Sharky's wife and children. Phelim Drew plays him as both

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pretentious and arrogant (with shades and a cocky walk), but clearly also as a man who cannot match the other men (drinks bottled beer instead of poitín and wears Versace).

The night in question - and indeed the play as a whole - hinges on the arrival of a Mr Lockhart (George Costigan) who belongs to another class (he lives in Howth, with a full wallet, and has an English accent). And this is where Fay's decision to push the comedy of the early part of the play pays off. Lockhart isolates Sharky and starts to mentally torture him with questions about the failures of his life. Clearly, Lockhart is the stuff of fable, a Mephistopheles who unleashes the demons lurking underneath the surface of the other men. And within seconds of isolating Sharky he has him writhing in pain on the floor, not through physical violence but through psychological torture. The play suddenly turns black and this sudden turn is such a turnaround from the first part that it is all the darker and more sinister. Thereafter the production swings between these moments of darkness and comic lightness until dawn arrives and an all-night game of poker comes to a rather surprising conclusion. Sharky is pitted against the devil-incarnate Lockhart and the battle is won on a sudden, but hilarious comic twist by McPherson in the form of Ivan Curry regaining total vision (he finally finds

his glasses) to win the game.

Paul O'Mahony's set mirrors the squalor of the single male alcoholic, and the main props are those necessary for the men's survival (battered sofa, fire, and empty beer cans) but there is a nod to normality in the form of a Christmas tree. Hilariously, however, the lights only reach halfway up the tree. A prominent picture of the Sacred Heart complete with votive candle sits like a guardian angel at the top of the stairs looking down on the men protectively. Sinéad Wallace's lighting design adds some grim and spooky touches to the proceedings with a flickering votive light and lightning to accompany Lockhart's devilish struggle at the end of the play.

McPherson brings his characters back from the brink of self-destruction exposing their human failings but allowing them to find solace in each other's company. And Jimmy Fay's impeccable cast play up the failings comically as a counterpoint to the demons that threaten to sink them completely. This production is proof that the play will remain in the Abbey repertoire for many generations to come; it has the comfortable accessibility and familiarity for a popular audience and more than a hint of the universally tragic to ensure its place in the canon of Irish theatre.

Brian Singleton is Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.



Genevieve O'Reilly and Sean McGinley in The Weir

THE WEIR

By Conor McPherson

Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Garry Hynes

Set Design: Francis O'Connor

Lighting: Davy Cunningham . Sound: John Leonard

With: Sean McGinley, David Ganly, Mark Lambert, Denis Conway, Genevieve O'Reilly.

10 June – 16 August 2008. Reviewed 10 June

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

DURING THE LAST DECADE, *THE WEIR* has been produced more often than any other play in this country: this Gate revival is its fourth Irish production since 1998. Yet despite its popularity, McPherson's play has also attracted criticism. Because it features five monologues, some reviewers see it as

undramatic. In the US, it was originally dismissed by some critics as 'too Irish': the telling of ghost stories in a rural pub was seen as stereotypical and inauthentic. And the characterisation of Valerie, the only female in the cast, has been criticised too, mostly by academics. Some dislike her apparent passivity as she listens to men spinning yarns; others claim she's a crudely-disguised plot device, whose only function is to force the play's male protagonist to acknowledge the truth about his life. This Garry Hynes production answers many of those criticisms, but remains faithful to the features of the play that have made it so popular.

There are two major challenges for any director of this play, and Hynes seems the obvious person to tackle

both of them. The first is the representation of the passing of time. Thematically and formally, *The Weir* owes much to Tom Murphy's *Conversations On A Homecoming*, another play set in a rural pub, which was also directed by Hynes, with Sean McGinley in the lead role. Each play is relatively short – McPherson's is only 100 minutes long – but the audiences for both need to feel as if time on stage is moving much more quickly than it is in the theatre: they must believe that they are witnessing the development of a set of relationships over several rounds of drinks, and many hours.

In the original production of *The Weir*, director Ian Rickson balanced the tension between real time and theatrical time very successfully: his characters sat in a small area of the stage, and their relative lack of movement, together with lighting, quickly established a sense of intimacy.

Hynes adopts a very different approach. When the men tell stories here, they stand apart from the other actors, each performing as if on a stage within the stage. Denis Conway, as smalltown businessman Finbar, asserts the strength of his personality through exaggerated gestures and expansive movement, so that it seems at times as if he could fill the entire pub by himself. As Jack and Jim, Sean McGinley and Mark Lambert work like a Beckettian double act, prompting each other and slowly

revealing their uncomfortable interdependence through gestures, pauses, and an unwillingness to look directly at each other. David Ganly as Brendan is the audience's representative on stage: his impatience, loneliness, and silent observation become the focal point for our attention.

So Hynes slows down our perception of the movement of time by filling each moment with multiple forms of communication: physical, visual, verbal, aural, and so on.

One particularly good example of that technique arises in an exchange between Genevieve O'Reilly as Valerie, and McGinley as Jack. O'Reilly is arched forward, listening to McGinley's ghostly story; he's moving closer to her, slowing down his delivery, staring directly into her eyes. But he goes too far, telling her about dead birds being found in bushes – an image that is much too close to reality for Valerie to stomach. O'Reilly sits back suddenly. McGinley stands up straight. Both retain eye contact with each other, and there is silence, before McGinley says simply "And that's the end of my story". This is a tiny moment, easy to overlook, but its expressiveness also shows how Hynes meets the second major challenge with this play: the characterisation of Valerie.

On first hearing, Valerie's story about the death of her daughter was genuinely shocking, but because she

has so few lines, her role seemed underwritten, and her revelation therefore seemed to come too cheaply. This production spends time exploring how the details from Valerie's story are anticipated in everyone else's. Jack's first tale is about fairies knocking on doors; Valerie's features ghosts knocking on walls. Finbar's is about a girl called Niamh, which is also the name of Valerie's daughter. Jim's features a paedophile who stalks children even after their death; Valerie's describes a man following her own daughter in a similar fashion.

The repetition of these details shows how the poetry of McPherson's writing arises from the accumulation of repeated phrases, words, and motifs. But those repetitions also place demands on O'Reilly, who must silently react – but not overreact – to all of those signals as they are revealed by the other actors. Her movement throughout the production is brilliantly eloquent, but gives nothing away: she thus becomes the person most responsible for the creation and release of energy and tension in the play. Hers is a superb performance, in a memorable production that is extraordinarily well acted – and well directed – throughout.

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

DOWN DANGEROUS PASSES ROAD

By Michel Marc Bouchard, translated by Linda Gaboreau

Crooked House Theatre Company, in association with the Associazione Culturale Tri-boo

Directed by Michele Panella and Peter Hussey

Lighting and Set design: Michele Panella

With: Keith Burke, Stephen Wilson

and Nick Devlin

Connolly Theatre in Liberty Hall, Dublin

12 – 17 May 2008. Reviewed 17 May

BY PETER CRAWLEY

"WHERE ARE WE? WHO ARE THEY?
What's happening? What's the significance?"

These questions, more worried than existential, are all mine, etched into my notebook from about halfway through the teasingly ambiguous *Down Dangerous Passes Road*. From where I sit now, I'm not sure that I can supply the answers without attempting dream analysis. But here goes. We are in a forest, so ravaged and felled that only a cluster of stumps remain, which, by some curious quirk of fate, is the *exact spot* where the characters' father died fifteen years earlier to the *very day*. They are two brothers, awaiting a third, who have not seen each other for years, but have been reunited for the wedding day of the youngest sibling. What is happening is a terse catching-up session, layered with revelations, reminiscences and recriminations and periodically inter-



Stephen Wilson, Keith Burke and Nick Devlin in Down Dangerous Passes Road

rupted by overlapping recitals of opaque poetic verses. The significance? Let me come back to that.

Both the play and the production in this staging by Crooked House and Florentine company the Associazione Culturale Tri-boo are curiously displaced. The setting of Michel Marc Bouchard's drama has the sinister otherworldliness of a fairytale or the post-apocalyptic blankness of a Beckettian dystopia. It is an isolated part of the woods from which the tetchy cynic Ambrose (Stephen Wilson) and the inexplicably phlegmatic Carl (Keith Burke) seem unable to escape. The "most beautiful bride in the

world" is waiting in some faraway place, jilted and angry, while the brothers grim seem to be stranded in a purgatory. It is not so much a drama as a psychological fable.

How much of this would have been better signalled by Peter Hussey and Michele Panella's co-directed production, had it been performed in the venue it was rehearsed for, is unclear. Following an abrupt relocation from Smock Alley to the much smaller Connolly Theatre, the company seem to have had to adapt to their new surrounds quickly. In a play dependent on mood and atmosphere, the suspicion grows that we are not seeing the

show in its full expanse, but instead getting the gist of it. Panella's disenchanted forest may be more cramped than intended, while Wilson's agitated pacing as Ambrose suggests the actors have had to confine their performances. A more obvious consequence is the lighting, also designed by Panella, which is constrained into rudiments by a stingy rig.

Then again, how much illumination Bouchard's play, translated by Linda Gaboreau, invites is debatable. We learn some concrete details about the brothers: that Ambrose is an art dealer from the city who has abandoned his terminally-ill boyfriend, an AIDS victim, at his homophobic brother's insistence, to be at the wedding. But before any theme can crystallize into something as recognisable as bigotry or parochialism, and before the dimly recalled truck accident that seems to have left them stranded is confirmed, all worldly elements dematerialise.

"Happiness, sadness," Ambrose contemplates blankly, "mere impressions." His comments on his stock in trade, the art market, are a little more revealing: "Conceptual art is going out of style and figurative is back in." When eldest sibling Victor (in a commendably understated, loose-limbed performance from Nick Devlin) lumbers onto the stage seemingly from out of nowhere, perhaps we should take these brothers as fashionably emblematic, each a model of human

disorder. With his failed marriage – his second – and his own collapsed family, Victor hauls the sins of the father into sharper focus, providing the catalyst for the men to revert to the humiliations of childhood, remembering their father as the town drunk and poet who funnelled their lives into his verses: "He thought he had the right to make sad poems out of everything."

The same might be said of Bouchard, whose forlorn text veers between the elliptical and over-elaborate. As the brothers' culpability in their father's demise grows mercilessly apparent, Panella and Hussey try to have it both ways: allowing their actors to spell out the play's portent at length, then ushering shards of poetry into a whispered, cyclical chorus. That might have worked given a more immersive sense of theatricality, but despite the undoubtedly commitment of the company we never get a stage picture of such encompassing strangeness that the family drama convincingly merges into a dreamscape. This production feels halfway there, evoking the personal wilderness of family and identity, but without the spectral grace to allow its ghostly figures and unanswered questions to haunt the woods of our subconscious.

Peter Crawley is News & Web Editor of this magazine.

Dirty Money

Three productions scrape away the sheen of wealth to find something festering beneath.

LAST BEAUTY SPOT

By Ger Bourke

Corcadorca

Directed by Pat Kiernan

Set design: Aedin Cosgrove.

Costumes: Joan Hickson

Sound design: Eoin Callery

With: Donagh Deeney, Joan Sheehy, Anthony

Morris, Jamie Beamish

Cork Arts Theatre

10–22 March 2008. Reviewed 18 March

BY RACHEL ANDREWS

THE UNDERBELLY OF IRELAND'S NEW wealth forms the subject matter of this low-key piece from writer Ger Bourke, as he explores the harsh consequences for individual lives of living within an economy, rather than in a society.

Bourke has always been interested in the situation of outcasts. In *Snap*, produced by Corcadorca in 2003, he examined the psychological damage that an isolated, unhappily married couple inflict upon one another. In this case, his misfits – a middle-aged, chip-van-owning couple, and a pair of driftnet fishermen – scramble to make a living on the margins of a

present-day, post Celtic Tiger society. No longer able to depend on raising money from a passing tourist trade to their once lovely but now soiled and faded rural surroundings, the quartet, in true capitalist fashion, desperately pursue any tricks they can think of to make a buck in a fast-contracting economic environment.

This is a darkly humorous piece of work imbued, not so much with tragedy, but with a sense of flat sadness. None of the characters – couple Dandy and Babe (Donagh Deeney and Joan Sheehy) and fishermen Davy and Willie O' (Jamie Beamish and Anthony Morris) – is particularly likeable, nor does Bourke try to redeem them, but the seedy nature of their lives, devoid of any reflection or hope, is nonetheless affecting – or at the very least, difficult to dismiss.

The writer has also been brave enough to face up to the imperfections behind the sheen of wealth; the play references an uneasy relationship between the new Eastern European immigrants and the native Irish. Most riskily, Bourke also deals with the issue of suicide, or at least, how

such a tragic event, if sufficiently high-profile, can attract both the swarming media pack, and a subsequent garish public interest. His characters know this, and greedily wait for the suicidal to make their way to a local bridge, a popular jumping-off point, in the hope that the publicity will help them sell more burgers and chips. It's not pleasant stuff, but the writing, deadpan and understated, as well as blackly witty, does not encourage a naturalistic interpretation of the narrative; this is a surrealistic,

allegorical fable, a treatise on the desolation of lost, scattered lives unable to find a place for themselves in a much changed society.

Bourke chooses for his locations the kind of small-town environment that finds itself at the mid-point between the urban and rural. Thus, while his characters know enough to know that coffee and designer labels might earn them more than chips and burgers – Dandy turns to this option at the end of the play – they incorrectly pronounce espresso (“expresso”)



Donagh Deeney in *Last Beauty Spot*

and flog cheap and nasty versions of Tommy Hilfiger rather than anything close to the real thing.

Director Pat Kiernan and his production team have largely captured the heart and spirit of this fantastical tale. Damien Murphy's animated backdrop, a blown-up John Hinde-style postcard in bright technicolour, encourages the instant referencing of tacky tourist spots anywhere, while Eoin Callery's sound design peppers the action with equally exaggerated, equally technicolour-like music. The pace of the play may flag from time to time, but Kiernan's decision to gradually fill the stage with dirt – potato peelings, burger wrappers, rubbish from bins – is an interesting one, perhaps an allusion to the sordidness of the lives – and life – behind the clean and shiny façade of First World materialism. The ensemble cast works well, if not superbly, together, while of all the individual performances Beamish comes across best, whining and wheedling admirably while on the phone to his ill and petulant grandmother.

The intimate, quiet nature of this work belies its strength; Bourke has created a drama, which, through its examination of small, almost incidental lives, has found something fundamental and significant to say.

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

SHOOT THE CROW

By Owen McCafferty

Livin' Dred Theatre Company in association with

The Ramor Theatre

Directed by Padraic McIntyre

Design: Maree Kearns.

Lighting: Barry McKinney

With: Ciaran Nolan, Charlie Bonner,

Noel O'Donovan and Barry Barnes

On tour, 11 April – 3 May 2008.

Reviewed 30 April

An Táin Theatre, Dundalk

BY PETER CRAWLEY

THE PLOT: A HEIST. THE JOINT: A BELFAST building site. The security situation: non-existent. The potential swag: an unaccounted-for, extra pallet of pure, uncut, white tiles. The team: divided in two; the first a disgruntled codger and his directionless young sidekick; the other, an irascible foreman and his unusually sensitive colleague. The motivations: various, among them to pay for a child's school trip, to buy a motorbike, and to muscle in on a window-cleaning round... If the stakes for the daylight robbery at the centre of Owen McCafferty's play were any lower, they could be placed underfoot, locked into place with adhesive and held together with grout.

That set-up, defiantly prosaic as it is, is crucial for the comedy and pathos of a group of Belfast tilers, whose mundane misadventures, like the extra tiles, would ordinarily go unnoticed. "If we worked down a di-

amond mine, now that would be a different matter," Noel O'Donovan's Ding Ding points out sagely, "but things bein' what they are we're stuck with the fuckin' tiles."

Stuck is right, for McCafferty's depiction of the working-man's lot might have also been called *Scenes From A Rut*. Ding Ding, in O'Donovan's unforced, naturalistic performance, is a man shorn of illusion and self-delusion. His retirement plan is to become a window cleaner (for which he needs to buy his way into a round), so even his fantasies offer little hope for an escape from drudgery. The longer you work in a dead end job, he tells Ciaran Nolan's Randolph, the tighter the noose becomes around your neck. "An' after a while it's you that tightens it 'cause you get used to the feel of the rope."

That reads like a despairing note from a working class agit prop drama, but McCafferty has positioned such sentiments within a near-farce of desperate machinations and crossed-intentions, and Padraic McIntyre's touring production for Livin' Dred struggles to find the right tone to accommodate the discrepancy. Ding Ding's counter-balance, for instance, is Ciaran Nolan, an actor familiar from Northern Irish comedy who uses his long, lean body for cartoon-like overplaying. If he is called to scheme, for instance, he will rub his hands together briskly as though

trying to start a fire in his palms. He does this a lot.

Charlie Bonner, as foreman Petesy, and Barry Barnes, as the thoughtful Socrates (getting the play's most interesting role, not to mention its most implausible nickname) are a more complementary pair, alighting on the exact same plan as the others with Bonner tersely overriding his colleague's ethical objections. "Is it morally right that we only get paid enough readies t'keep our heads a few inches above the shit heap?" Although each is given an implausibly sympathetic reason for fencing the tiles – in Petesy's case, his child's school trip; for Socrates, who, like his own father has walked out on his family, the chance to make amends – morality is less an issue here than responsibility. Engaged in a quadruple cross, the four men are pathetically revealed as bunglers and fidgeters, bumbling through a Mametian set-up which steadily, inevitably unravels. Played between two adjoining rooms – neither of them clearly distinguished by Maree Kearns's economical set – there is something cruel about the farce of their undoing. It's hard to extract pleasure from seeing four no-hoppers so mercilessly exposed.

McCafferty is more revealing breaking through the defensive patter of daily conversation, when an impromptu group therapy session,



instigated by Socrates, abruptly clears the air: "I hate bein' in here day in and day out with you fuckers... yous are ruin' my life an' I fuckin' hate yous for it." Those shades of Yasmina Reza, together with Socrates's self-analytical, emotionally indulgent bent, are quickly shaken off, as though emotion – and not work – was the real inconvenience.

With the mutual deception prolonged past breaking point, accentuated by McIntyre's ill-advised decision to insert an interval into what ought to be a brisk 90 minutes, the heist is always going to be a bit of a red herring. We never learn what the tiles are worth, for example, on Belfast's presumably booming DIY black market. When the plot is not only undone by a twist as humdrum

as the entire scheme, the play's true nature seems to lie not in its philosophical discussions, its nods towards fatherhood, or the sudden, time-passing dissertations on modern art or Thunderbirds, but in their instinctive adherence to duty.

Forced to work through the night, while Socrates chooses family over professional duty, the others reassert a moral code. "We're covering for him because the man's right," says Petesy. "He's doing the right thing." There's a quiet tragedy in the death of modest dreams, but that solidarity becomes the play's most striking note. This production may be more serviceable than remarkable, but its an ethos that stems straight from its characters. Sometimes there is a virtue in being workmanlike.

BOSS**By Thomas Hall**

Meridian Theatre Company

Directed by Johnny Hanrahan

With: Michael Loughnan

Granary Theatre, Cork

15 – 26 April 2008. Reviewed 24 April

BY RACHEL ANDREWS

WRITER THOMAS HALL'S SECOND collaboration with Meridian Theatre Company is a 'sign of the times' drama that seeks to explore the public and social responsibility underpinning the private culpability of those involved in planning corruption in this country. Jim Kielty (Michael Loughnan), former builder and property developer, is "not interested in answering questions" to either Tribunals or persistent news reporters, but neither can he live with the ghosts of his past, and this one-man show is an exercise in defensiveness and self-flagellation in equal measure.

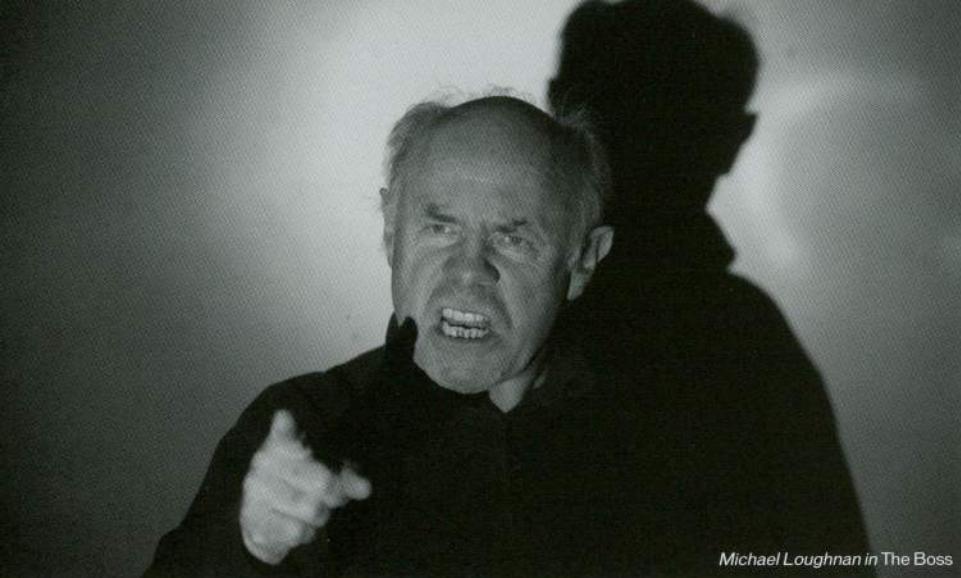
No longer able to reside in Ireland, Kielty is adrift in Spain, a place where "they bury their secrets", so "they don't need yours". His secrets have hijacked him, nonetheless, and, in a production that interweaves dramatic narrative with a backdrop of sound and projected image, Kielty finds himself compelled to confront the circumstances of his life, and to grasp at reasons that may justify his actions.

In many ways, Kielty is an easy target. Uncouth and aggressive, with a

background in cronyism, he makes a convenient pariah. And this, it appears, is the playwright's wider message. As Kielty accuses his audience of condemning the alleged planning corruption surrounding the Liffey Valley Shopping Centre while simultaneously rooting for bargains in its stores, the contention is clear: if this is an Ireland Kielty - and his ilk - has created, then it is one that we blithely, and perhaps blindly, have chosen to live in. "You like it well enough, corruption," the developer charges at the end of the play, as he endeavours to force us to face up to our own complicity in the type of country and society we see about us.

In choice of theme, *Boss* is reminiscent of the theatre of playwright Paul Mercier - whose last work, *Homeland*, also centred around an unrepentant property developer - and although different in tone and style, it feels - as do Mercier's plays - vigorously contemporary, with something immediate and relevant to say. In fact, so present is it - it makes pointed reference to people such as Tony O'Reilly, Michael Smurfit, and Charles Haughey - that one senses, at times, that the work could be transposed to the back pages of a newspaper, where Hall (or indeed Kielty) could take his place as an enraged columnist.

If, in some respects, this appears unfair - after all, Hall is a lyrical writer, and there is much more substance to this work than exists in many newspaper columns - it is the tone of the



Michael Loughnan in *The Boss*

monologue that forces the comparison. Kielty is angry and hectoring, and his accusations confrontational; the more he hectors and accuses, the more we, as an audience, reach for our defences. There is a difference between being encouraged to consider a particular point of view and being beaten over the head to do so. The biggest difficulty with Hall's narrative is that, clever and illusory though it is, it lacks a fundamental subtlety, necessary for theatre to impose itself upon the mind.

Much of this particular absence is apparent in the character of Kielty, a man so inherently unsympathetic – he married his wife, herself involved in the running of the planning Tribunal, to prove that “anyone can be earned”; he may or may not have committed incest with his daughter – that, like a character thundering opinion from a soapbox, he becomes easy to dismiss, diminishing and undercutting any truths he might have

to tell us. Kielty, as he is both written and acted – Michael Loughnan is suitably powerful and ferocious, but there is a danger of this becoming a one-note performance – needs to be imbued with greater nuances in order for us to begin to understand where he is coming from.

Hall has set out to challenge, but of all aspects of this production, it is the sound and video that prove the most theatrically arresting. Under Johnny Hanrahan's direction, the animated images, particularly, play an active role in driving forward the narrative: here are Kielty's ghosts, looming huge and imposing, infiltrating all our consciousness. There are times when this backdrop – primarily looped images of the faces that haunt Kielty's life - becomes too much, threatening to overpower the performance, but there are other occasions when it is more well-adjudged, such as when the screen flashes up the video of the inside of a generic shop-

ping mall. This, after all, is what the whole thing has all been about.

In a sense, too, the backdrop does what the play itself cannot: it trusts its audience to draw its own responses to the sounds and pictures. The

narrative offers no such leeway. Thomas Hall knows what he wants to say, but he also knows how he wants us to feel. Here, unlike the Ireland he writes about, too much is discussed, and too little left unsaid.

Through the Looking Glass

The interior lives of women were reflected in a number of – very different – productions. Our critics peer into the shadows.

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

By Henry James, adapted by Liam Halligan

Storytellers Theatre Company

Directed by Liam Halligan

Set and Lighting Design: Marcus Costello

Costume Design: Sinéad Cuthbert. Composer:

Rory Pierce

With: Helen Delaney, Ruth McGill, Deirdre Monaghan and Chris Patrick Simpson

On tour, 01 April – 10 May 2008.

Reviewed 10 May

Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray

BY EMILIE PINE

"I HAVE A DEEP TRUST IN YOU." These words, spoken by a cloaked narrator, open *The Turn of the Screw*, adapted by Liam Halligan and Storytellers Theatre Company from Henry James's ghostly novella. The issue of trust reverberates through the production: who can the young and naive narrator trust when she takes up the posi-

tion of governess to two small children, Flora and Miles, in a lonely and remote Essex mansion? And, indeed, can she herself be trusted when she begins to see – or is it she begins to imagine – ghostly presences that threaten the moral safety of her charges?

James's ghost story has long provoked debate as to whether the governess is a haunted or a deranged woman, whether she is a protector or a predator. Though the governess early on makes joking references to the *Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre*, both Gothic fantasies of the kind that Jane Austen made fun of in *Northanger Abbey*, in which her heroine is lured to think extra-ordinary thoughts about perfectly ordinary situations, here the joke is a hollow one. The implication that runs through the story is that just these kinds of influences are indeed working upon the imagination of the

Chris Patrick Simpson and Ruth McGill in The Turn of the Screw



governess, leading her to believe her charges to be in communion with, even possessed by, the ghosts of their former governess, a fallen woman, and the valet Peter Quint, the reason for her fall.

Storytellers Theatre Company have taken the story and tried to recreate this central ambivalence. However, in the flesh it is near impossible to generate - within a predominantly realist style - a sense of the supernatural. The production tries to create the impression of ghostly presences through a combination of altered lighting and the ghostly musical refrains of church bells and a high-pitched cello, played on stage by Flora (Helen Delaney). Yet for all this, and the transfixed facial expression of the governess, played by Ruth McGill, it doesn't manage to create the kind of spooky atmosphere necessary for the audience to really ever believe in the malevolent presence of the ghosts. The ambivalence is thus less whether or not the governess is truly haunted, but rather speculation as to what her agenda might be.

The set also works to build ambiguity, this time of space, with a curved wooden platform that functions as both outdoor and indoor space, with a slight change of props and shifts in the tone of lighting to indicate the inner sanctum of the drawing room or the brightness of a summer's day by the lake. Upon the platform, designer Marcus Costello has planted skeletal trees, and towards the end of the play,

the silent children bear more of these trees on stage, as if to hem in the governess, and cause the threatening external world to engulf the entire space. Yet it is unclear really why this happens and whether or not the children are acting under demonic influence or simply as prop carriers. While the performance space is thus fluid and shifting, much like the mood, in being so indeterminate, it doesn't quite manage to create any definite sense of place at all, threatening or otherwise. Nevertheless this is an imaginative engagement, and the pool across the front of the set is effectively used to vary the levels and to introduce the new, slippery element of water.

The major issue with the production is, however, the casting. The ages of the children in the story are eight and ten, with these raised in this adaptation so that the girl is ten and the boy twelve. Yet the actors are much older - in particular it is hard to believe that the boy Miles, played by Chris Patrick Simpson, is anywhere near the age of twelve, and this changes the dynamic between his character and the governess. There is a sexual frisson between them that creates an odd dynamic between Miles, who longs to be bad, and his governess who longs to discover badness. His seeming maturity thus allows her to easily identify him with the sexually threatening presence/memory of Peter Quint and hence to justify her abrupt killing of Miles himself in a final struggle.

gle between the living and the dead.

The acting, particularly of Ruth McGill as the governess and Deirdre Monaghan as the housekeeper Mrs Grose was strong, though from the beginning McGill's high-pitched tone serves as a warning that she is neither a reliable narrator nor a stable character. While the production successfully suggests the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, it ultimately disappoints in its quest to summon up a haunted world.

Emilie Pine lectures in Drama at University College, Dublin.

THE DEEP BLUE SEA

By Terence Rattigan

The Gate Theatre

Directed by Alan Stanford

Set Design: Eileen Diss.

Costumes: Leonore McDonagh

Lighting Design: Paul Keogan

With: Barbara Brennan, Risteárd Cooper, Ingrid Cragie, Michael James Ford, John Kavanagh, Bryan Murray, Marion O'Dwyer, Stephen Swift

15 April - 31 May 2008. Reviewed 15 April

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

FROM ABOUT 1970, THE SUICIDE RATE in Ireland began a steady climb, climaxing around the year 2000 with some 500 per year. We have a particularly high rate of youth suicide, and with figures not taking into account suicidal behaviour in drug and alcohol related deaths, the issue is a live

one. In such an environment, Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*, must, of necessity, take on a different complexion than merely being a twee middle-class entertainment.

Inspired by the suicide of his own real-life recently ex-lover Kenneth Morgan, Rattigan's play opens with the huddled body of a woman, Hester, lying by a gas fire. Her suicide attempt has failed, perhaps intentionally, but the result is that she is able to speak with her lover, Freddie, and her abandoned husband, Sir William Collyer, and several others, in the course of the play. No one can quite understand why she tried to kill herself or what she is feeling, except possibly the German ex-doctor Mr. Miller.

It is a strong play: classically 'well-made' and carefully worked through to arrive at an unlikely but absolutely necessary 'happy' ending entirely understandable in the context of its creation. The self-conscious appeal to seeing light in the darkness and finding escape through artistic self-expression upon which the final scene turns is almost unbearably poignant knowing both Rattigan's personal story and, again, considering the reality of suicide. It is shameful, in a sense, that the dramaturg in us wants Hester to die, or at least leave us uncertain. But Rattigan does not, in fact, let his heroine leap into the deep blue sea, but leaves her finding a place be-



Ingrid Craigie in *The Deep Blue Sea*

tween the proverbial devil and this other.

There was, perhaps, an opportunity here for The Gate Theatre to 'reinvigorate' Rattigan in the way the Druid found unexpected power in John B. Keane. Keane's work was also mired in cliché and the expectations of audiences of a rollicking laugh at the foibles of familiar character types, but through Garry Hynes' rigour, the playwright's core dramatic and rhetorical power was unleashed in startling ways.

Rattigan's post-war work was once considered significant in helping Britain to find its moral compass as the last trappings of the Empire faded. The playwright's milieu being primarily that of a by now clichéd stiff-upper-lip post-aristocracy, there is a tendency to dismiss his relevance, or downgrade his work to the

status of quaint museum pieces.

The Gate's production of *The Deep Blue Sea* is the case in point. Alan Stanford concentrates on carefully rendering Rattigan without tittering irony, and though that is good and it allows the play to stand on its own merits as a work of writing for theatre, it will not actually allow the play to reach beyond the cultural framework that continues to confine it. Young Irish teenagers will not come to see this play, nor anyone else in need of a powerful message of hope. It remains altogether too 'respectable' for that.

To some extent, this is inevitable with Rattigan's "oh Dahling" type dialogue, but the fact is that that dialogue is all about the barriers that people erect between themselves with language. Behind the stiffness is intense human pain - intense enough for

Hester to try to kill herself. This production allows that to come through, but, unlike Druid's Keane, does not find ways to push it forward and make it heard by a wider audience.

None of this takes away from the skill with which the production has been mounted. It is very well rendered, and draws an excellent performance from Ingrid Craigie as Hester. She conveys Hester's both passion and hesitancy equally well, giving us a sense of the delicacy of the psychological and emotional balancing act she has been carrying out in this attempt to find her own space in a world that seems unable to accommodate her. Her movements are near-perfect, conveying a physical being on the verge of either collapse or flight - capable of bursts of energy, but desperate to conceal them or contain them. The rest of the cast are also perfectly good, and work their characters within the boundaries of the overall ethos very well. Bryan Murray does a variant on his turn in the Gate's *Anna Karenina*: all stiffness and pomposity, but touched with a genuine concern for his estranged wife that actually works.

John Kavanagh is also characteristically superb in his usual low-key fashion as Dr. Miller. He moves with careful deliberation around the stage, conveying the mind of a man who understands the subtext of everything and is capable of making an intervention. This capacity does not ex-

tend to the production overall, which merely understands – and that may not be good enough.

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

ARIADNE AUF NAXOS

By Richard Strauss,

libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Opera Ireland

Conducted by Walter Kobéra.

Directed by Dieter Kaegi

Design: Stefanie Pasterkamp.

Lighting: Thomas Maerker

With: Alwyn Mellor, Kinga Dobay, Mari Moriya,

Alan Woodrow

Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

30 March, 1 and 4 April 2008.

Reviewed 30 March

BY ÁINE SHEIL

ARIADNE AUF NAXOS ORIGINALLY consisted of a play (a version of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, performed at the 1912 premiere by Max Reinhardt's company) followed by an opera. The total evening was Wagnerian in length and destined to fall between two stools, trying the patience of both theatre- and opera-goers. Not surprisingly, Opera Ireland presented the more manageable revised version from 1916, which is almost wholly operatic. One spoken role, the Major Domo, remains. This was performed by Alfred Werner

(Antonio in Opera Ireland's other production of the season, *The Marriage of Figaro*), whose clarity, severity and Austrian rolled r's were as striking as any of the singing. Werner took particular pleasure in announcing the central twist of the plot: that in order to save time, his philistine master had decided to have the two chosen entertainments for the evening, a Commedia dell'Arte routine and a weighty opera commission, played simultaneously.

This promising clash of the sublime and the ridiculous yielded some

genuinely funny moments, for example when the abandoned and grief-stricken Ariadne was interrupted mid-lament by the comment "The lady is rather fond of giving in to misery". Here, the lush orchestration suddenly gave way to an incongruous barber-shop sound. The clash of high and low art also provided grounds for a variety of vocal displays, several of which were suitably impressive. Kinga Dobay was a particularly fine Composer, conveying the fretful and ardent qualities of the part with warm-toned agility. Nor-

Mari Moriya (centre) in *Ariadne auf Naxos*





mally a 'breeches role', the Composer in this production was female; certain moments of illogic arose (for instance when the Music Master sang 'a young man like you'), but the innovation brought several interesting developments. Zerbinetta, the leader of the Commedia troupe, flirted happily with the Composer as well as with all the men on stage, thus underlining her unrestrained nature and adaptability.

This part was performed by Mari Moriya, who appeared last year with Opera Ireland as Liù in *Turandot*. Demure and modest in the earlier role, here she shone convincingly as a party-girl and scene-stealer. Dressed eye-catching in flared and feathered turquoise, her bravura coloratura aria upstaged the Prima Donna as intended, despite some weakness in the middle register of her voice. Alwyn Mellor played the Prima Donna/Ariadne with knowing satire, making much of the foibles of leading opera singers and pointing up her character's inability to accept the Commedia players. She sang in strong, sustained tones that only showed some strain at the upper reaches of her register. Her partner, Tenor/Bacchus (Alan Woodrow), sounded strained throughout, and certainly not in a position to produce the Wagnerian intensity and rapture needed to carry the non-ironic ending to the work. And despite some attrac-

trative playing during the evening, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra under Walter Kobéra never built to a sense of abandonment at the close, thus contributing to an unexpectedly muted denouement.

Perhaps it was difficult to inject the requisite fire into the performance, because the production itself had something of a distancing effect. Director Dieter Kaegi and designer Stefanie Pasterkamp updated the action to the 1980's, apparently inspired by the idea of Andy Warhol's renowned house parties. The black set had a faded Bohemian grandeur, and the modernist furniture did not appear to belong in the home of a philistine. The motley collection of Commedia players and household figures became vacuous party guests: the wig-maker snorted cocaine and an officer fell into a drunken stupor from which he never recovered. His unconscious body later served as a framing device for the opera within an opera, reminding the audience of the party setting even when the other guests had disappeared behind a screen.

This drunkard also highlighted a weakness in the production: a tendency to allow the characters and plot to become obscure. Initially the officer was needlessly and confusingly associated with the character of Bacchus. And when Woodrow emerged as the real Bacchus, this in turn was something of a surprise: in

the Prologue he had more the air of a bored rich host about him than a tenor waiting for his cue. The updated setting blurred boundaries, in other words, with characters such as the wig-maker and the dancing master becoming party guests rather than employees. Hierarchies thus dis-

peared and the clash of low and high became a matter of style rather than substance.

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

Playing for Laughs

New writing with a light touch appealed to our critics' sense of humour.

RUBY TUESDAY

By Rose Henderson

Bewleys Café Theatre

Directed by Deirdre Molloy

Set design: Yvonne Smith.

Costume design: Rae McAllister

Lighting design: Mayra Darcy

With: Rose Henderson, Helen Norton

31 March – 26 April 2008. Reviewed 22 April

BY TANYA DEAN

MRS. T, ONE OF THE HEROINES OF *Ruby Tuesday*, is proud of her chosen career as a stay-at-home mother: "I work in the home. I never stop working... I am CEO of my own home." *Ruby Tuesday* is a lively collection of comic sketches and female banter, but it is also a rare platform for a middle-aged female character, who is also a dedicated housewife: voices rarely given prominence onstage.

We are first introduced to Mrs. T

(played by Henderson herself) as she stands folding y-fronts, aiding her cleaning woman – the irrepressible Ruby (Helen Norton) – in the weekly houseclean. Despite the differences between the irrevocably bourgeois Mrs. T and the more practical working-class Ruby, the two actresses have good chemistry as they enjoy an easy banter alongside their battle with dust and cobwebs. Norton is well cast as the pragmatic foil to Mrs. T's self-indulgence. Ruby is the more practical of the two, tolerating no nonsense in her attitudes towards everything from men to Jif ("Never called it 'Cif'. Never have, never will.") Ruby lightheartedly accuses Mrs. T of being "maudlin" over her upcoming birthday, which has prompted her employer to reflect on the state of her life, her children and her marriage.



All this is exposed through a mixture of monologues, female heart-to-hearts and short sketches.

Some of the sketches are 'filler', such the flashback casting the two actresses as cute kids enraptured with the joys of biscuits and caravan holidays: sweetly amusing, but ultimately superfluous to plot and character. However, many of the vignettes are engagingly written and Deirdre Molloy's direction makes strong use of the female double-act. A good example is the scene when Mrs. T recollects a so-called friend calling around to 'check up on her' following her "little breakdown". Henderson as Mrs. T Public bites out her responses to the fake sympathy through a clenched smile ("Yes, I've had a lovely 'rest'") whilst Norton as Mrs. T Private quietly mutters her true thoughts ("Cow").

Many of Mrs. T's snobberies and

vanities – her self-important Novel, *Objective Perspectivity*; her comedic yoga twisting; her fad diets – are predictably clichéd, but her desperate cheeriness comes across as very human and affecting. Her birthday has brought up memories of her two miscarriages, tragedies that have shadowed most of her life. However, possibly too much time is given to her self-pity. Issues like her bitterness to-

wards her eldest daughter Ethel (for "making me feel like a failure") rest uncomfortably in the short play, and this theme is never adequately explored. Her casual contempt for her daughter is disturbing, such as when she self-importantly talks about "quietly removing the biscuit tin" from Ethel.

The short running time and light-hearted nature means that sometimes the heavier issues lie awkwardly. Although Ruby's simple understated monologue revealing the tragic death of her only son ("A 15-year-old dying. It's not right.") is moving for its simplicity, it is tacked on a little late in the production. Yet, though the format could use a little polishing, overall *Ruby Tuesday* is a gently amusing production with its heart in the right place.

Tanya Dean is the outgoing General Manager of this magazine and writes about theatre for the Irish Daily Mail.

SHORT SHORTS AND VERY SHORTS
International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival

Cobalt Café, Dublin

12 – 17 May 2008. Reviewed 15 May

BY IAN R. WALSH

BLIND MATING

By Vickey Curtis

With: Vickey Curtis and Rose E Markowitz

EMILY BREATHES

By Matt Casarino

Directed by Ryan Hilliard

Sound design: Kristy R. Smith

With: Hunter Gilmore

and Greg Homison

TUMBLING DOWN

By Brian Merriman

Directed by Brian Merriman

Sound: Vickey Curtis

With: James Barry, Mark Yeates,

Rian Corrigan

MAMMY'S BOY

Bang Out of Order Theatre Company

By Suzanne Lakes

Directed by Patricia McMenamin

With: Elijah Egan, Suzanne Lakes, Ciara

McGuinness

TOM CRUISE GET OFF THE COUCH

EAT

By Kevin Brofsky

Directed by Aimee Howard

Costumes by Amy Elisabeth Bravo

With: Joe McDougall, Kaolin Bass,

Jason Connell

CONNUBIAL CELTS

By Shawn Sturnick

SHORT SHORTS AND VERY SHORTS, an innovation by The International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival of short pieces from Ireland and abroad, proved that the 'short' form can accommodate big ideas and bigger laughs.

The programme opened with *Blind Mating*, written by Vickey Curtis, a light tale of a disastrous lesbian blind date. The two actors playing the dating women (Rose E Markowitz and Vickey Curtis) addressed the audience directly through verse, telling their uninteresting story (they meet, they don't like each other, they leave) in rushed, irritating rhyming couplets.

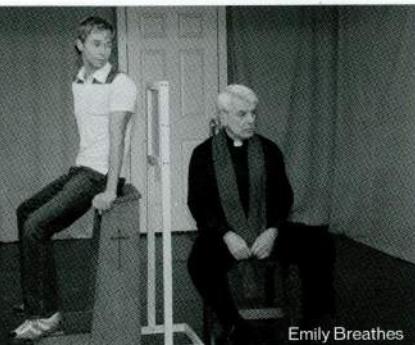
The engaging Pinteresque *Emily Breathes* followed in which a young gay man (Hunter Gilmore) confronts a priest (Greg Homison) in a confessional. All is not as it first seems in this cleverly written piece by Matt Casarino that generated uncertainty through oblique dialogue and shifting power relations. The audience's expectations were played with: what at first seemed like a confrontation between lovers was revealed to be a conflict between a father (in a double sense) and son. Under Ryan Hilliard's intelligent direction, Gilmore and Homison's powerful yet sensitive performances convincingly portrayed

the repression, regret and ultimate redemption of their characters.

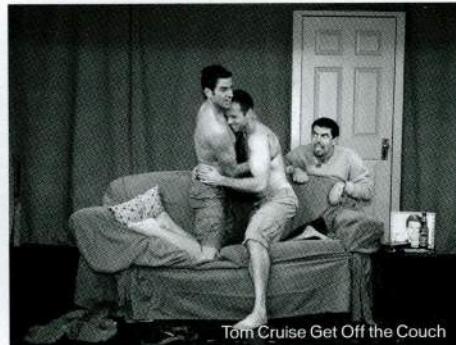
Tumbling Down by Brian Merriman made love its subject. Set in 1989, Tom (James Barry) a Linda Martin obsessive, and his partner Ian (Mark Yeates) a fastidious queen, are visited by their young friend David (Rian Corrigan). He tells them a story of how he loved and lost an East German named Ste-

waiter in a 'fancy' restaurant. This sketch, written by Suzanne Lakes, relied on the rather unsavoury ridiculing of stereotypical Dublin characters and their ignorance of fine dining for its comedy. The actors played their roles with relish and Patricia McMenamin as director made good use of the Cobalt Café space.

Tom Cruise Get Off The Couch, was a



Emily Breathes



Tom Cruise Get Off the Couch

fan. After he finishes his tale, the news of the fall of the Berlin Wall is heard and the play ends with David leaving to seek his German love. Barry and Yeates were delightful as the camp 'odd couple' and were given deliciously vituperative lines. However, Corrigan's character, David, was so nauseatingly sincere and sentimental that his romantic story was more exhausting than uplifting.

Next up was *Mammy's Boy*, a simple sketch of a working class mother (Suzanne Lakes) and her sister (Ciara McGuinness) embarrassing her son (Elijah Egan) on his first day as a

short comedy featuring an actor playing a dog named Tom Cruise (convincingly done by Jason O'Connell) who insists on interfering in the f(risky) business of his master, Charlie (Joe McDougall) a Tom Cruise fanatic and his date, Tim (Kaolin Bass). This piece tickled the belly as more and more Cruise trivia and paraphernalia was revealed by the barking mad Charlie.

The final short, *Connubial Celts* written by Shawn Sturnick, was a light hearted but very silly satire of the Irish Celts featuring Brian Boru quarrelling with his gay son, his lesbian wife and

a tree-hugging hippy chick. This was a poor end to a good night.

Ian R. Walsh is the new General Manager

er of this magazine. He is a PhD candidate in the School of English and Drama, University College Dublin, where he also teaches.

Biographical Notes

Personal testimonies and true stories were the inspiration for new plays this season. Our critics sort the facts from the truth.

WALKING AWAY

Written and Directed by Helena Enright

Amalgamotion Theatre Company

Lighting: Tom O'Donnell.

Costumes: Ciarda Tobin and Ella Daly

With: Laura Jane Allis, Eleanor Bennett, Niamh Coghlan, Helena Enright, Karen Fitzgibbon, Liam O'Brien, Aideen Wylde, Sinead Vaughan
On tour, 5 – 28 June 2008. Reviewed 5 June

Granary Theatre, Cork

BY RACHEL ANDREWS

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS OF productions such as the Tricycle Theatre's *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (which Irish audiences had a chance to see in the Abbey Theatre during the 2005 Dublin Theatre Festival), documentary theatre has been flooding the theatrical market, particularly in Britain.

Inevitably, this has also given rise to less well-thought out work, with no clear rationale for being. The question has to be asked: what is the function of

a theatrical production if it, effectively, mimics the work of journalists or of television documentaries? Nicholas Kent, of the Tricycle, has made his own case for "100 per cent verbatim" theatre with an illustration from Guantanamo, another Tribunal play drawn from letters and interviews with the Guantanamo prisoners, as well as politicians including Jack Straw and Donald Rumsfeld. In the play, when Rumsfeld is asked about conditions in Guantanamo, he replies as though describing a holiday camp: "To be in an 8ft by 8ft cell in beautiful, sunny Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is not an inhumane treatment." As Kent said, "You couldn't make it up."

In the case of Amalgamotion's *Walking Away*, a theatrical testimonial from survivors of domestic abuse written and directed by Helena Enright, you could make it up. Or at least, you could anticipate it. Sad and difficult though the women's stories

may be - and there is no getting away from the troubles of their lives - their words are not unexpected: for the most part, we have heard them before. Of the six women who tell their tales, sitting with us in structured intimacy around separate rounded tables, there are only two who occasionally offer surprises: one when she states, after the first blow, that she wasn't going to become one of 'those women' - although, of course, she does - and the second, an older woman, who describes the mental and emotional, rather than physical, abuse she suffered. Aside from this, the tales are predictable. Working class women, most of them married young, some for love, some not. The violence starts. They don't know how to leave.

This, of course, comes across as journalistic cynicism, but that is not how it is meant. The truth is, these stories have already been told, in similar manner, in the pages of newspapers or on television. The problem of domestic abuse is not solved and continues still, but for theatre to operate as theatre, it has to make emotional, intellectual connections with its audience, or that same audience will itself become cynical. Meantime, the problem is compounded by the play's overt agenda - an overlaid voice intermittently calls out statistics relating to the amount of domestic abuse in Ireland, the injuries received, and so on.

The Bloody Sunday Tribunal play worked because it trusted that the words spoken by witnesses to the Saville Inquiry would be enough to engender real debate; in this case the play is edited and channelled through a specific point of view, meaning it comes precariously close to polemic. In fact, had more been made of the actual theatrical elements in the production - a bride and groom on their wedding day circle around the action - it may have given the play freedom to make its points in a more subtle, thoughtful manner. There is room for verbatim theatre in the contemporary theatrical landscape, but let us not forget that fiction and the imagination still have their place too.

SILVER STARS

Sean Millar & Brokentalkers

Design: Lian Bell. Composer: Sean Millar

Project Arts Centre

15 – 18 May 2008. Reviewed 15 May

BY SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN

THERE WAS A WONDERFUL MOMENT in this piece of storytellers theatre where each of the performers reached into a pocket and presented us with a photograph, a visual memory of a person, a moment, harboured in their past lives. These were lives sometimes lived or even half lived in fear, in loneliness, or shame. *Silver Stars* told and sang stories of older Irish gay men that were poignant, joyful and universal.



The cast of *Silver Stars*

This was a small, simply crafted event which spoke volumes. With the adroit hands of Brokentalkers and Lian Bell who were responsible for the staging and visual presentation, a work was created that was both private and public, domestic and social. The flowery carpeted stage, the line of washing, contrasted with the use of projected video image to create a world that was at once old fashioned and contemporary. The cast of eleven (one woman) assembled by turns as a presentational Greek chorus or dispersed into solo roles. As each actor /narrator stepped forward from this community to start his story, we became aware that we were listening to and watching fragments of social history, personal experiences placed in a wider context of straitened times.

One sensed these confidences and memories were partial and not definitive, a deep ore of other experiences remains to be mined. Mothers, fa-

thers, families, all were central to the recollections evoked by this talking, singing, dancing ensemble. Sometimes the stories were individual hidden angles on a documented event, as for instance the account of the St. Patrick's Day parade in the US when the Irish Gay and Lesbian contingent were marginalised and vilified by their fellow Irishmen and Americans.

The ensuing confusion for an Irish American family where their strong cultural (and religious) identity and heritage was rattled, unfolded in the videotaped interviews that were spliced with the narrative and song. Or poignantly, in the song and story 'You Were Life', the telling in voice and image of the life and death of designer Richard Lewis's life partner, where participation in social and spiritual rituals of heterosexual society are sealed off. "No walking down the aisle in dresses", the actor/narrator humorously recalled but by contrast there was the

anxiety about the final funeral arrangements: what part for invisible men?

Musical director Sean Millar conceived of the idea which became a collaboration with Bealtaine, the festival celebrating creativity in older people, then with timely luck coincided with the Gay Theatre Festival. The strength of the production lay not so much in the score of songs and choral singing, which provided a perfect complementary 'musical show' format: the impact lay more firmly in the stories and their theatrical and engaging ensemble telling.

Seona MacRéamoinn is a journalist and critic.

SUBMARINE MAN:

The Little Known Life of John P. Holland

By Aidan Harney

Upstate Theatre Company

Directed by David Horan.

Design: Marcus Costello

With: Janet McCabe, Miche Doherty and

Karl Quinn

On tour, 30 April – 9 May 2008. Reviewed 9 May

Axis, Ballymun

BY FINTAN WALSH

AIDAN HARNEY'S *SUBMARINE MAN* is the first new play produced by Upstate under its renewed commissioning programme. Its subject is Clare-born John Phillip Holland (1841-1914), an inventor who made pioneering contributions to the development of

the submarine. A figure largely written out of history, Harney's play is foremost an exercise in retrieval and the two-hour production documents much of the man's life and work. If we know little to begin with, we know much in the end - perhaps too much.

More so than with other genres, the staging of history and biography makes demands on both the writer and director to take a particular position on fact and form that does not involve the chronological reproduction of a life story when Wikipedia might do the job as well. Even the Ancient Greeks understood from less mediatised times that the staging of history and biography needs a well-developed psychological, theatrical or epic hitch to give it life in the present. All good theatre, after all, allows us to think *through* it, rather than just *about* it. One of the problems with *Submarine Man* is that it does little more than impart information.

The most interesting aspect of the play is reserved for the last ten minutes when Holland worries about the implications of his invention. He cannot reconcile his pacifism with the knowledge that his submarine will be a military machine under US control. In this instance, the play touches upon a genuinely gripping dramatic tension where the impetus to create is challenged by questioning the utility of the creation. This ethical quandary matters outside of the play world, and would have been a fascinating

entry point for Harney's study, rather than being tacked on at the end, as it is. But the writer's fidelity to life stories (his other plays are about a monk, a suicidal housewife and Diana Ross) forfeits this richer trajectory. Instead, Harney loosely situates the play within the context of 'The Irish Question' (The Fenian Brotherhood sponsored Holland's early endeavours) without convincing us of the significance of his revision of dominant national narratives.

In addition to the lacklustre framing, the language sometimes jars. Synesian rhapsodies strain next to Shakespearean slurs - cur, gannet and cuckold - pointing to yet another difficulty in staging a period piece of this kind. And then there is the peculiar ebb and flow of comedy and tragedy, with neither emotion given full realisation. Harney's last play, *Titus*, also suffered from being over-written, and while this piece is neither as dense nor as rhetorical, it would certainly benefit from the work of a good dramaturg. There is no doubting that Harney is a real talent, but his academic relationship to subject matter tends to get in the way of the actual theatre.

Director David Horan tries to animate the material with moments of choreography - a funny walk here, a swinging of the bath there - but it all comes off feeling rather flat, as the stylizations are not developed languages within the production but per-

functory gestures to break-up the dialogue. The narration and role-playing conventions that recur are useful in telling a sizable story by a small number of actors, but these devices are poorly paced and pitched, and fail to ignite the action. And the stage design, almost exclusively comprised of an oval floor plan, presumably gesturing at some kind of a submarine draft, does little to keep the action afloat.

Janet Moran plays Holland's wife Maggie B. Foley with high energy and sparkly physicality, while Karl Quinn pulls off multiple persona with aplomb. Miche Doherty does well as Holland, although there is a stern, pinched quality to his rendition that does not readily draw us closer. But words ultimately weigh the actors down, and direction does not relieve them of the burden.

More generally, the production raises an issue of relevance to theatre-makers everywhere: in the interest of pulling people away from the internet, cinema, television set or even history books, theatre is under increasing pressure to justify its own form - the value of the liveness, intimacy and sociality it typically claims as unrivalled. While the writing in *Submarine Man* shows potential, and individual performances are strong, Upstate's new production does little to sell the art form.

Fintan Walsh teaches and writes about theatre.

The Body Politic

The personal and political were fatefully entwined in four recent productions.
Our critics engage with the big ideas.

THE BURIAL AT THEBES

A version of Sophocles' *Antigone*

by Seamus Heaney

The Peacock Theatre

Directed by Patrick Mason

Set & costume design: Ferdia Murphy

Lighting: Sinéad McKenna

Music & sound design: Denis Clohessy

With: Gemma Reeves, Kathy Rose O'Brien, Barry Cassin, Des Cave, Kevin Flood, Eamonn Hunt, Declan Conlon, Chris McHale, Aonghus Óg McAnalley, Des Nealon, Peter Hanly, Jane Brennan, Eric Higgins, Oscar Hernandez

Rodriguez

4 April – 3 May 2008. Reviewed 12 April

BY KAREN FRICKER

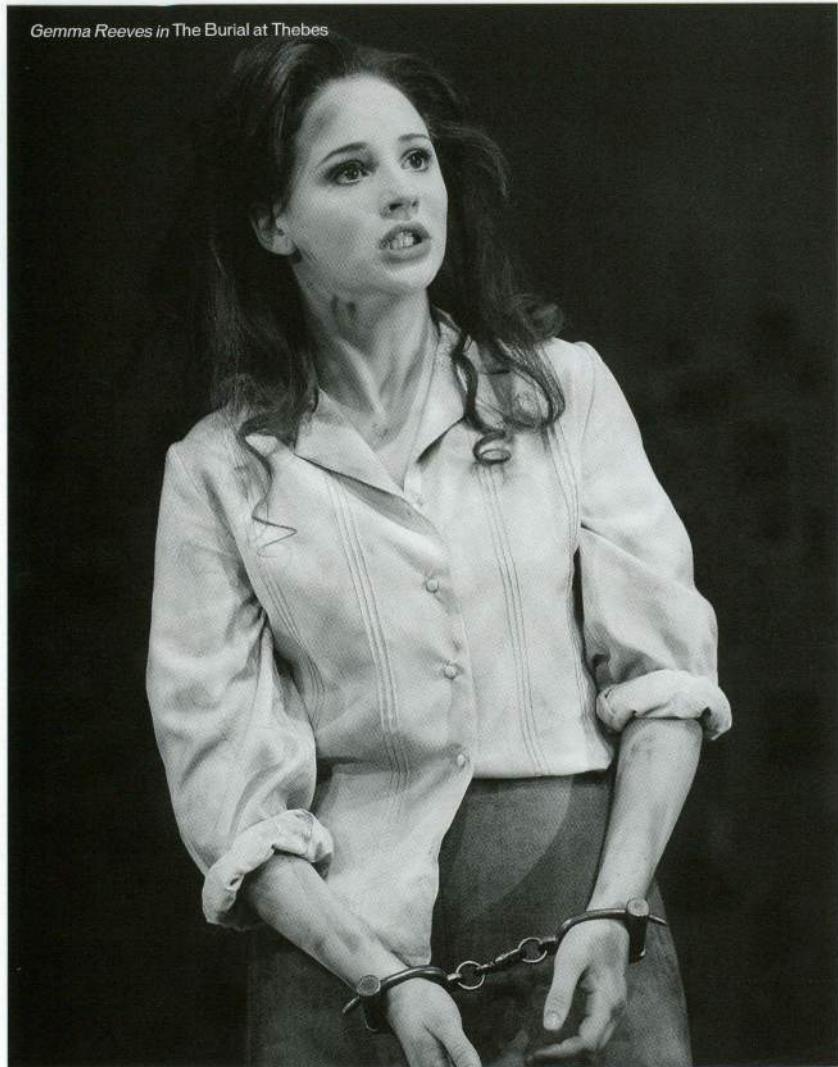
COMMISSIONED BY THE ABBEY and first staged during its centenary celebrations only four years ago, Seamus Heaney's new version of *Antigone*, however excellent, was not necessarily overdue for revival on Ireland's national stage. Nor has Heaney's text been gathering dust in the meantime: professional and student productions of *The Burial at Thebes* in the UK, US, and beyond have proliferated since its Abbey premiere, most notably Lucy Pitman-

Wallace's 2005 Nottingham Playhouse production, which is still touring internationally.

It was the rapturous initial reception of Pitman-Wallace's production that prompted *Irish Times* Arts Editor Deirdre Falvey to wonder in print if "the definitive production of Heaney's version is to be seen in Nottingham, not our own national theatre", and the current staging may be a response to this siren call of cultural nationalism. The current production is also in keeping with Abbey director Fiach MacConghail's ongoing efforts to cultivate relationships with great living Irish writers, a drive that also led to the first-ever Abbey staging of a play by Conor McPherson (*The Seafarer*, also reviewed in this issue) this year.

It is also clear that the current production is being offered as a corrective to Lorraine Pintal's premiere Abbey staging; while marketing materials, and Heaney himself, steer away from this angle, the new production's director Patrick Mason critiqued Pintal sharply in an interview in *The Irish Times* for being "simply... not interested in doing the lan-

Gemma Reeves in *The Burial at Thebes*



guage." Pintal's production was not as aesthetically unsuccessful as the consolidation of opinion now seems to indicate – reviews at the time were mixed but not wholly damning – but the production was doubtless an em-

barrassing underperformer at the box office, playing to only thirty-six per cent of capacity in a period of increasing turmoil for the theatre under Ben Barnes' leadership.

As Mason's comments indicate,

many of the central decisions around this production were made to keep the focus squarely on Heaney's beautiful, spare text – the most important being to play it on the intimate Peacock stage. Indeed the production is impeccably spoken across the board, and the differentiation between the various characters' rhythmic registers is clear and effective. At times, however, the emphasis on clarity of delivery seems to stultify the action, with too many actors made to plant themselves in one place (frequently, the same spot downstage right) and orate.

Unlike Pintal's much-criticised choice to set her production in an un-specific time and place, the setting here (designed by Ferdia Murphy) is very clearly post-World War II in a Western country – a pile of rubble, bullet holes in a back wall, and a shrine of photographs are physical signs of a conflict just ended and not yet recovered from. Heaney had the current Iraq war in mind while writing his version, but Mason's interpretation directs us away from making contemporary connections, as if this might disrupt the stability of the enterprise.

The production's focus is definitively on Creon and his ability to keep his community and its values stable after a period of turmoil. This is cued from the first moments, as the royal family appears in solemn procession. The atmosphere is tense and martial, and all characters, from fam-

ily members to attendants, are attentive to Creon's mood and movements. It is Creon's personal journey – from certainty in the rule of law, to the creeping realisation that his absolutism has backfired and destroyed the lives of everyone around him – that provides the production's backbone and a strong tragic arc.

The production's focus on the values and sanctity of the *polis* is most brilliantly illustrated in the conception of the chorus, here presented as a group of elderly, besuited men (Barry Cassin, Des Cave, Kevin Flood, and Eamonn Hunt) who sit around a centrally placed table for nearly all of the action. They create a physical manifestation of the positive values of the society that Creon is putatively trying to protect; their dignity, stillness, and growing unease at his behaviour create an enormous impact.

Declan Conlon was in excellent voice as Creon, but the unforgivingly small space revealed his inner movement from rage to self-doubt to be too much on the surface – he was performing profound feeling, but did not convince that these feelings went deep enough. Gemma Reeves started out strong as Antigone in defiant mode, but her performance edged too close to hysteria as her lot becomes clear. The most interesting performances came in the smaller roles: Chris McHallum's quirky, even humorous depiction of the Guard,

and Peter Hanly's rapier-sharp delivery of the Messenger's speech.

The production was clear, direct, and precise, and represented some of Mason's most impressive work for the Abbey in many years. More might have been risked and gained by opening up the possibility of contemporary interpretation, but as it was the production certainly provided the corrective focus on Heaney's writing that had been aimed for.

Karen Fricker is a theatre critic and lecturer in drama at Royal Holloway, University of London.

LIFE IS A DREAM

By Pedro Calderón de la Barca,

in a translation by Jo Clifford

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Directed by Tom Creed

Set & Costumes: Conor Murphy.

Lighting: Sinéad McKenna

With: Peter Daly, Andrea Irvine, Mark Lambert, Ronan Leahy, Daragh MacMathúna, Barry McGovern, Siobhán McSweeney, Will O'Connell, Shane O'Reilly, Hilary O'Shaughnessy, Paul Reid, Mark Rogers and Raymond Scannell

Project Arts Centre

27th March – 19th April 2008. Reviewed 1 April

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

ROUGH MAGIC CONTINUES ITS PROJECT of tackling the cornerstones of the theatrical canon with this celebrated 1635 play of the Spanish Golden Age that asks huge philosophical ques-

tions of free-will and predestination, as well as the very contemporary concern of reality versus simulation.

Set in a traverse formation, the stage is empty save for two metal climbing frames at either end, one of which holds musician Raymond Scannell who provides live and continuous accompaniment throughout the play. In one of the most bizarre and arresting opening sequences of a production I have seen, the cross-dressed Rosaura (Hilary O'Shaughnessy) with her clownish sidekick Clarin (Peter Daly) in contemporary climbing gear, descend from the top of the climbing frame and discover the tower in which Segismundo is imprisoned. The discovery is ours, too, as they paint a verbal picture for us in this totally empty space, aided by Sinéad McKenna's haunting lights which, with a similar poetic beauty, mark out and conjure up space, distance and territory that work with the textual imagery rather than against it.

The production rollicks along at a cracking pace. Basilio, the King, announces to the world (and into a TV camera in this production) his secret son whom he has imprisoned from birth and his project of releasing him into the world in the hope that, untainted by the world, he might not fulfil the prophecy of usurping his father. The project is an instant failure. Segismundo, who has been treated



Daragh McMathuna, Ronan Leahy, Barry McGovern and Andrea Irvine in *Life Is a Dream*

like an animal, behaves like one upon his release, committing murder and attempting rape within a few stage minutes.

He is returned to the tower but ultimately released by a revolutionary guard and wages war against his father. This is action drama at its best and Creed directs with confidence and flair, sweeping the action through the cavernous empty space with a panoply of contemporary visual references to our own mediated perception of cataclysmic world events.

The 'action', however, is paralleled by a series of long and multiple discourses by each of the main protagonists. These discourses are very self-consciously constructed as virtuosic

showcases for highly skilled performers. Each one demands the highest level of oratorical skill, emotional engagement and rhetorical dexterity from the actor. Paul Reid as Segismundo begins the battle of the virtuoso performers with a haunting rendition of both his anger and despair at the injustice of his condition. Further, after he commits his first murder, Reid self-confidently holds the emotional moment, aware of the destructive force of his power. Similarly Mark Lambert, as Basilio, gives a magisterial rendition of his own existential crisis. But as the production proceeds, these solo performances seem to be sacrificed to a very general presentation of rage and revenge.

In the seventeenth century, audi-

ences would probably have called 'encore' as for an opera diva or solo musician. The multiple asides in the text are testimony to how the play interacts with an audience. Creed, though, appears to focus much more on a filmic imagery of storytelling rather than on these moments when characters turn into counsels for their own defence, addressing us directly as members of some existential jury.

The visual storytelling of the production along with a hugely sensitive score by Denis Clohesy conjures up an image-conscious world of great suffering and a catastrophic fear of reality. Literal disguise is used throughout as a metaphor for the disjunction of appearance and reality, life and dream. The wronged lover Rosaura is on a revenge mission dressed as a man, of course, and the greatest dissembler of them all, the jester Clarin, with his comic Cork-accented 'everyman' asides to the audience, is astonished to learn that he might even be taken for a Prince such is the illusory nature of the world in which he lives.

The oratory, though, seemed so caught up in the rage against simulation that the transparency of the actors' craft was submerged in a heightened realism that has an aversion to long speeches. It was in these moments when I wanted the actors to really show how talented they actually are.

THE PARKER PROJECT:

SPOKESONG and PENTECOST

By Stewart Parker

Lyric Theatre/Rough Magic

Directed by Lynne Parker

Set and costumes: Monica Frawley.

Lighting: Sinead Mckenna

Sound Design: Ivan Birthistle & Vincent Doherty

Musical Director: Hélène Montague

With: Kathy Kiera Clarke, Richard Clements, Dan Gordon, Gemma Mae Halligan, Will Irvine, Eleanor Methven, Marty Rea, Ali White and musicians Hélène Montague and Shane McVicker

Old Northern Bank, Belfast,

26 April - 17 May 2008

Empty Space, Smock Alley, Dublin,

24 May – 15 June

Reviewed 12 May (Spokesong) and

15 May (Pentecost)

BY TOM MAGUIRE

IN MARKING THE TWENTIETH anniversary of the untimely death of Stewart Parker, this Lyric/Rough Magic co-production in repertoire of two of his most important works honours the memory of one of Ireland's most important writers. Using the former Northern Bank building in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter as a venue was particularly apt. In both these plays, Parker engaged with place as a means to explore the relationship between the legacies of the past and the need to find a viable way of living in the present, something vital in the life of his home town, Belfast, but resonant across wider post-industrial

Eleanor Methven in Pentecost

contexts. So, turning a bank into a theatre while the streets outside echoed with the transformation behind Belfast's Victorian façades was an obvious sign of renewal; and, of course, the Lyric company's own home on Ridgeway Street is undergoing a major transformation.

Given the importance of place for these productions, Monica Frawley's design had particular importance. Washed in shades of tired grey, the set was placed in transverse on a raised platform stage. For *Spokesong*, an array of bikes was hung from a rack over the stage, with the space below adaptably fitted to create a variety of internal and external locations with minimal effort. Through ramps on either side of the stage, access was provided for the actors on bicycle. For a play that engages with cycling as both a viable alternative of mass transport for the city

dweller and as a metaphor for politics, this was crucial. Colour was added to the set with red drapes over one end wall and a large mirror framed by light bulbs directly opposite.

For *Pentecost*, the stage became the sitting room of Lily Matthews' house in East Belfast, the most domestic and intimate setting of all of Parker's plays. Access to the rest of the house and the world outside was provided for by two doors against the back wall, stage right and stage left. Between them at double height hung a tattered union flag, above a cabinet in which were displayed Lily's domestic memorabilia. Opposite, the fireplace was indicated, with the rest of the space occupied by various items of furniture. The sense here, however, was of spaciousness rather than confinement and the furnishings seemed at times to be at odds with references

in the dialogue, the requirements of the plot and the historical setting. This was unfortunate as Parker's writing calls the characters to complete a process of transformation by the end of which they are enabled to play out forms of behaviour that disrupt the confines of a highly authentic and recognisable setting.

Both plays are set in Belfast in the 1970's. Written in 1975, *Spokesong* was Parker's first play for the stage and demonstrates his exuberant embrace of the theatrical. The play is a discussion about the future of Belfast, not just as a city of the Troubles, but as a city in which the motor car is set to wreak a similar amount of damage on the capacity of its citizens to relate to each other. Frank Stock (Dan Gordon) is a bicycle shop owner whose livelihood is under threat from developers and local paramilitaries. While the play intercuts scenes from Frank's contemporary world with scenes from his grandparents' life, in it dreams are as important as memories. Marty Rea's Trick Cyclist acts as Stock's imaginative alter ego, providing a series of musical turns and producing multiple minor authority characters who try to thwart the spirit which has long animated the Stock family. This high energy and virtuoso performance was juxtaposed with Dan Gordon's subdued playing of Stock as a naïve dreamer, creating one dynamic. Another was between

Stock and Kathy Kiera Clarke's sparky primary school teacher, Daisy, providing the romantic interest for Frank and his brother, Julian (Richard Clements), just returned from England to claim his inheritance. This was slightly problematic as it was never clear what Daisy would see in Gordon's middle-aged and overweight Frank.

By contrast Ali White's playing of the imperious grandmother, Kitty, daughter of a serving British officer but committed proto-feminist, Irish-republican and cyclist, demonstrated that her commitment to Frank's grandfather, the conservative and unionist Francis (Will Irvine), was a product of a genuine meeting of spirits, despite the differences in their social standing, personalities and politics.

By the time he had come to write *Pentecost*, Parker had already completed an impressive body of drama for stage, radio and television. This, his last play, is less obviously theatrical than *Spokesong*. Premiered in 1987, it is set within the narrow confines of a Belfast parlour house during the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike. Parker introduces to the house four refugees from the violence outside: Lenny (Richard Clements) to whom it has been left following his aunt's funeral; Marion (Kathy Kiera Clarke) his estranged wife; his friend Peter (Marty Rea) who has returned from England; and Marion's friend Ruth (Gemma



Marty Rea in Spokesong

Mae Halligan), escaping from a violent husband who has been traumatised by his experiences as a policeman. A fifth presence is that of the ghost of Lily Matthews (Eleanor Methven) who had lived all of her married life in the house, carefully preserving it as the outward sign of her staunch fidelity to her Protestant identity and husband. The decision to have a ghost onstage using a form of magical realism allows Parker to interrogate the relationship between the story Lily presented to the world about her marriage, the private memory she has concealed within her diary, and the ways in which the living too have to undertake a form of exorcism to free them from the burdens of their own pasts.

Eleanor Methven's playing of Lily was superlative as she tried to conceal her past but was forced by Marion to face the truth, demonstrating

dignity and a long-suppressed grief.

Where *Spokesong* is performed as a series of turns, *Pentecost* is Yeatsian in the ways in which live music and action are intended to combine to turn the realistic into the poetic. This is hardly surprising since Parker's Masters dissertation had been on non-realist poetic drama. Neither the actors nor the direction seemed secure in managing this transformation, however, particularly in the last scene. This is where the characters are overtaken by a spirit of renewal and transcend their previous differences through the recitation of the biblical passage on the Pentecost as a kind of 'talking blues'. Sonic harmony is supposed to replace the verbal sparring of the previous scenes. That both Clements as trombone-playing Lenny and Marty Rea as Peter on banjo, were evidently unable to play

their designated instruments, rather robbed the scene of its impact.

Staging these two plays in repertoire outside of a theatre placed particular demands on the creative team and the actors. It was never particularly clear what motivated or was added by the transverse staging, for example. In *Pentecost*, the actors did not appear to be consistently at ease in negotiating the space provided for them. However, the standard of performances was maintained across both pieces, with particular credit to the actors' double cast. Kathy Kiera Clarke played both Daisy and Mari-

on with sophistication. Marty Rea demonstrated both admirable range as the Trick Cyclist and emotional depth as Peter. Richard Clement's Julian was engagingly roguish, even if he didn't quite capture Lenny's charm. Most importantly, this production demonstrated Parker's capacity to handle theatrical form and his grasp of the power of performance in all its modes as a way of engaging with and exciting an audience about ideas.

Tom Maguire lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.

Only Connect

Experiments with form were a means of examining personal crisis in three recent productions. Our critics became armchair psychologists.

FIRST LOVE

By **Samuel Beckett**

Gare St. Lazare Players

Directed by Judy Hegarty Lovett

Performed by Conor Lovett

On tour, 8 March – 3 May 2008

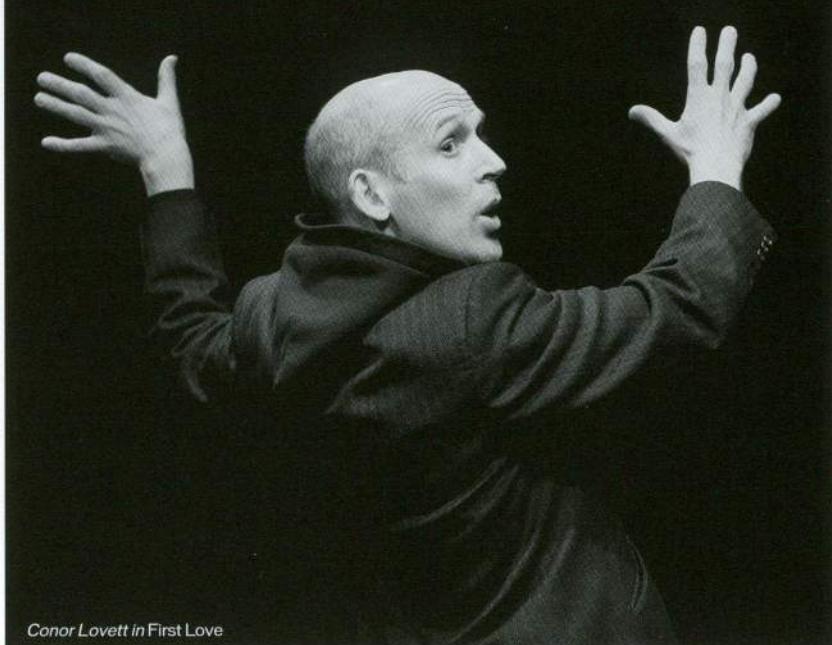
Reviewed 1 May at the Helix, Dublin

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

POSSIBLY THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE facing any interpreter of Beckett is that of self-effacement: the necessity to hold back the impulse to rise to the

prose with undue hauteur, and instead slip into a pair of ragged shoes and shuffle on without ego, if not without self-awareness. It is therefore fitting that Conor Lovett has chosen to present himself in *First Love* as he has.

The actor enters with the audience, unnoticed by most, not least of all because of their expectations. The stage has been dimly lit, but though seating in The Helix is on three sides and without assignment, the performative and observational spaces are



Conor Lovett in First Love

clearly demarcated. Not so the actor and the audience, at first. Lovett slopes in wearing a slightly too large light pinstripe suit jacket covering a purple hoodie. The pants match the suit, more or less, but sit atop a pair of sneakers. As it happened on the night, Lovett was able to choose the seating area to the right of the entrance, where no one else had chosen to sit. He therefore sat alone, isolated, unassuming: waiting, like the rest of us, for something to begin.

He was not passive during the wait. He looked up. He looked down. He picked his nails. He patted his pockets. Small gestures: ordinary, but specific. The buzz of conversation continued as the actor went unobserved. A group behind me were talking about the quality of Italian meals in Dublin. Finally, the lighting signals

it's time for something to happen. The stage area becomes brighter, the audience area darker. But nothing happens. Lovett sits and stares at the stage like everyone else for a long pause. Then, hesitantly, almost shuffling, the actor rises to his feet and seems to wander into the spotlight and begins to speak in a confessional, conversational tone. This is not quite metatheatrical: there is a sense of integration in the self-conscious positioning of the narrator as Everyman.

Beckett's quasi-autobiographical short story details how a man finds himself forcibly born into the wider world after ejection from his father's house. He sleeps on a canal bench, where he meets his first love, a prostitute named 'Lulu' (intertextual with Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*, no doubt) whom he renames 'Anna'. He shares

a decrepit house with her for a while, rearranges her furniture while she caters to him after a fashion, then walks out on her while she is giving birth, possibly to his child.

"Either you love, or you don't" is the final line, but the description of a life lived more inside the narrator's head than in a recognisable reality is considerably more ambiguous. The narrator speaks of marriage, birth, and death ("It's all a muddle in my head: graves and nuptials and the various motions") - seeming absolutes of lived experience, and yet he deliberately equivocates over the nature of love itself except as a collection of literary moments described as if viewed from fifty feet away. Beckett's usual mixture of profound and absurd peppers the stream of consciousness, and the character veers from a kind of sociopathic alienation to one sudden burst of rage that has the effect of making him ordinary in a characteristically Beckettian way ('Everyman' as a vessel for intellect channeled through observation of small details).

Lovett interprets all of this in his usual manner. His delivery is not poetic or even especially inflected. He speaks in a soft, droning cadence and frequently hesitates as if actually reflecting on what he is about to observe. His stance is fairly stationary, his feet in a v-shape or t-stance and one hand resting on his chest while the other punctuates his delivery in a precise, controlled manner,

not the wild gesticulation of an improvisator. When he moves, there is usually a reason, and it is not so one side of the house can see him better. Two benches are the only significant set decoration, and one of these is moved around at one point by the actor himself, again as if a random action while the character thinks, but it comes after his one moment of anger as he shouts "one feels nothing". The movement is a calm after a storm, a moment of physical action breaking the tension of psychological and emotional action that has reached a climax of sorts. And the performance ends as it began, quietly, unassumingly, Lovett taking bows with no significant change of demeanor, then disappearing into anonymity as the audience leaves. No autographs, please. Beckett would approve.

JET LAG WALTZ

By John Grogan

Ready Fire Aim

Directed by Sophie Motley

Set & Lighting: Stephen Dodd.

Costumes: Liv Monaghan

Music and Sound: Sean Lennon

With: Aoife Courtney, Therese Mullan,

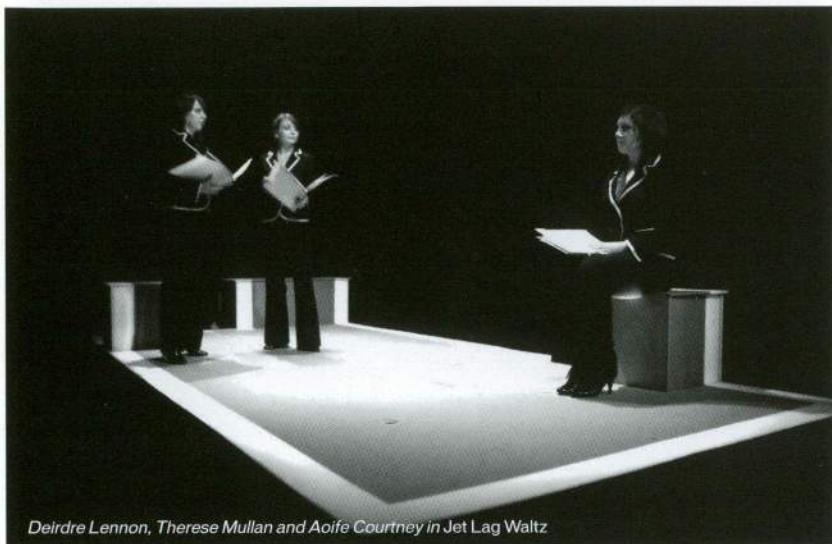
Deirdre Lennon

Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin

1 - 5 April 2008. Reviewed 2 April

BY IAN R. WALSH

JET LAG WALTZ IS A CLEVER NEW PLAY by John Grogan written for the promising new acting ensemble Ready



Deirdre Lennon, Therese Mullan and Aoife Courtney in *Jet Lag Waltz*

Fire Aim and directed by Sophie Motley of the Rough Magic SEEDS Initiative. More an enjoyable dance around handbags of middle-class *ennui* than an existential waltz of despair, this play makes some refreshingly droll observations and is appealing in its experimentation with theatrical form.

Inspired by observing the all-female company in workshops and a newspaper story of a beautiful woman who stepped off a plane from New York to Dublin Airport not knowing who she was, Grogan constructs a tale of a woman's breakdown as she searches for emotional stability in a soulless, consumer-driven contemporary Ireland.

The character whose journey we follow in *Jet Lag Waltz* is not present-

ed to us as a unified self but instead is fragmented and elusive. This was shrewdly conveyed through the style of presentation. The opening scene sees the three actresses that make up the ensemble (Aoife Courtney, Therese Mullan, Deirdre Lennon) dressed in uniform trouser suits, bringing to mind HR executives, discussing the file of a woman who they variously name Kat/Katie/Kate. The three actresses then go on to illustrate episodes and people in this woman's life (looking for a partner, winning a new job, buying a new house, Machiavellian careerism, drifting from her friends, etc) leading to the eventual crisis of no longer recognizing who she is. She realises that she is what she buys – her identity is based on the products she consumes. A deli-

ciously comic example of this occurs when Kat/Katie/Kate's mother and friend come to visit her new home and communicate to her exclusively through pithy advertising summations of interior decoration. They ooze over colours of paint, varieties of wallpaper, lampshades, etc. constantly defining her through the objects she uses to adorn her house.

However, what could have been an interrogation into a crisis of identity in the age of late capitalism comes across more as a polemic on the simple truism that 'money won't make you happy'. The reason for this is that despite the engaging episodic structure and deconstruction of character through role-play, *Jet Lag Waltz* is disappointingly a predictable story of a girl who chooses to screw over her friends and colleagues to secure a great job and glamorous lifestyle only to find she is lonely and unhappy in her success.

The young actresses all gave earnest and eager performances but their inexperience showed with poor projection making some of the dialogue inaudible. They were not helped by sound designer Sean Lennon's irritating feedback noise that played throughout various scenes, or the clacking of their high heels on Stephen Dodd's raised wooden platform stage. Sophie Motley directed assuredly with tightly choreographed transitions from one

rapid scene to the next. This production by Ready Fire Aim and John Grogan did not quite hit the target for this reviewer but I look forward to when they take their next shot.

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF DISSOCIA

By Anthony Neilson

Calypso Productions

Directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh

Design: Diego Pitarch. Movement Director:

Cindy Cummings

With: Judith Roddy, Peter Daly, Jasmine Russell, Gerry McCann, Damien Devaney, Malcolm Adams, Sorcha Fox, Ronan Phelan

On tour, 21 May - 21 June

Reviewed 7 June, Project Arts Centre

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

HAVE YOU EVER REALLY THOUGHT about the ending of the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*? Dorothy's return to the colourless world of rural Kansas is a stern lesson in 1930's realism, essentially consigning her to a good and proper future of deprivation, isolation, possibly a loveless marriage to an older man (there's no one else around) and a life of toil (not to mention tornadoes). Not good. Likewise, do we really want to know what happened to Alice between her return from Wonderland and her trip through the Looking Glass?

Anthony Neilson's acclaimed comic drama *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* self-consciously engages with

the problem of escapist fantasy and its social and psychological contexts. Like the best dream-world fictions, it is entertaining when at its most absurd, as one Lisa Jones (Judith Roddy) finds herself descending to a

turns puritan moralist and Brechtian realist in the final act, where, as expected, we finally see Lisa's real world - confinement and treatment in a psychiatric institution: cold, colourless, and desperately literal.



Judith Roddy (centre) and cast in *The Wonderful World of Dissociation*

magical, surreal world populated with literary conceits and word games rendered as characters, all of whom clearly stand in for aspects of her real-world personal dysfunctions. But, darn it, they're fun to watch and to listen to. Neilson then

A serious-minded, socially self-conscious patron or critic is going to lionise the second section of the play, noting how the hard-hitting reality of psychological distress is beautifully encapsulated by the minimalism and clinicism, the sparse dialogue, and

the all too human connection with our real lived experiences. They wouldn't be wrong in this, but, to my mind, the play is really at its most interesting when it is energetic, because a little minimalism goes a long way, and the play's resolutely humourless polemic (in the second half) is a point quickly made that overstays its welcome by being made over an ungodly amount of time even at thirty minutes.

The first half, which runs around an hour, is full of movement and colour, which can be enjoyed as spectacle, appreciated as craft, and read in terms of the psychological and social issues clearly embedded within it. It is also simply more fun. Realising Lisa is suffering from a psychiatric disorder is neither shocking nor all that interesting, really. It is actually an obvious move presented in an obvious way, and though this means the play gets to make its point like a sullen, sunken-faced preacher, this does not necessarily mean it achieves profundity in its punitive lack of jouissance.

Calypso Productions present the play with both the necessary jouissance in part one and the required sévérité in part two. Diego Pitarch's cheerful Teletubbies-style set proves a perfect backdrop to the wild and woolly first half, complete with trapdoors out of which sinister caricatures may sneak, or flowers may sud-

denly sprout (or even, in one case, a bear puppet, who sings a lullaby - puppeteer: Ronan Phelan). The cast attack the fairly heavy amount of stylised movement very well, and Malcolm Adams' wonderfully bored facial expressions in the midst of the frantic 'oathtaker' dance are just delicious. There is so much variety in the action that it's very easy to be carried along by it, and though the spectre of its meaning hangs very heavily over the proceedings (like the metaphoric Black Dog King that threatens this happy land in the story), you get it, absorb it, and still enjoy it. When things turn serious, director Bairbre Ni Chaoimh keeps the action suitably taut and claustrophobic, built around repetition and routine connoting oppressive conformity. This too works well, but, as noted, seems to go on forever (and yes, of course this is the point).

This is a good and well-regarded play well rendered by a company clearly engaged with the project rhetorically and aesthetically. That it is ultimately less rich and rewarding that it may in fact believe itself to be is perhaps more to do with Neilson's underlying failure to enjoy what he is doing, feeling there must be rigour and meaning or it just won't fly. You wonder though, in sixty years time whether this will be running as often as *The Wizard of Oz*?

Fierce Creatures

New children's and educational theatre productions re-introduced our critics to some familiar characters.

JUMPING ON MY SHADOW

By Peter Rumney

Team Educational Theatre Company

Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess

Set & Costume Design: Chisato Yoshimi

Sound Designer: Philip Stewart.

Movement Director: Sue Mythen

With: David Ferguson, Maria Ann Hylton,

Georgina McKevitt, Alan Wai

On tour April – May 2008. Reviewed 30 May

Scoil Ide, Cromcastle Green, Kilmore West

BY LISA MAHONY

IN THE REALM OF THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION, pedagogy and dramaturgy go hand in hand. The excitement generated by a professional theatre company arriving into the classroom or assembly hall, the resultant break with monotonous school routine and the innate capacity of drama to entertain can all contribute to an environment where young people are receptive to learning new things in new ways. For educational theatre to leave a lasting impression, how a play aims to teach children is as crucial as what it aims to teach them.

Peter Rumney's *Jumping On My Shadow* is a play whose broad themes, appropriately in such a context, are

easily read. Aimed at 5th and 6th class pupils, it deals with issues surrounding immigration, cultural diversity and tolerance - issues that are of clear contemporary relevance to the lives of Irish primary school children. The storybook setting for the play is a bakery in a city by the sea, ruled by a powerful emperor who has built a high wall around the population to keep out unwanted intruders. Here Anna and her grandmother together bake 'story bread', which is imbued with tales and traditions but also filled with family secrets. Anna pesters her grandmother, who came to the city as a child refugee long ago, with questions about her painful past. In an updated time-frame Josip, the 'boy from nowhere', slips into the same 'City of Bread' and seeks refuge with Mr. Miah - a settled immigrant who is dedicated to his adoptive country yet whose famed spice bread perpetually reminds him of home. Over the course of the play these characters' lives gradually converge, by various fantastical means, until the powerful authorities intervene and threaten their safe haven.



Georgina McKeown and Maria Ann Hylton in *Jumping On My Shadow*

The message is as unequivocal as it is commendable. The play, according to an author's note in the programme, suggests, "that it is both moral and utilitarian to welcome immigrants into our societies." Yet the challenge of finding the right tone to communicate such ideals to today's eleven and twelve year olds in a manner that is age-appropriate yet neither condescending nor superficial, is a difficult one to meet. The writing at times seems to suffer from

the contradictory flaw of simultaneously being overly convoluted and yet overly simplistic. The make-believe situation, incongruous events and heavy-handed use of metaphor smack of magical realism yet one wonders if its target audience, perhaps ill-equipped to read it as such, might dismiss it as childish fairytale.

Such problems notwithstanding, the production is by and large engaging for young spectators, with the informal traverse staging allowing the cast to di-

rectly address the audience and aiding to fully capture their attention. Deftly applied realistic touches such as dough being kneaded or flour flung about the place lend a pleasing verisimilitude to Chisato Yoshimi's well-conceived setting. Director Thomas de Mallet Burgess succeeds in injecting both pace and pathos into the hour-long play, though the action on occasion lapses into high-pitched histrionics. Alan Wai excels as the solitary and affecting 'boy from nowhere' whose pranks and kung-fu antics lend a much-needed sense of fun to the proceedings.

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

THE SNAIL AND THE WHALE

Adapted from the picture book by Julia Donaldson, illustrations by Axel Scheffler

Cahoots NI

Adapted and directed by

Paul Bosco McEneaney

Set design: Steve Bamford.

Costumes: Diana Ennis

Music Direction: Ursula Burns

With: Christina Nelson, Hugh Brown and

Maryke Del Castillo

On tour, 30 April - 6 June

Reviewed 6 May at the Helix, Dublin

BY DEREK WEST

"OH THAT'S MY LITTLE LAD'S FAVOURITE book. He just loves the rhymes." I'd just purchased *The Snail and the Whale*

for research purposes and my companion, spotting the cover – Toucan, climbing chimpanzee, little green lizard, golden beach and the eponymous duo – imposed on me a level of expectation about this production.

I've read it to my children. It's a great book-at-bedtime bonding exercise. The drama lies in "doing" the voices, giving emphasis to the text - in this case, lively rhyming couplets - and perusing the pictures at considerable length. Axel Scheffler, also responsible for illustrating *The Gruffalo*, is masterful in detail, colour and playfulness. So when it is transposed to the stage there's a whole magical aura crying out for conservation, and sensitivity is required.

This production is nearest to the spirit of the original in its visual presentation. Costumes by Diana Ennis and set by Steve Bamford are both eye-catching and economical. McEneaney employs the techniques of black light theatre so that colourful objects and fantastical creatures seem to move themselves. The travels of the little snail with "an itchy foot" are vividly represented. Her hitch-hiker's message - "Lift wanted around the world" - loops and curls, just like the silvery trail of a snail; a exotic underwater sequence thrills with brilliant shark and octopus; the final salvation of the mighty humpback whale entails the use of voluminous silken fabric and some stunning pyrotechnics.



Christina Nelson in *The Snail and the Whale*.

This held the three-five year-olds enthralled. So did circus and street-theatre elements – a monocyclist, acrobatics, hula-hooping. So, too, did the music, when a harp, an uilleann pipe and a saw were used to atmospheric effect.

But McEneaney blurs the clarity of the original plot by introducing his own narrator, Madam Escargot (Christina Nelson), looking back on her youthful adventures. She is full of vaudeville gestures and a gutteral French accent, working overtime to whip up audience reaction. There's a superfluous, if personable, bird (Hugh Brown) who also plays the drums. By supplementing the original with banal dialogue and lyrics – some of which just got lost in

the flies – the simplicity and economy of Julia Donaldson's original narrative is compromised. While "one small slither for snail-kind" is clever, it's a smart-alecky adult reference, not really for the small people in the audience.

And then there's the whale – it dominates twenty-one of the thirty-two pages in the book and most of the time it's HUGE. McEneaney chooses to introduce it as an eighteen-inch cut-out and, while he may be forgiven for holding back on some visual surprises for the closing moments, this failure of scale with the whale just will not do. Likewise, the environmental theme – after all, it's the ear-splitting roars of zigging and zooming speedboats, that put

the whale in peril – is fudged with some inadequate sound effects.

With proven source material, abundant energy and a high degree of inventiveness, this should have worked magic. As part of the theatrical experience, it was a joy to observe rapt expressions on young faces, but it didn't quite beat the more intimate pleasures of the fireside tale.

SNOW WHITE – THE REMIX

Written and directed by Patricia Byrne

Sole Purpose Productions

Set design: Jim Keys.

Choreography: Venessa Chapman

With: Abby Oliveira, Tara Vij, Carolann Carlile,

Tony Doherty, Gerald Dorrity, Ellen Factor,

Réa Curran

On tour, 14 – 21 May. Reviewed 21 May

Belvoir Players Studio, Belfast

BY DEREK WEST

THE 'REMIX' OF THE TITLE SUGGESTS that there is to be a radical rethink of the Snow White story and the programme illustration – half-grungy heroine: dress hitched up, boots on her feet, women's studies tract in her hands, sprawling across a chair – hints at funkiness. What we get on-stage is: a demure beauty (Carolann Carlile), in the complete Disney outfit, singing sweetly; a prima donna queen (Tara Vij) who preens in front of the talking mirror; and a show that is most comfortable

when it's presenting the traditional narrative as a pantomime, wholesome and filling.

There's a spirited narrator (Abby Oliveira) who engages enthusiastically with the audience: booing, "He's BEHIND you!!" and corny jokes, all going down a treat with the five+ year-olds. Most of the cast members double up – or rather bend over – to become dwarves and sing jolly variations on a "Heigh Ho!" kind of song, the ensemble dominated by Grouchy (Tony Doherty, as a stout Ulsterman, most concerned that Snow White will have "the dinner" before she sets out).

The core strength in this production lies in a conventional 'show' format, which uses song – six cheery, original numbers by Curran, McLaughlin and Byrne – dance at appropriate moments, story-telling and direct interventions with the audience. Jim Keys' economical, simple set gives the production the mobility to travel into communities. At that level it can reach across the generations.

But Patricia Byrne has attempted to introduce a number of critical issues: environmental vandalism, male chauvinism and the malign influence of the beauty industries. So the dwarves are redundant miners who have become sermonizing forest litter-pickers; there's some token feminism from Snow White, reading Nao-

Rea Curran and Tara Vij in Snow-White the Remix



mi Woolf and drawing up a rota for housework in Dwarf Hall. She rejects the advances of a prattish Prince (Gerald Dorrity), who has wandered in from *Cinderella* with a glass slipper. When she is poleaxed by the stepmother's spiked apple, Snow White has a visitation from a dancing feminist Forest Fairy (Ellen Factor) who stops pirouetting to preach on the vile culpability of the cosmetic capitalists (the magic mirror being their device to sell more creams, perfumes, etc.) and the need for women and girls to beef up their self-esteem and self-image. The corporate conspiracy is weakly served by a manic Cosmetic Surgeon (Réa Curran) with a Botox syringe, but he has insufficient dia-

logue and dramatic development to convey real menace.

Ultimately this is not so much remix as mish-mash. Sole Purpose claims "to use the discourse of the imagination to illuminate social and public issues" – if the production aims at illumination, it requires a more radical dramatic form and a deeper integration of the medium and the message: more imagination, more intellectual "bite" and less didacticism. But maybe the company needs to acknowledge its strength lies in plain story-telling, drawing in and charming its audience by its sense of fun, its energy – both physical and vocal – and to leave the overt educational intentions to the classroom.

THE BUS**By Maeve Ingoldsby and Philip Hardy**

Barnstorm Theatre Company

Directed by Philip Hardy

Set Design: Carol Betera

Costume Design: Bernie McCoy

Lighting Design: Sinéad McKenna

Original Music: John Ryan

With: Gareth O'Connor, Dylan Kennedy, Fergus McDonagh, Samantha Heaney, John Morton, Jenny Fennessey, Phoebe Toal and Mick Burke

On tour, 05 February – 24 April

Reviewed 07 March,

Town Hall Theatre, Galway.

BY CLAIRE-LOUISE BENNETT

PERFORMANCE THEORY FREQUENTLY emphasizes theatre's 'liveness' as a means of distinguishing it from other art forms. The presence of both performer and audience in the same place at the same time is a fundamental requirement for a theatrical event to take place. Welcome, then, to the Town Hall Theatre Galway: Barnstorm's *The Bus* is about to pull up.

Barnstorm's production, *The Bus*, is aimed towards children between the ages of 6-12 years – and what seemed like 5,000 children in the theatre auditorium, all vociferously excited and impatient, could only be experienced as a pleasure in 'liveness'; this boisterous élan was infectious. It is a testament to Barnstorm's performers that they possess an equivalent vitality, which in conjunction with a vigorous script by Maeve Ingoldsby and

Philip Hardy, not only maintained this vibrancy from its young audience, but successfully conducted it.

The story itself is a familiar one. A young boy, Gareth, starts at a new school and immediately encounters a minefield of shifting allegiances, uncertain loyalties, sudden hostilities, unspoken rules, pranks and casual cruelties. The dynamism of the play finds concrete expression in Carol Betera's fantastic set design, a cross-section of the eponymous bus, which a consistently upbeat cast find increasingly inventive ways of entering, exploring, and exiting.

Despite the constant motion and corporeal dexterity, character and narrative are never overshadowed to the extent that *The Bus* feels like an exercise in physical theatre. In addition, its rambunctious verve doesn't operate as a kind of shorthand for representing children and the animated world they inhabit. On the contrary. Each movement, deed, and action, demonstrated controlled brio, hinting at an arcane and dignified elsewhere, off-limits to adults. I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on a child's gestures; "every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal". According to Benjamin they have their origin in "another world, in which the child lives and commands", and they correspond to notions of truth.

The Bus demonstrates a comparable



Gareth O'Connor and Gus McDonagh in *The Bus*.

regard for childhood experience. Ostensibly the story charts one boy's fraught integration into a new, and somewhat unaccommodating, social group. However, the play avoids becoming issue-based or message-driven by ascribing an attitude of fatalism to this process. Here, regard does not dissolve into a romanticized vision of childhood, but rather manifests as a pragmatic acknowledgement of the unavoidable trials of finding our way in the world.

Certainly there are moments of poignancy. Gareth's brief monologues are delivered directly to the audience, with the bus a shadowy, skeletal, dragon slumbering behind him, signifying a world that clearly lives on his imagination, long after the streetlamps have flickered on. But these depictions are not sombre ap-

peals, and Gareth, rather than appearing lonely, seems instead more like a journeyman. Indeed his reflections encourage him to adopt a plucky and strategic approach to the challenges he faces. He seems to experience a degree of joy in his quest to conquer the dragon and secure a place at this particular roundtable.

This dexterous negotiation of presenting a theme that children can recognise and, to varying degrees, identify with, while at the same time refusing to deliver a morally prescriptive coda – the capacity to show an audience something of their lives without telling them how to live it – is an impressive achievement.

Claire-Louise Bennett is a Research Fellow at NUI Galway.

Comedy of Errors

Mistaken identities and farcical sexual innuendo ran riot in recent productions.
Our critics try to keep up.

THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

By Gioachino Rossini

Opera Theatre Company

Directed by Bill Banks-Jones.

Conducted by Roy Laughlin

Design: David Craig. Lighting: Kevin Treacy

With: Owen Gilhooly, Doreen Curran, Niall Morris, Martin Higgins, Gerard O'Connor,

Mary O'Sullivan

On tour, 23 Feb - 8 March

Reviewed 8 March at Cork Opera House

BY JOHN WHITE

WHEN A BIT OF STAGE BUSINESS involving a paper airplane goes awry and lands in the empty pit of the Cork Opera House instead of on the stage and both audience and cast, and even the onstage musicians share the joke – you know you're in for a good night. The last night of a successful tour often provides that special end-of-term giddiness, but here it helped to further fuel the anarchy and farcical comings and goings of Opera Theatre Company's hilarious production of this evergreen Rossini masterpiece.

When the annals of the OTC are written, this production will undoubtedly be known as 'the one with

the Guitar'. Director Bill Banks-Jones, in his programme note, eschews a "heavy handed 'concept'" in favour of One Big Idea. And ideas don't come much bigger than the enormous white guitar case on stage, the lid of which eventually opens to form the centrepiece of David Craig's perfectly pitched design. Inside the sensuous lush red of its lining we have Rosina's quarters, and thanks to Kevin Treacy's atmospheric lighting, the period clad characters combined with giant case convey a giant musical chocolate box, complete with porcelain figurines caught in a frenzy of comic misfortune. The one small caveat was the opening scenes where Rosina and Bartolo were unseen but heard, perhaps due to the design, but it was a small price to pay for a stunning overall effect.

Niall Morris' Almaviva (the Count) set the tone of the evening when he delivered the first of many earnest arias to Rosina (accompanied by the ubiquitous guitar) with a deliberately ham-fisted performance in a strangled tenor voice: the rich count as earnest amateur – more money than

talent. These vocal gymnastics were a feature of all performances, none more so than Owen Gilhooley as Figaro in his opening *Largo al Factotum*, where, to the delight of the audience, he soared into falsetto for part of the number, as well as serenading females in the audience and handing out business cards. The audience were further thrilled when Figaro accompanied Almaviva on a real guitar for yet another Cavatina type aria to Rosina – with a silent orchestra, this was strangely moving in its simplicity and fastidiousness.

It was Martin Higgins as Bartolo, the bumbling guardian and fancier of Rosina, who provided the comic engine of the evening. His frustrated buffoon was a wonderful foil to Figaro's suavity. His facial contortions ranged from a Mr. Bean-like childish frustration to a gormless incomprehension and frustration, expressed vocally by imitating Rosina's vocal line in a falsetto when the music demanded it. The audience really enjoyed this but it was a little over used, losing its comic force. Gerard O'Connor's rich mahogany bass was perfect for Basilio, particularly during the aria in which he persuades Bartolo of the power of spin to ruin someone's reputation.

Noticeable during this aria particularly, were the re-scored orchestral parts by Lara Taylor. This wasn't an anaemic version of the original full orchestration and all the better for that.

The orchestral timbre gave the music a new dimension, particularly in the strings which numbered just one of each. The only time larger forces felt absent was perhaps the thunderstorm music in Act II – a tall order for a ten-piece orchestra. Conductor Roy Laughlin's musicians were very much part of the action with lots of interplay between cast and players, and his continuo on electronic keyboard as harpsichord even had some discordant notes for dramatic purpose on occasion. (Isn't it terrible that a country with so much money can't afford one harpsichord and one tuner who could be shared by all professional opera companies? How about a 'National Harpsichord' *An Harpsichord Naisiúnta?*) The mellifluous mezzos of Doreen Curran and Mary O'Sullivan as Rosina and Berta respectively were refreshing sorbets between the bass/baritone beef. Unfortunately, put-upon servant Berta only gets one shot at the limelight but it was beautifully delivered with panache and a scintillating freshness. The full company set pieces were ably amplified by John-Owen Miley-Read in a number of supporting roles, and the staging was impressive with razor sharp enunciation and ensemble.

Finally, given that the piece is about mistaken identities and miscommunications, it was entirely appropriate that as I was leaving the theatre, the gentleman sitting beside me remarked: 'Well, I'll say one

thing. You're always guaranteed a great night out with Opera Ireland! I'm sure you are.

John White is a theatre director and tenor with The Mornington Singers chamber choir.

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

**By Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,
libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte**

Opera Ireland

Conducted by Jari Hämäläinen

Directed by Marc Adam, restaged by Pascale-Sabine Chevrotin

Set Design: Jean Bauer. Costume: Pierre Albert.

Lighting: Thomas Maerker

With: François Lis, Maria Carola, Paul Armin Edelmann, Daria Masiero, Anna Agathonos, Helen Field, Marcello Lippi, Roberto Covatta, Claudia Boyle and Alfred Werner

Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

29 and 31 March, 2, 3, 5 and 6 April 2008.

Reviewed 29 March

BY ÁINE SHIEL

MANY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS MAKE a virtue of breaking down the invisible barrier between audience and stage, but in Opera Ireland's *The Marriage of Figaro* a plywood 'fourth wall' made for crude partitioning. This panel remained in place during the overture and lengthy scene changes, impairing the general appearance of the production. The blocked energies it imposed seemed particularly at odds with Mozart's sprightly over-

ture, nimbly performed by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra under Jari Hämäläinen.

The first glimpse of the box set revealed a steeply raked double bed that dominated an all-white room with all-white furniture. Stylised period costumes – also white apart from colourful linings – completed the look. This should have had a clean and elegant effect, but the set seemed flimsy and apt to wobble dangerously. This continued to be a problem later on, even when the kitsch of the Countess's apartment and the safari-style furniture in the Count's quarter drew attention away from the walls of the set.

The bed in Act I set the tone for the entire production, for this was a *Figaro* obsessed with sex. Instead of measuring the room during the opening duet, Figaro (François Lis) lounged in bed and measured himself, constantly peeking under the covers at his private parts. Later in the act, the Count (Paul Armin Edelmann) and Don Basilio (Roberto Covatta) groped Susanna (Maria Carola), much to her disgust. Daria Masiero portrayed the Countess as a sex-starved individual, whose protestations of marital fidelity sat badly with her eagerness to be seduced by Cherubino (Anna Agathonos). Antonio the gardener (Alfred Werner) lifted the skirts of the peasant girls as he went in search of Cherubino, and his potted cacti provided the final phallic

The cast of The Marriage of Figaro

touch: having apparently grown to monstrous proportions, they were positioned in Act IV at regular intervals across the centre of the stage. As the opera closed, all male characters bar Antonio and Basilio straddled the succulents, which were then hoisted into a position raked enough to leave nothing to the imagination. Giant cacti have been used in opera before, most notably in Nicholas Hytner's renowned production of Handel's *Xerxes* for English National Opera, but here the implications were both crude and troubling. Was Basilio left out for being too camp and effeminate? Had Antonio lost his potency through age and alcoholism? Was this a joke or a serious reflection on sexual politics?

Unfortunately it was hard to credit this production with any seriousness.

Instead it worked at the level of farce, eschewing much of the emotional subtlety and class-based politics of the work. The Count was rarely seen without a rifle or two, and his tendency to wheel about and point a gun at other characters began to look like the action of an automaton rather than an autocrat. His relationship with his servants carried only undeveloped hints of danger or oppression, as for example when the peasant chorus converged on him in Act I in a moment of potential sedition, subsequently retreating and defusing the moment by throwing soft toys at him.

This lack of social nuance was carried through to the buffoonish characterisation of Figaro. On discovering the identity of his parents, the protagonist swooned in cartoonish fashion;



caught on the spikes of a cactus in Act IV, he detracted from the Countess's solemn act of forgiveness by gesticulating wildly for help. When called on to deliver significant anger, pain or anxiety, his sentiments could not convince.

This *Figaro* felt like a long evening for a number of reasons. At key ensemble moments the characters froze and lost contact with each other, singing out to the audience in static configurations. The long recitative passages were performed without any believable depth of characterisation and were thus unengaging. The orchestra lost its sparkle, performing with diminishing finesse as the evening progressed. And many of the voices were simply not in adequate form to compensate for the unsubtlety of the production. Helen Field (Marcellina), Alfred Werner and Marcello Lippi (Bartolo) all sounded worn; as Susanna, Maria Carola's sound was hard and contained; François Lis had a richer tone but a periodically uncertain intonation; and Paul Armin Edelmann's voice was pleasant but lacking the edge to convey the bullying aspect of the Count. Anna Agathonos injected sincerity and vocal conviction into Cherubino's arias, but these impressive moments were soon lost within a production that insisted on two-dimensional comedy at all costs.

PAGLIACCI

By Ruggero Leoncavallo

Wonderland Productions

Directed and translated by Alice Coghlan

Sets and Costumes: Alice Butler

With: Joan O'Malley, Ralph Strehle, Rhys Jenkins, Simon Morgan, Wojciech Smarkala, Tristan Caldwell and Donna Gallagher

Bewley's Café Theatre

10 – 29 March 2008. Reviewed 19 March

BY ÁINE SHIEL

A CAPACITY AUDIENCE FOR PAGLIACCI at Bewley's Café Theatre on 19 March clearly relished the combination of soup and verismo opera. This pared-down production unfolded within feet of the diners, making for a highly unusual opera experience. Many of the normal trappings of an opera house – pit, conductor, orchestra and chorus – were missing. Instead the singers performed as a chamber group and were accompanied by pianist Elaine Brennan, who took the place of a large orchestra. Leoncavallo's chorus was reduced to two performers, Tristan Caldwell and Donna Gallagher.

Those familiar with Bewley's Café Theatre will appreciate how small its stage is. While much of the action of *Pagliacci* took place on this tiny triangular platform, director Alice Coghlan also made full use of the dining area. The chorus representatives remained among the audience, sitting at a table half-way back. Gallagher entered after the performance had

started and, laden with shopping bags, looked for all the world like a late intruder until she began to sing. When the curtain closed between Acts I and II, both Gallagher and Caldwell spoke into mobile phones, proclaiming in Dublin accents that they were at an opera and 'couldn't talk now'. In a sense, they performed the classic role of the chorus: to watch an action and to comment on it. But they also introduced an extra temporal layer, since they were clearly contemporary while the period of the main action was indeterminate. The costumes of the clown characters suggested the 1950's, while outsider Silvio (Simon Morgan) sported a more 2008 look. The text, a translation by Coghlan, also mixed the here-and-now with period language. Canio's famous aria 'Vesti la giubba' opened with the long-established phrase 'On with the motley', whereas Nedda's rejection of Tonio, 'Go off to Neary's', was one example of the playful localism of the production.

The use of the curtain before, during and after the action lent an unexpected element of conventionality to the proceedings. Perhaps this was inevitable given the absence of exits onstage, but the set was so minimal that the change from Act I to II cannot have been a huge task. A clothes line, yellow walls and a few palettes suggested a southern exterior in Act I, while in Act II a kitchen table relocat-

ed the action to the 'play within a play'. Most of the props were naturalistic, including the real vegetables Tonio/Taddeo (Rhys Jenkins) presented to Nedda/Colombina (Joan O'Malley) during the clowns' performance. His suggestive wielding of a parsnip was met in true Commedia style by a beating with a leek by Beppe/Arlecchino (Wojciech Smarkala).

The Commedia style set the tone for Jenkins' performance in particular. Even as Tonio (rather than Taddeo, his clown persona), his performance was full of pathos, melodrama and scheming, even histrionic, expressions. During the prologue he stepped out from behind the closed curtain and wandered among the diners, making direct eye contact with them.

Although director Alice Coghlan worked hard to overcome the strictures of the space and succeeded for the most part in moving her cast creatively and effectively, the central problem of this production proved impossible to resolve. Fringe opera presents an almost insurmountable conundrum, since lack of funding means that it can only happen in inexpensive, hence confined, quarters. If an opera is to sound attractive in such a setting, voice control is paramount. But where money is an issue, singers with the technique to scale back their voices and still maintain a resonant and beautiful tone are generally out of reach.

Coghlan's cast members are all at

the outset of their careers, and most of them were not able to modify their voices to suit the space. Strehle in particular produced a harsh and unsubtle sound that was apt to go sharp, but Jenkins and Morgan also experienced difficulties reining in their voices and maintaining resonance in quieter passages. As the female chorus, Gallagher fared better, but it was O'Malley as Nedda who achieved the most vocal subtlety and convincing performance. That she managed to do this with one arm in a sling – and that one quickly forgot the sling was there – was testament to her achievement.

BUCK JONES AND THE BODY SNATCHERS

By Ken Bourke

Georgian House, Limerick

Produced and Directed by Joan Sheehy

With: Donall Farmer, Denis Foley, Róisín

Gribbin, Paul Meade, Gene Rooney

12 - 28 June 2009. Reviewed 12 June

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

THIS NEW KEN BOURKE COMEDY IS the second play in a trilogy that's been in the works since 1994. Part one – *The Galloping Buck Jones* – was produced by Tinderbox at the Lyric fourteen years ago; part three, *The Hunt for Red Willie*, appeared at the Peacock back in 2000, when it was a Christmas-time hit.

It's easy to understand why Bourke keeps returning to his delightfully stupid hero, a theatrical impresario in

eighteenth-century Dublin. As in his earlier appearances, this latest outing for Buck Jones appeals in many ways. We get ingenious similes, dodgy puns, and mild sexual innuendo. We get role-doubling and cunning disguises – men wearing kilts and fake beards, and a French maid speaking in a Swedish accent. And, once again, there are witty allusions to other dramatists, especially Boucicault, Wilde and, in particular, Shakespeare: an entire subplot is lifted directly from *The Merchant of Venice*, there are lengthy references to *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, and we even get to see Paul Meade standing at a graveside, a skull in his hand, reminiscing about an old friend.

It's not all infinite jest, of course – both play and production are highly intelligent in their use of form. The major difference between this play and the productions in Belfast and Dublin is that *Buck Jones and the Body Snatchers* has been written specifically for Limerick's Georgian House. So the opening scene is set in an actual eighteenth-century drawing room, while the bulk of the action takes place in the building's coach-house (here doubling as a seedy Dublin inn) and its garden.

That site-specific setting is both a strength and weakness for the production. The play's success is dependent upon pacing: like all good farces, it moves so quickly that audi-

ences will be laughing too much to think about characterisation or plotting. But the shift from one part of the house to another causes some of that comic energy to dissipate. The movement from the coach-house to the basement took about ten minutes for the opening night audience, reducing the impact of the final scene. The compensation is that we can enjoy Bourke and director Joan Sheehy's clever use of the building to advance the plot.

But the production's most admirable feature is the acting. Led by Meade as the eponymous hero, the cast move through multiple roles with wonderful timing. Denis Foley is enormously likeable as Buck's sidekick Charles, while Gene Rooney hams things up gloriously in her dual roles as maid and barkeeper; Gribbin and Foley also impress throughout. It's particularly gratifying to see how the actors have been allowed to develop their own methods of communicating the comical features of their characters. Too often in Irish comedy, we see actors using gestures and line-delivery that they have copied from other performers (usually from television sitcoms). Here the actors present their characters coherently: the comical gestures are merely one part of a fully-developed characterisation. So for instance, as Buck, Paul Meade hilariously uses facial expressions to convey his character's goofy arro-

gance – but that gesture is consistent with all of his other movements and expressions, so that Buck seems unusually well fleshed out for a character in farce. The other actors dedicate similar levels of attention and thought to their performances.

So *Buck Jones* is tremendously entertaining, and very well performed – but a serious point may be inferred here. It's notable that the production involves many people who are associated with Island Theatre, the company which (as reported in the last issue of *ITM*) is in limbo, following the decision of the Arts Council to stop its funding. The director Joan Sheehy has appeared in many of Island's best productions; *Buck Jones* itself was originally presented in a reading by Island.

It would be wrong to suggest that Limerick theatre is entirely in a state of crisis. As is shown by the ongoing success of the city's annual Unfringed Festival – not to mention the work of local companies such as Impact Theatre – there is plenty to be excited about in this part of Ireland, despite the loss of Island. The decision of Sheehy and her colleagues to seek once-off funding for their production of Bourke's play can be seen as an important statement of intent, an expression of the desire of Limerick's theatre community to continue producing work of national importance.



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