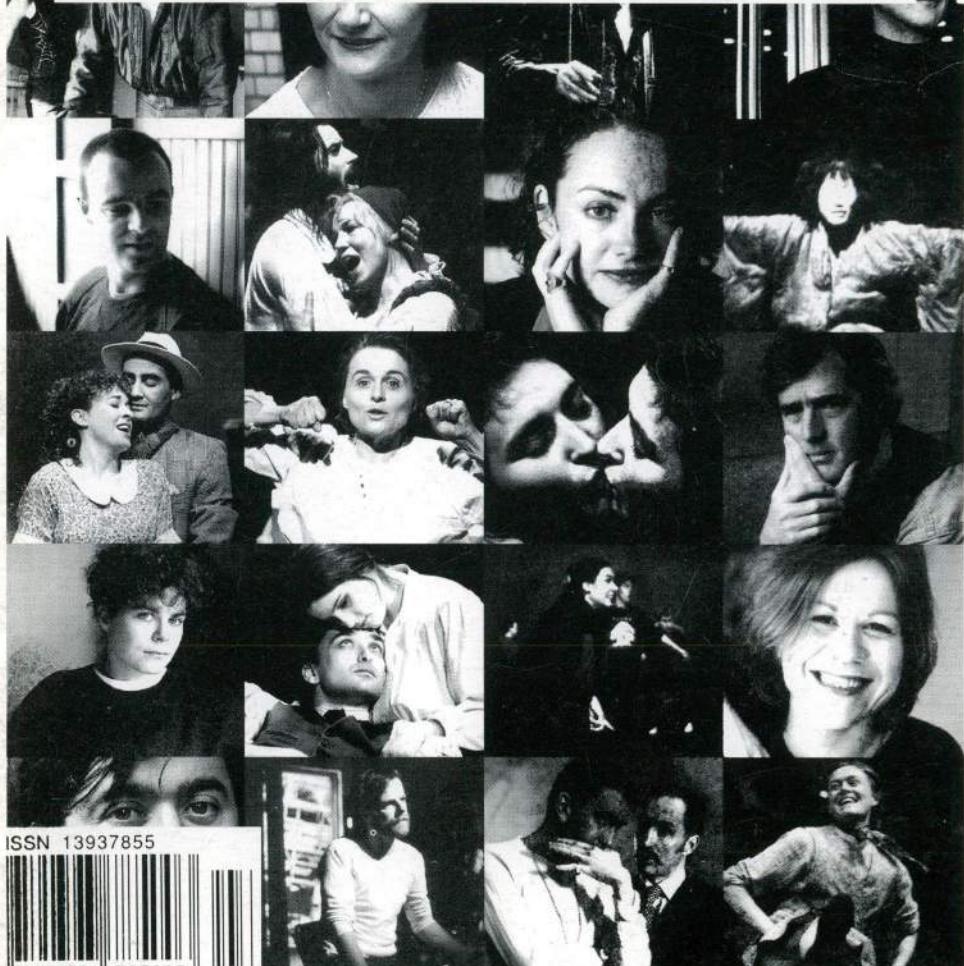


# irishtheatre

VOLUME ONE, NUMBER TWO SPRING 1999 £4

MAGAZINE



ISSN 13937855



9 771393 785003

**ISSUE EDITOR**

KAREN FRICKER

**CO-EDITORS**KAREN FRICKER  
WILLIE WHITE**MANAGER**

MAURA O'KEEFE

**ART DIRECTOR**

SUSAN CONLEY

**ADVERTISING SALES**

CATHERINE LAFFEY

**DISTRIBUTION**

NEW ISLAND BOOKS

**SPECIAL THANKS**

Steve Blount ■ Karl Burke  
■ Siobhan Colgan ■ Ali Curran and the Dublin Fringe ■ Edie Demas ■ David Grant ■ Amy Kerwin ■ Fiach MacConghail and the Project Arts Centre ■ Deirdre Murphy ■ Ciarán Walsh ■ Matt Wolf  
■ Sara Zatz ■  
and our subscribers

**FRIENDS OF IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE**

The Agency ■ Steve Blount  
■ Dublin Theatre Festival ■ Bernard Farrell ■ Dr and Mrs John A. Fricker ■ Galway Arts Festival ■ Dave Holland ■ London Arts Discovery ■ The Passion Machine ■ Project Arts Centre ■ Red Kettle Theatre Company ■ Margaret Warren

**ADDRESS:**

14 Summerville Park  
Upper Rathmines Road  
Dublin 6

**EDITORIAL PHONE:**

086-831-9802

**E-MAIL:**

frickekp@tcd.ie

**2 WHAT'S NEWS**

- 4 THE CANONISATION OF FRIEL** Brian Singleton on the upcoming Friel Festival

- 8 PAN PAN POW WOW** Karen Fricker and Deirdre Mulrooney on the 3rd Annual International Theatre Symposium

- 13 HOLDING HISTORY TO THE LIGHT** Sebastian Barry considers the propriety of unpacking family history in his plays.

- 18 MARATHON MAN** Síofra Campbell meets *The Beauty Queen of Leenane's* Brian F. O'Byrne.

- 24 FRESH MAGIC** Seona MacRámoinn introduces the revamped Rough Magic Theatre Company and their latest project, *The Whisperers*.

- 28 NOT THE SAME OLD RAZZLE-DAZZLE** Jocelyn Clarke interviews director Conall Morrison.

- 32 THE DOCTOR IS IN** Willie White on Operating Theatre's new production, *Angel/Babel*

- 35 IRISH THEATRE — WITH A SCOTS ACCENT** Mark Fisher meets three Irishwomen making a theatrical stir in Scotland.

- 38 BARNSTORMING BELFAST** Anna Cutler and Caoimhe McAvinche recount their experiences mounting new festivals in the North.

- 43 OPINIONS AND OVERVIEWS:** Our critics and columnists sound off:

- COLUMNS** Maxine Jones on Radio Drama  
Sarah FitzGibbon on Youth Drama  
Martin Munroe on Entrances and Exits

- REVIEWS** Dominic Cavendish on **HOWIE THE ROOKIE**  
Cathy Leaney on **THE WHITE DEVIL** Jack Helbig on **BELFRY** Jocelyn Clarke on **THE UNFRINGED FESTIVAL, LIMERICK** Dominic Cavendish on **PLAY-BOY** Berni Sweeney on **NORTHERN STAR**

# No-win Situation

EVERYBODY LOVES AWARDS. There's something about an awards competition that's exciting, that galvanizes attention, and that's a great excuse for a knees-up. Last year, the Irish Times and ESB announced that they were sponsoring a new Irish Theatre awards, and the theatre community happily jumped on the bandwagon, putting on their black-and-whites and heading to the RDS for a jolly, boozy night. It's doubtful that anyone remembers who won or lost at this stage; it was an occasion for celebration of some good times for Irish theatre in general.

One year on, it's amazing how the tide has turned. This year's Irish Times/ESB nominations got everyone talking — about how confused they were, how unrepresentative of what many people considered the most interesting work of the year. What were the criteria at play here? What did "best" mean? The awards themselves provided the answer; by their standards, best meant safe, crowd-pleasing, and aimed at a middle-class, middle-brow audience. Through their selections this year, the Irish Times/ESB awards undermined their own credibility; if they continue in this vein they will become a good evening out for suits and sponsors, a nice line of copy for a few ads, nothing more.

Which is a waste. We salute the spirit of the Ritas (Really Irish Theatre Awards), Richard Cook and Lynn Cahill's irreverent response to what they perceived as the absurdity of the Irish Times/ESB awards. But we also can't help but wish for a review and an explication of the Irish Times/ESB criteria — starting with the selection and number of judges. A larger panel than the current three would allow for greater aesthetic and regional diversity, and would also allow judges to remove themselves from the judging process in categories in which they might have a conflict of interest (which is almost inevitable in a community this small).

One of the greatest value of awards, let's face it, are the promotional opportunity they provide for the medium they celebrate. The Irish Times/ESB awards are among the biggest media pushes the theatre gets each year. They form part of the basis of what most people think theatre is about in this country. And the message they sent this year was inaccurate; Irish theatre is more diverse, younger, more innovative, and more vibrant than anyone could guess from looking at this year's list of nominees and winners. The field is wide open for an awards that would really capture and celebrate the excellence in our community. ■

## featured contributors

**SÍOFRA CAMPBELL** is an Irish playwright and filmmaker living in New York. She's currently working on her second feature film, *Punks Vs. Ravers*, which features Brian F. O'Byrne as "Matthew, the punk . . . a pretty self-involved character who's having a nervous breakdown because his girlfriend left him and he's convinced that his younger brother, the raver [played by Ewen Bremner], is trying to sabotage his career." Campbell wrote the role for O'Byrne, who she's known for eight years. She interviews him on page 20.

In this issue, **MARTIN MUNROE** inaugurates his "Entrances and Exits" column (page 47) — an overview of major personnel changes at theatres and arts centres around the country. A New York native who's lived in Dublin for the past 12 years, Munroe holds an MA from Boston College and a PhD from U.C.D. He recently ended a five-year stint as coordinator of the annual Theatre Shop to focus on producing projects.

**W**HOL'LL BE THE NEXT artistic director of the Abbey? While word on the street has it that the field has narrowed to three main contenders — Ben Barnes, Conall Morrison, and Fiach MacCongail, with Barnes the front runner — Abbey managing director Richard Wakely says that the search for Patrick Mason's replacement is still very much ongoing. The Abbey will advertise the post in March, and Wakely says applications will be welcomed from "directors, producers, or indeed other theatre artists as well; what is required is experience in programming, an understanding of the status of this theatre, a deep knowledge of the Irish repertoire, and a willingness to engage on a journey of understanding of what Irish audiences expect." Wakely also emphasises that the search will be international: "Our work takes us around the globe and the board will welcome quality applicants from around the globe."

When questioned about the flak that might ensue if the Abbey did appoint another non-Irish artistic director (Mason is British), Wakely was quick to reply: "I think we're bigger than that. Ireland's place in the international community should give us the confidence to engage the best — we should always go for the highest-quality candidate, regardless of where they come from." Ideally, says Wakely, the new a.d. will be appointed by summer and work alongside Mason until his departure at the end of December.

INTERVIEWS WERE UNDERWAY at press time for a new a.d. at **Yew Theatre Company** in Ballina following outgoing a.d. Pierre Campos' decision to return to his native France with his wife Yvette — we wish them a fond au revoir.

AS PART OF A major management restructuring funded by an N.I. Arts Council Advancement grant, the **Lyric Theatre** in Belfast has advertised two newly-defined (and imposingly named) top posts, Executive Producer and Director of Administration and Resources.

AT PRESS TIME, the **Belfast Festival at Queen's** has yet to name a replacement for programming director Séan Doran, who de-camped after the 1998 festival to run

the international festival in Perth, Australia. The clock is ticking, with less than 9 months to go until the next BFQ...

#### IT'S THAT ISDA TIME OF YEAR

THIS YEAR'S **Irish Student Drama Awards Festival**, the 52nd annual, will be hosted by NUI Galway from 21-27 March. Drama societies from approximately a dozen colleges and universities around the island have been invited to submit productions.

#### IN OTHER STUDENT NEWS...

FROM STUDENT COMPETITION to student cooperation: Howard Brenton's translation of Goethe's *Faust* will be performed for the first time in Ireland by **Threefold Theatre Company** — an unusual consortium of students from Trinity Players,



ANN EGAN

**OUTGOING:** *Patrick Mason*

UCD Dramsoc, and the National College of Art and Design. The production runs from 15-20 March in the Beckett Centre.

### UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

AMONG THE INTRIGUING revelations in the recently-released full year schedule of **Abbey and Peacock** productions are world premieres by Darragh Carville, Chris Lee, and Frank McGuinness; and the theatre's first-ever staging of *The Tempest*, directed by Conall Morrison, with which they'll see in the millennium. We can't help but note that of the 27 named writers and directors on this year's Abbey schedule, not a single one is a woman. Why?... **Fishamble's** next production is a world premiere by Joe O'Connor, *True Believers*, running in Andrew's Lane from 4-29 May... **Bedrock's** long-awaited production of *Quay West*, by Bernard-Marie Koltés and translated by David Fancy and Joseph Long, runs 9 April-7 May at project @ the mint and will be directed by Jimmy Fay... David Grant directs the world premiere of *Iph...*, Colin Teevan's new version of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, from 2-20 March at the **Lyric**, Belfast... **Barabbas...the company's** new show (as yet unnamed) is written by Charlie O'Neill and directed by Raymond Keane: it plays project @ the mint from 7-29 May... **Common Currency** presents Genet's *The Balcony* from 4-22 May in the Crypt, directed by Leticia Agudo... **Corcadorca's** latest is *Misterman*, written by and featuring Enda Walsh, running 22 April-8 May at UCC's Granary Theatre; Corcadorca will also stage *The Merchant of Venice* in June... A "kick-ass" production of *As You Like It* is promised from **Druid**, directed by Maeliosa Stafford, starting performances 15 March...

### TOURING NEWS

BELFAST-BASED **Kabosh Productions'** acclaimed *Mojo-Mikybo* continues its island-wide tour through March 27... **Galloglass'** spring touring production is Lorca's *Yerma*, directed by Bairbre ní Chaoimh and featuring Fionnuala Murphy and Mark D'Aughton. The 15-stop tour opens 9 March in Clonmel and finishes 15 April in Belfast... **The**

**Abbey's** increased commitment to national touring will be in evidence this spring as Hugh Leonard's *Love in the Title* sets off on a 7-venue tour, from 27 April-5 June, after its Abbey mainstage run... **Blue Raincoats** are

staging *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, adapted by Jocelyn Clarke and directed by Niall Henry; it opens at Sligo's Hawk's Well on 16 March and then tours nationally... **Upstate Live's** production of *Hades*, written and directed by Declan Gorman, will tour to Belfast, Monaghan, and Cavan — and perhaps other border county venues — in March and April...

Cork's **Graffiti Theatre Company** are touring

schools with the company-written *Forget-Me-Not* from February through Easter, and an Irish language version of the same production, *Scéal Faoi Bhláth*, until 18 June.

### TRAINING ROUNDUP

**Blue Raincoat Theatre Company** are holding a spring physical theatre training workshop in Suzuki Method, Viewpoints, and Corporeal Mime from 12-17 April in their home town of Sligo. Ring 071-71431 or email: [bluerain@iol.ie](mailto:bluerain@iol.ie) for an application...

**Minc Theatre Ireland** are holding training workshops every Saturday in Temple Lane Studios, Dublin. Ciannait Clancy teaches an ongoing voice workshop based on Linklater technique in the mornings; and Clancy and other Minc members teach an "actor's studio" in the afternoon which does not require an ongoing commitment. Ring 01-667-6427 or email: [minctheatre@earthling.net](mailto:minctheatre@earthling.net) for more information.

# The Canonis



**PARTY TIME:**

Miriam Healy  
*Louie* in Dancing  
at Lughnasa

TOM LAWLER

# ation of Friel

*With this spring's multi-venue, international festival of his work, Brian Friel will be officially enshrined as Ireland's Greatest Living Playwright. But will the festival format arrest our understanding and appreciation of his work?*

**BRIAN SINGLETON** weighs the issues.

**B**RIAN FRIEL'S 70TH BIRTHDAY is to be marked by a tribute festival of his work, a retrospective homage to one of Ireland's greatest playwrights — an honour normally not accorded to the living. Producer Noel Pearson is attempting to channel the efforts of major Irish and international

theatre companies into a Friel-fest running roughly through the months of May and June of this year. The Abbey, the Gate, Druid and the Royal Shakespeare Company, among others, are all set to present productions in Dublin, and the Lyric will make its own contribution to the birthday party in Belfast. Some productions are set to tour, and like many instances in the recent past, Irish theatre will be "festivised" prior to export. But why do our theatres and producers choose the festival format for tributes and celebrations such as this? The answer lies in the history of the post-war theatre festival.

The modern European festival dates from 1947 when Jean Vilar established the Avignon Festival in a spirit of post-war socialist decentralization in France, but also in the belief that established repertory



companies could not survive permanently in the provinces. Economics forced actors to stay close to the principal marketplace in Paris but Avignon became a site of the Parisian stage on vacation and attracted international companies which bypassed Paris. The Edinburgh

Festival operates on similar lines as London theatre decamps for three weeks in August and foreign-language productions benefit from the internationalism of such an event.

The Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF) is a wildly different animal, occurring at the peak of the theatre-going season in October. Established theatres slot in their repertory and international players are flown in to top it off. This is no decampment but a simple binary division of "guaranteed Irish products" with import-

ed exotica. Audience surveys reveal that festival tourism in Dublin is negligible, with 90% of the audiences coming from Dublin and surrounding counties. It seems to be a celebration of "self" and a time when regular theatregoers become multiple attenders and others are attracted by the allure of the occasion. The festival cachet increases consumption.

The first DTF in 1957 played a hesitating though significant part in the exteriorization of Ireland's cultural identity, focusing on home-produced items in the context of unstable coalition governments, large-scale emigration, but also the reform of censorship and an emergence from a post-colonial period of isolationism. It also signaled the rising importance of the city in cultural representation, transferring significance from the rural, amateur feis to the urban professional festival.

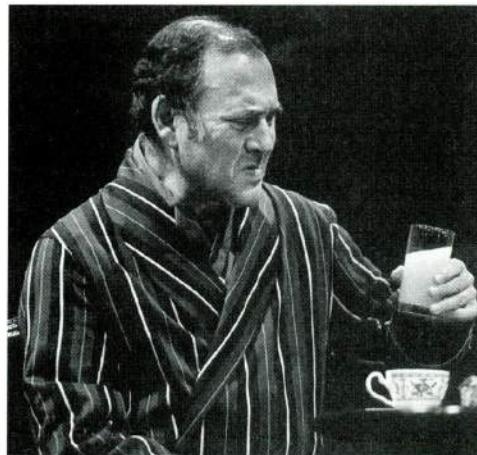
Now the DTF and its northern rival in Belfast have become local halting sites for super-cultural events created by the great and the good of the international stage. Robert Lepage, the Wooster Group and Anne Bogart have all contributed to our international jamborees in recent times. The scale

of these events has increased considerably in the '90s, particularly since 1991 when Dublin played host to the European City of Culture.

**B**EYOND (BUT INCLUDING) THE DTF, Ireland's theatrical success in the last decade has been achieved by capitalizing on its culture to help construct a national identity concomitant with international renown bestowed on us by way of our novelists, filmmakers, actors, artists, musicians, athletes, and a President at a time of economic upturn. Festivals of our culture contribute to this success story by marketing our international figures in "collections" which increase the value of lesser known works and artists by dint of being sold in packages containing "known value items."

The single-author Festival of Friel fits into a recent "tradition" established in 1991 by the Gate's Beckett and subsequent Pinter Festivals, which repositioned Beckett within the Irish as opposed to French tradition and took Harold Pinter out of university drama societies and departments and placed him on the professional stage in Ireland. Both authors had a place to travel in Irish theatre territory —

FAITH HEALER: FERGUS BOURKE



but whither Friel, whose plays already have canonical status? The Friel Festival becomes thus a retrospective more familiar to the art gallery. Few living authors can command such retrospective treatment. The body of their work must be substantial, accrued over time, with recognizable development charted and approved by the Academy, and have made a significant contribution to the nation's culture — or more particularly, to the perceptions of a nation's culture from the outside.

In Dublin, therefore, whose public is well-used to Friel productions this indeed will be a (nostalgic) retrospective, but on tour, this will be a festival of Irish theatre seen through the prism of Friel. The foregrounded themes of exile and emigration in the early work are indelibly stamped on the Irish collective consciousness and are perfect travelers to the diaspora. One of the dangers is that they will reinforce external



stereotyped perceptions of a rural and impoverished economy so alien to our contemporary reality and lived experience. Exporting Friel will do little to replicate reality but do much to bolster the myth created by diasporic taste.

**W**HAT ARE THE LIKELY BENEFITS, though, for the seasoned Irish theatregoer? We will be able to see his less popular works produced by the major companies which they normally would not entertain outside a festival structure. The breadth of the Festival thus affords us an opportunity to see the development of Friel as a writer. We can make comparisons between plays, identify common themes and dramaturgical strategies of the author. We can also see back-to-back differing approaches of contemporary directors to the same author's work. What

C O N T I N U E D O N P A G E 5 8

---

**FESTIVAL CULTURE:** (from left) Harold Pinter in *The Collection* at the Pinter Festival; Roseleen Linehan in *Happy Days*, part of the Beckett Festival; the original cast of Friel's *Faith Healer*; and Tom Hickey and Catherine Byrne in Friel's *Aristocrats* (1990).



# Pan Pan Pow Wow

*This past January, Pan Pan Theatre Company organised the third annual International Theatre Symposium at the Samuel Beckett Centre. KAREN FRICKER offers a critical overview of the week-long proceedings, while DEIRDRE MULROONEY introduces Roberta Carreri, one of the international visitors who particularly captured the Symposium's imagination.*

## Theory and Practice

**I**N ITS THREE YEARS, the Pan Pan International Theatre Symposium has fast become one of the signpost events of the artistic year for Ireland's theatre practitioners and, increasingly, its audiences as well. The high attendance levels this year — some 180 people took part in the symposium's workshops, and attendance at the performances and other staged events topped 3,000 — made for a buzzy and highly positive atmosphere.

At the heart of the Symposium are the workshop sessions, offering Irish artists a unique opportunity to experience and experiment with different approaches to theatre practice under the instruction of international and Irish companies and directors. The full performances in the evenings form a solid bookend at the other end of the participation scale, showcasing the work of visiting artists and featured Irish companies in full flower, and opening up the symposium to members of the public interested in broadening their theatrical palette. For the first time this year, there was a different production on offer every night of the symposium — an extra reward for eager audiences though doubtless a particular challenge for the technical staff

(who to the credit of Pan Pan and the Beckett Centre handled the quick changeovers with miraculously few glitches).

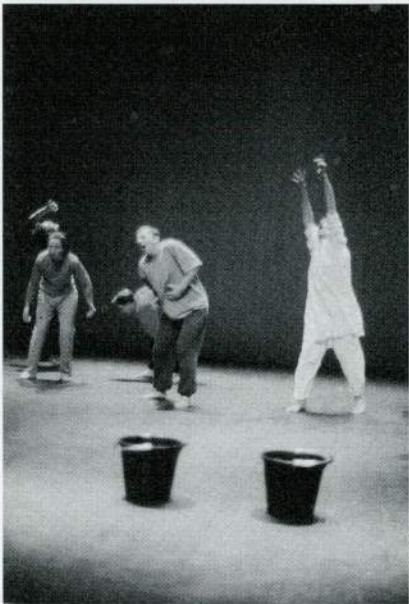
The Symposium also offers a selection of events which occupy a middle ground between training and pure performance — not always comfortably. The demonstration/performances by several leading independent Irish companies, for example, sounded highly enticing on paper, a rare opportunity to watch directors and actors work together. But none of the demo/perfs that I saw or heard about managed to adequately confront or overcome the specific demands of the unique genre that is the "open rehearsal," erring either on the side of too much show and not enough tell or vice versa. My discomfort at the setup of these events seemed to be shared by one of the participating directors, who plead-

ed at the end of his demo, "can we go back to rehearsal now?"

The problems with this type of event raise some very interesting and knotty Big Questions: Is there anything to be gained for the participating companies — other than a marketing opportunity — in opening up their rehearsal process, or is the rehearsal room a secret, sacred place for artists' eyes only? How can people outside a creative process be given a greater understanding and appreciation of what happens in rehearsal without being disruptive? Adding a discussion of just these issues with directors, actors, and audience members might provide a much-needed element of framing and analysis if this kind of event is to be repeated in future Symposia.

There was one provocative and effective exploitation of the demonstration/performance model on offer at the Symposium, by the visiting Italian company Nuove Produzioni Spettacolari. As part of their ongoing theatrical investigation of Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*, director Domenico Mongelli and one of his leading actors worked with a small company of Irish performers over a two-day workshop and presented the results under semi-realized performance conditions on the Symposium's final night.

As Mongelli explained in a charmingly long-winded introductory speech, what the audience was about to see was one of numerous investigations of Gide's novel — the theatrical equivalent of a study or sketch towards a final canvas. The performance was a very provocative mix of expressive movement and long passages of un-translated Italian text, ending with the chorus reciting the same bit of text over and over again to the point where some audience members found it unbearable — most noticeably



ENDA O'BRIEN

**IT'S DOWNRIGHT IMMORAL:** Nuove Produzioni Spettacolari's *Gide* workshop.

the man who threw his hat at the performers as he stormed out of the auditorium. I don't know what the experience of working on the project was like for the performers, but for me, Mongelli's clear explication of what the company were trying to achieve, and the subsequent offering of a passionately delivered — if sometimes confusing and enervating — performance, made this a positive example of how the demo/perf format can be made to work from the audience perspective.

**T**HE TWO PANEL DISCUSSIONS were a mixed bag, both good starts in airing important issues — theatre training in Ireland and the place of ideology in Irish theatre practice —

that were hindered by too-loose delineation of subject matter and problematically assembled panels of speakers. That the only panellists on the training panel (which I moderated) were the heads of the two most established actor training programmes on the island predetermined that many who attended did so expecting a showdown between the two pro-

ENDA O'BRIEN



**BUTOH HOW-TO:** Japanese performer Kagaya Sanae at the Pan Pan Symposium

grammes, and that other attendees who were identified with other training programmes or approaches would naturally feel excluded and disenfranchised. The speakers — the Gaiety School's Patrick Sutton and the Samuel Beckett Centre's Peter McAllister — did yeoman work in advocating and analysing their own programmes and — more importantly — the philosophies behind them, but we were only able to touch on the myriad other issues surrounding this underserved and under-interrogated field: alternate approaches, ongoing training, quality control, training in areas other than acting . . . the list goes on.

On the second panel, the combination of panellists with very different backgrounds and experience levels — Druid's

Garry Hynes, Meridian's Johnny Hanrahan, and playwright Alex Johnston — and a very loosely framed topic, "General creative impulses and ideologies in Irish theatre," added up to too much ad hoc for my tastes. Moderator Fiach MacConghail attempted to turn the free-form construction of the event into an advantage by inviting other practitioners in the audience into the chat, but the result was a disjointed and diffuse meander through some potentially fascinating material, more a talk about the fact that we don't know how to talk about ideology than an active engagement in ideological issues.

At the Symposium's week-ending plenary session, several enthusiastic participants suggested that future Symposia might include workshops on business issues such as starting a theatre company and applying for funding — an idea that was emphatically batted down by the majority of theatre practitioners in the room. A defining element of the Symposium, they argued convincingly, is that it creates a "safe space" for the investigation and sharing of ideas and practices among artists, and that, while there is an increasing need on the Irish theatre scene for business and administrative training, the right place for that is not the Symposium. This viewpoint was seconded by several of the international participants who reported that, in their experience, the Symposium is unique in the opportunity it provides for discussion, experimentation, and interaction as well as presentation of completed work.

Pan Pan is putting the Symposium on hiatus next year to concentrate on securing funding and beefing up the infrastructure for their next gathering in 2001. But two years seems too long to wait for another immersion course in international theatre; who will step in to fill the breach? —KAREN FRICKER

## Unwrapping Presence

MET THE CAPTIVATING Roberta Carreri in The Talbot B&B before she caught her plane back to Holstebro, Denmark, where she has been one of five actors working with Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret for over two decades. She had been one of many people "giving away secrets," in her own words, at Pan Pan's

International Theatre Symposium. I decided to talk to Carreri because she is a walking manifestation of an aesthetic of continuous theatre training that sums up the ethos of the whole Symposium.

For Carreri, it all began one fateful day when she left her History of Art course at the University of Milan to visit Barba's company in Denmark; she had seen the company perform and had become fascinated with their work: "I found it extremely appealing the way the actors were on stage; they were fully present in their bodies and in their voices. I had the feeling they were not pretending, but they were being there. So I thought about making my thesis about them. I went there 25 years ago — and never made my thesis!"

The rest — 3 months later she was in her first performance — is the stuff of her inspirational autobiographical performance-cum-masterclass *Traces in the Snow* with which she transfixed a Samuel Beckett Theatre practically overflowing with theatre practitioners and students during the Symposium.

"The beginning for me was so hard," says Carreri. Having never danced or sung, "I had to start to walk, literally, on stage when I was 20 years old." This, on top of having to learn Danish, "so different than Italian, or French, or English . . . I was getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning, it was still dark, and asking myself 'Why do I do this? For whom?' But something in me told me to continue. I think in

each one of us there is instinctive knowledge that makes us choose what reality we need," she says. "When you listen to your head, more than to your instinct, that's where it goes wrong."

Barba, the Odin's director, was assistant to the late Jerzy Grotowski for three and a half years during the early '60s. During that time, Barba "learned a great deal," according to Carreri, "especially the concept of actor training, and the constant development of one's professional skills. Also the concept of group theatre, which means that a group of people work together for many, many years, making change and renewal necessary." Which is where the training comes in.

"You need training from the moment you enter the theatre to learn how to have confidence in your body and your voice. But also the moment you enter the theatre, you enter the process of building a performance." Unlike Grotowski's last phase of work, which brought his practice to a place "at the edge" of theatre not meant for public viewing, the Odin's work is based around performances. After building a theatrical presentation, they tour with it for three years, giving workshops along the way.

Barba started out working with contemporary Scandinavian writers, then began to develop material with his performers. When Barbara Brecht denied rights to material for a Brecht collage, Barba went back to Brecht's own pilfered

sources, starting to use "this technique of 'stealing.' Or borrowing," as Carreri puts it. The company are currently working on a collage based on the poems of Henrik Norbrand, which they will tour in Danish, Spanish, and English versions.

In the short workshops Carreri gives, such as the one she gave at the Symposium, she tries to do "exercises that make you think with your body, and feel with your body," with the aim of waking up what she refers to as "the *extra-ordinary presence*" — to make the participants aware of the fact that to be present on the stage you cannot just be beautiful. "You have to irradiate . . ." She searches for the right English word — "to 'beam out'?" — and settles for "to *emanate* energy, and, you can do it only if you are conscious of your means of expression . . . you should be able to model your presence on stage. To be able to tune it from strong to soft, to have a dynamic to keep the attention awake. Because if you have a dynamic that is monotone, the public will fall asleep."

Their approach to training and performance is supported by the Odin's well-documented research in the area of theatrical anthropology (another concept Barba took away from his time with Grotowski) which Carreri defines as "a way of looking for similarities in other cultures — finding means, techniques, and strategies in our quest to be present."

The Odin's work also addresses the actor's motivation for entering the field: "Until 150 years ago you became an actor because you *needed* to be an actor. Not because it was fashionable, or glamorous. The profession of the actor from the

beginning has been to transcend him or herself, to be another kind of priest. In the Greek theatre they were provoking catharsis in the spectators. With the years it has been turned to something else. If you go back to the original function, I think it is extremely important that the actors learn all the possibilities of their bodies."

With characteristic pragmatism and a hint of self-deprecation she describes the workshops she has given here as "just an inspiration, it is just a taste of another



ENDA O'BRIEN

**CAPTIVATING:** Roberta Carreri leading a workshop

way of thinking on stage. There are other ways. There is always a way out from your *impasse*. When you come to a block, if you know there are other ways, maybe you can use them to come out of it."

When I marvel at her energy she takes a moment to make sure she has understood me before responding: "You have to be *there*. The moment you are fully there, you have energy. Energy disappears when you are not fully there . . . like me now," she says as she is told there is a taxi waiting below, and this extraordinary presence is whisked away to the airport, practically leaving traces right down the stairs as she goes. —DEIRDRE MULROONEY



JOHN HAYNES

# Holding History to the Light

*In writing his plays *The Steward of Christendom* and *Our Lady of Sligo*, **SEBASTIAN BARRY** found himself unearthing some uncomfortable chapters of his family's history. Here, he considers the propriety — and the potential redemptive value — of such acts of creative excavation, in an essay originally delivered as a Platform talk at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain in July 1998.*

**I** WAS MEANING FOR A LONG time to get going at a play about my poor benighted grandmother. Years ago, in the early '80s, I wrote a short novel about her, but even then I felt that, though I knew a lot about her from stories my mother had told us as children, I had taken an early jump at her, as it were, and wasn't ready

for it. Because inescapably her story is a dark one, with redemption on short rations, a story infinitely complicated by that most savage of drugs, alcohol. Alcohol has fuelled many a marriage, but also many a perfidious representation of Irishness itself. So the dangers were legion, the story was dark.

Also, there is a requirement in the theatre to entertain. An obvious statement, but when you are wading about in the dark streams of your own family, sometimes you take pause and wonder, what the hell am I doing? Shouldn't these people be left in the safe peace and the merciful dust of the past — Thomas Dunne, the troubled policeman whose story was the centre of *The Steward of Christendom*; and Mai O'Hara, the disastrous woman?

What comes against this good caution is a sort of necessity, the forceful requirement to tell a story, certain stories, that are better out than in, things that need explanation, canvases that want to be taken off the haunted wall of the church and hauled into the light of the theatre. Perhaps there is a criminal element to it all, in the end, and it may well be that in my work I am, not in a romantic sense, an outlaw. I note with a heavy heart that Eugene O'Neill never wanted *Long Day's Journey into Night* to be produced.

But all my writing life, and it's only 20 years or so, I've been nagged by this thought. Indeed, the first time I wrote about Mai, her husband, my grandfather, was still alive, and he was angry about that book. We never spoke to each other

again. Is it better now, that he is dead?

I am sure a psychiatrist would have a field day with all this — in fact, a psychiatrist has. Psychiatrists are very nimble on your behalf and are sometimes shocked by what you say to them. They seem to look at you and wonder how you survived. But I do not think it is so bad. All experience is just that, a testing and a hammering. Jesse James had a troubled childhood and look how well he did in life, made money and ended up a legend.

In seeking to understand the old maps and wonders of childhood, where dark and bright were mixed with abandon, the paintings of childhood streaked with dangerous lightning even as under the harmonious trees the figures gathered in the sunlight, I have tried, as a sort of spaceman of disaster, of secrecy and lies you might say, to pull down the old paintings and, choking sometimes with their dust and holiness, drag them out into the courtyard, into a place like this, and have a close and as far as possible a disinterested look. The reward for this is not always a lessening of confusion, but I set great store by, and take great comfort from, the fact that sometimes, another person on God's earth has had a moment of comprehension and even endorsement from a play that I have written.

I've said before that in 1986, when I began to write plays, after some years of fiction and poems, I meant to begin with this one, or at least, this story. To tell the truth, I was always happy to put it aside and attempt another. I shied away from it

like a horse, because I did not want my old grandmother to put the bit in my teeth and ride a mile away, whipping and slashing the while.

My greatest other difficulty was, I knew too much about the subject. I had all the facts, the colours, the moments, at my fingertips. Research, though a comfort to the scholarly part of the brain, can be fatal to an imaginative enterprise. I was content to make *The Steward of Christendom* from very scanty facts, and only ever went to see what truth those facts had long after it was first produced, when the director of the French production was eager to visit the police museum in Dublin Castle. With what a fearful hand I saw the old book of the DMP opened, and half-expected no trace of my great-grandfather would be there. And that he was there, with all his 43 years' service, is neither here nor there. My help and refuge was knowing almost nothing about him, and my freedom. I could not know as little about Mai, so I spent the years between book and play trying to forget her.

**B**UT I DID FINALLY TURN TO HER, though fearfully. Things were different. By then, I knew I would have the immense pragmatic genius of Max Stafford-Clark to restore and renew and reimagine the old painting. And crucially, the loveliest, the bravest and the most magnificent of actresses was willing to be Mai, to hold Mai to the light, to risk Mai. Sinéad Cusack, as everyone agrees, is a glorious actress, and she is glorious in this.

And at the end of the day and the close of the sun, I write for actors. This is because I was the child of an actress, in the Abbey Theatre, and what stands out for me among scores of evenings long ago, is those unexpected performances, Mick Hennessey in *Galileo*, Eamon Kelly in *The Well of the Saints*, and later Godfrey

Quigley in *The Gigli Concert*, when all the town wondered at an actor, and turned their heads to contemplate a miracle. And I can think of no better occupation than to try and supply a particular suit, or in this case, a nightdress, for an actor.



JOHN HAYNES

**MAI'S MEMORIES:** Sinéad Cusack and Nigel Terry in *Our Lady of Sligo*.

Somewhere in the marriage of those things, the inescapable impulse to tell a story, to honour an actor, I have tried to strike a clear note of some sort, to lean forward in the saddle of a play, and keep ahead of the stern and just posse of criticism, theatrical, social and worse.

A night dress. I suppose *Our Lady of Sligo*

is a "night" dress. It is certainly not a dress of the daylight, a dress to go shopping in down the town, to pass from chemist to butcher-shop, or a dress for an evening among other people. It is Mai's last dress. What I carry about with me after the many weeks of rehearsal, and the performances subsequently that I have seen, is the powerful stage emblem Sinéad Cusack has made for this in a sense unimportant woman she plays, an emblem of a figure blowing in the harsh and final wind of time, the fiery wind, her nightdress her only protection. She is like something drifting along in the shadows, a sort of newspaper with indistinct printing, or a remnant of a human woman, under the press of guilt and fear. Sinéad made this image out of the bright shillings in her own extravagant purse.

Donal McCann made his own visionary image in *The Steward of Christendom*. The truth in that time was, I thought in my heart we would be lucky to escape from London reasonably unscathed by criticism, reasonably glad we had undertaken the play for a four-week run in the 60 seats of the old Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. I had no reason to believe that *The Steward*, with its long speeches and obscure subject, would fare any better than average. That Donal and Max brought it to the wild pitch of admiration they did was a miracle of my life.

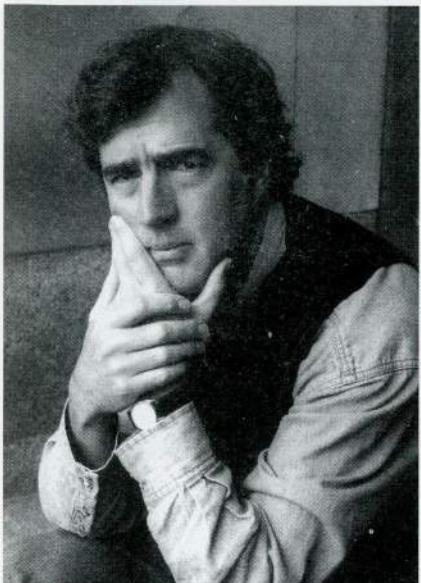
The point I am making is, I wrote *The Steward* in a sort of benign obscurity, for the love of the theatre and because no doubt I was good for nothing else. *Our Lady of Sligo*, though, was produced with a rather fierce-some light of expectation on it, a very different kettle of critical fish. I am very glad it has come through all that, that Sinéad and Nigel Terry and the other tremendous actors have held the day. I delight in the serious and intellectual pleasure of seeing the little circle beside the play in the London

*Independent* newspaper that denotes, Returns Only. But if I don't miss the pennilessness of those other days, I miss the sweet possibilities of quietness. Throw him back into that obscurity and damn his soul, now, you may say as one! But there is a certain circumstance and weather when even to speak is a form of hype, a kind of self-interested self-regard, that I don't know what to do about. This is a roundabout way of saying, I am very glad to be here, but feel an imposter. Of saying that I sort of believe and suspect that plays have scant importance away from the heartbeat, the hurrying blood and illustrative mind and body of the actor. They are for actors.

Believe me, to make a play is a great adventure in itself, to work away and stack those pages and put them in a drawer strangely there to cook, to be taken out some weeks later and be altogether different to how you thought they were. There are greater mysteries, I mean, than being known, which the modern age teaches us to crave, and the worst of having a tiny modicum of such a thing, is that while it is infinitely perishable it also means nothing at all. It is inedible. It leaves you open to attack in an abysmal and pitiful way. What's the good of it? A known writer is one whose goose is cooked, who is that cooked goose. A known writer is a marked man.

**O**UR LADY OF SLIGO IS A SLIGO PLAY, just as my novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* is a Sligo novel. That's to say, when I went down to Sligo to read from the novel I was astonished to find that it was taken as a sort of memorial of the town, especially as it existed in the '30s and '40s. But I never lived in Sligo, certainly not then, and between me and the town is my mother, who was reared there, and for whom Sligo of the '30s and '40s is as a living and often darkening dream. It

seemed strange to me that you could make a town from someone else's stories of it, for that town to be recognisable enough for Sligo people to regard it as a reconstruction of their childhood terrain. There is a lot in African writing about the stories of the



JERRY BAUER

#### THE WRITER AS OUTLAW?: *Playwright and novelist Sebastian Barry*

---

mother, and in this respect I suppose I am an African writer, if not a Sligo one.

When I used to visit Sligo as a child, going to my great-grandparents who were still alive in a little dark house by the river Garrawogue, I had no idea that all about it lay the beauties of the places Yeats had written about, Knocknarea, Ben Bulben and the like. I thought it was only a little dark town set in damply under the rain. And yet Sligo in truth is a fine town set amid the most extravagantly lovely country. I fear that my version of Sligo is

a libel on the truth.

Still and all, when I went down to do that reading, I expected someone might remember something of the people I was writing about. But a town is a kind of film set, and new actors come to fulfil their scripts, and the old companies of actors, once so completely important to themselves, are forgotten. All the arrangements and facts of life are peculiar, yes. Perhaps a play or a book wants to deny this terrible Equity and National Theatre of life, where an actor is doomed to be forgotten, and all that endures is the set.

I have not quite finished with Sligo, or my floating and different Sligo. I am working on a film about one of the minor characters in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, another of the O'Hara wives, a woman I think who had raw deal from life.

The difference with Mai is, she probably dealt more raw deals to others than she got herself. In the writing of her and in the weeks of rehearsal, I had an eye on her redemption, I desired it greatly. I wonder if I think I have achieved it. I hoped that in the space between drinking and dying given her in her room in Jervis Street in Dublin, she might settle her accounts with the living and make her peace at length with her Maker. Oh, it is a hard task for a mere grandson, and I fear I did not achieve it. I tried to, and in failing to do so, I fear I have failed her. Yet, there it is, that floating woman in her nightdress that Sinéad has fashioned from my efforts. I regard that as my recompense and perhaps God, in looking down at his uncertain earth, may say a woman deserving of such an actress, may not be so irretrievable, so inadmissible after all. ■

---

A new edition of *Sebastian Barry's Our Lady of Sligo*, with this essay as introduction, will be published later this year by Methuen.



## Marathon Man

**BRÍAN F. O'BRYNE** already had a bustling acting career in Ireland and New York when he joined the original Druid Theatre cast of an unknown trio of plays called The Leenane Trilogy three years ago. Then the world went Martin McDonagh-mad, and O'Byrne and his fellow cast members were off, from Galway to London and eventually to a year-long stint in New York with the Trilogy's best-known play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Just a few days after his final Broadway performance, **SÍOFRA CAMPBELL** met O'Byrne in New York to talk about what a long, strange trip it's been.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF BRÍAN O'BRYNE AT THE LOCAL 138 IN NEW YORK BY SÍOFRA CAMPBELL



**SÍOFRA CAMPBELL: Talk to me about *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. What was it like to play a role for so long?**

BRIÁN F. O'BYRNE: Well, you see, it happened over a three-year period. I really enjoy the whole the rehearsal process; that's the best part. Then there's the fun of seeing if it works on the stage in the beginning, all that sort of stuff. And it's fun bringing it 'round to different countries, whether it's in England or Australia or here.

But to do it over and over eight times a week, it just becomes about getting ready to do the show so that you keep your energy at a certain level. You know that there are points you have to hit every single night and you start focussing in on the tiniest little details. You think you've changed your performance because you lift a cup at a differ-

ent time — it's as if you've been radical that night.

You start playing mind games for yourself as well. I shouldn't say "you" — I do. There can be times where you go: "Can I just not be here at all and actually get through this scene? Can I just organise my shopping; can I just think about all different things?" That's where it becomes frightening. All of a sudden — it's like waking up — you're back in the scene and there's a thousand people there, and you're like, "fuck, where am I, what the fuck is going on?"

I don't think it's healthy. I don't think actors should do the same show for more than six months. To stand up for this cast, we were, I think, very conscious of that and we talked about every single show afterwards, and that's rare, even on a short run.

**So what was it like being a part of the whole Martin McDonagh phenomenon?**

Over the three years it's taken loads of different twists and turns, obviously. It was amazing to meet him initially. I went into the pub and he was sitting down in the corner and he was this young English guy. After having read the play, I thought it was some guy in his 50s or 60s who'd emigrated from the West of Ireland and had some kind of a romantic view of Ireland. Because when I read the play first I said, "OK, right," but I wasn't really blown away by it. I didn't know how we would approach it. We had to work really hard to get it to work, to get it to carry.

So it was that initially. Then it was about getting to know him and then he became a friend. When all the publicity happened, I think I became really protective of Martin, so his work became completely secondary. It's been interesting to see him cope with this whole rags to riches thing in a very short space of time.

**Now, this wasn't your first time on Broadway, was it, Brian?**

No, dahling, no.

**Is it a very different thing to be on Broadway than anywhere else?**

Yeah. It's completely different. Mainly because you've money. And obviously a bigger space and all that. The Broadway audience tends to be very different as well. It goes from being the regular theatre-goers who are really hungry to see what's new. To then becoming people who might have seen something in a magazine or something so they come to New York and they say, I have to go and see something on Broadway. To then it just being part of a tourist circuit and being sold as bus tours. So the audience changes completely.

What's great is that Broadway is one

place where as actors, you have a very strong community. When you're out and about, you see people from other shows. And it's not that desperate thing where actors are looking for work where there's several people going for auditions together and you don't really get to know other actors. It becomes much more "hey, how ya doin', how's the show going?" You're part of a community.

**You're the only cast member of *Beauty Queen* not to win a Tony award. Are you bitter?**

I have people working on that; I don't think I can actually talk about it at the moment. —Not in the slightest.

**Why — because you know you're going to win one eventually?**

Yeah, Tom [Murphy] won't actually get a chance to be nominated again. I will. Tom's going to go through a very bad phase in his career right now, if my people have done their work right.

No, not at all, it doesn't bother me in the slightest. It was an honour to be nominated and I had such fun there that night, to see each of them get up to accept their award. They were like deer in headlights, the three of them getting up, and it was so funny and so wonderful to see this massive stage and my friends getting up there and saying, "thanks, this is great." I was just thrilled.

**Do you want to talk a bit about your background?**

It's really boring.

**You went to Trinity. Do you think training is important for an actor?**

You have to have some talent or natural ability or else all the training in the world won't help you. But the notion that actors as distinct from anybody else in the arts



don't need training . . . You won't get an opera singer who just goes, "ah well sure, lookit, I can sing." It's changing now in Ireland, though — it seems to have gone 360 degrees the other way; there seems to be a big culture of training now.

But before, the Irish thing that anyone can get up on stage was just bullshit. It leads to actors with a very small repertoire. Now, they can be brilliant at doing what they do; in a certain part, they can be absolutely astounding. But it won't

lead to a lifetime in theatre playing a vast amount of roles right across the spectrum. Which is something that I want to do.

**Yeah, there's definitely a case for training to get the technical stuff down. And then the notion of an apprenticeship, which is quite an old-fashioned notion in this day and age.**

When first I came over to America, it was five years after I finished school before I got my first lead. And I was chewing at

the bit, I was walking on basically with a spear and going, "this is fuckin' ridiculous; I can do that much better than that person there." Now, I don't know actually whether I could have, but the fact is you're watching and learning. Plus the whole notion of building sets and working all around theatre — I did all of that. Most people coming out now just want to be movie stars. So one film can catapult them, next thing they've a whole list of films and they're making a shitload of money and all that but . . .

**Yeah, because the thing about film is that when you do a film role, it defines you in a way that theatre doesn't. Film is a permanent record. When you talk to a lot of agents or casting directors here they have people immediately categorised by that one thing or those two things that they've done.**

That's also coming into theatre as well. Because budgets are going through the roof so they can't afford to take risks. Risk-takers are very few and far between. That's why someone like Garry [Hynes] is for me such a godsend. I mean, she cast me in this part and I was totally wrong for it, 28 years of age, but she cast me. If you picked up the script of *The Leenane Trilogy* and read the three different parts that I ended up playing, looking at me, a person would not cast me in any of those parts. I was wrong for any of them. Too young, too old, just wrong. Garry believes in actors and in their abilities. I'm not going to be playing the thick Cavan lad every time, which would be a stereotype.

#### **Are you saying you are a thick Cavan lad?**

I fucking am. So usually I would be wheeled on for that. But Garry's willing to take the risk to go beyond that. If you have a situation where the director and

maybe the writer decide who the characters are and they get the type of actors who fit those parts, then you don't have collaboration — the actor is not actually part of a process. Whereas if you cast an actor who is an equal part in that set-up, which is hopefully what I am . . . I mean, we changed an awful lot in each of Martin's plays. They became something that wasn't just on the page, a much more muscular type of thing. An actor having an equal say in that process, as a creative force rather than being a body that just goes on and mouths certain words — that's where it becomes hugely exciting.

#### **What do you make of Irish theatre being the hottest thing around?**

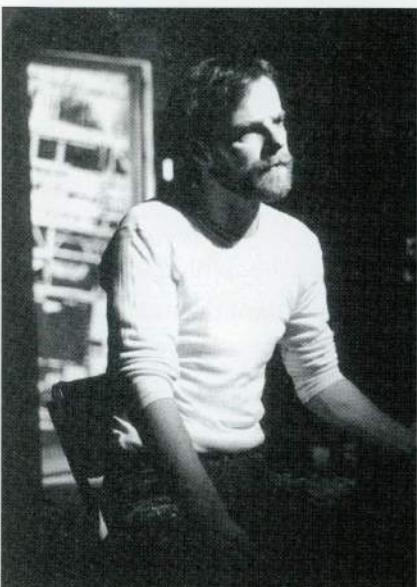
I'd prefer it was hotter in Ireland. I'd prefer it if Irish people thought it was the hottest thing around. So many Irish people have come to see *Beauty Queen* in New York and they ask, "and is it going to Ireland?" They've just discovered it because it's on Broadway. We're very lucky in that we've a huge amount of writers for a place so small. And obviously it's great from an actor's point of view. Within the industry we're on a level with British theatre; we're no longer second best or in a separate category. I think we're more than a flavour now — we've become part of the diet.

#### **Back to your background. After you finished the acting course at Trinity, you came straight to New York?**

No, when I finished the course, then I really thought I didn't want to be an actor. So I went to London, because I was going out with a girl over there and she was an actor so I let her do all the acting and I kind of worked at odd jobs. Then I got a Green Card and came over here and did a show and I was like, right, I do want to act.

**And then how did your move back to Ireland come about?**

Myself and this writer, Tony Kavanagh, had been doing plays in bars and small theatres in New York. It was a lot of fun. It was really exciting. You see, that's my biggest, biggest thrill — working with writers. That's what really turns me on. I'm not a writer; I'm always attracted to people who do things that I can't do. Then Tony's play, *The Drum*, went to



AMELIA STEIN

**UNLIKELY HERO:** Brian O'Byrne as Pato Dooley in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

Ireland and I went back with it, and ended up doing a couple of different plays in the Peacock and the Gate.

**Was it a deliberate choice at that point to go back to Ireland to stay, or were you just going with that play?**

I'd been here six or seven years at that

point; I'd been working away and I'd done a year on Broadway and worked at Lincoln Center and other reputable places. But I didn't want to just go back to Ireland with a resume and go, "Hello, my name is Brian O'Byrne and I'm from Cavan and I was in this play and it was a big hit in America — no, trust me it was." Because people don't really care about that. I wanted to go home because nobody in my village had seen what I was at — it was like, you're an actor, in other words you're a fuckin' dosser, you're not working. I really wanted them, and my family, to see that I have actually made a choice in my life.

So I said, I'm not going to go home until I have a play. And thankfully *The Drum* went; I went back in Dublin in a part that I loved that I'd done before. Not caring about structures or knowing the right people that I suppose you should know. Had I started off in Dublin, I might have been intimidated by certain people in authority who could possibly give me employment. When I went back I was like, 'I don't give two fucks, I can walk back out the door and go back to America. So nothing that you say or do to me is going to bother me. I know my worth.'

Because I'd done it from the bottom here in New York without agents or anything like that. I think that coming to New York was a bigger thing. That empowered me. The East Village gave me a sense of myself and my own worth. The perception can be when you're entering an industry that you have to play along with certain rules and you have to get on certain people's sides. Which I don't know if that's true or not.

**Anything else you want to say?**

I'm available for work. And since I haven't won a Tony, I'm much cheaper than Tom Murphy. ■

# Fresh Magic

*How does a contemporary writer collaborate with a playwright who's been dead for 200 years? How does a veteran independent theatre company find new life when one of its founders moves on? And how might these two mysteries be connected?* SEONA

**MACRÉAMOINN** introduces the revamped Rough Magic Theatre Company and their latest project, *The Whisperers*.

**T**ake three women: Frances Sheridan, Elizabeth Kuti and Lynne Parker. They are the leading characters in the story of Rough Magic Theatre Company's next production, a story that begins with a fragment of an 18th-century play and finishes with the celebration of a new era for one of Ireland's leading independent theatre companies.

The arc of creativity that encompasses these figures extends back two centuries to the time of Frances Sheridan, novelist, playwright, and mother of Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

By any account Frances Sheridan was a successful writer; her novel *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph* was translated into French and sold out in its first edition within three months. Her first foray into playwriting was also a success; *The Discovery* was considered the finest comedy of the age, featuring a prologue written by Boswell and with David Garrick in a leading role. The expanded literary career of Frances Sheridan seemed secure. But the curious ambiguity of social mores at the time was to wreak havoc

on women who strayed inadvertently beyond a thin blue-blooded line of political correctness, whether in artistic or scientific endeavour. Sheridan, despite her establishment fans, was not immune. Her second play, *The Dupe*, was lacerated by the critics, not for dull pacing or flawed structure but for its language and representation of women which did not accord with the received notions of delicacy and femininity.

The play was deemed to be full of bawdiness and licentiousness, and its female characters in particular were said to flaunt unnatural immodesty. Women of the period might be capable of introducing inoculation against smallpox or seeking Vindication



**THE PLAYWRIGHT:**  
Frances Sheridan

for the Rights of Women (in Mary Wollenstonecraft's case) but at all times they had to give thought to their public and private image. Wit and chastity in women were considered irreconcilable characteristics. So, when Frances Sheridan proffered her third play, *The Trip to Bath*, David Garrick rejected it on the grounds that it transgressed gentility and featured lewd language. The play's scenario was that of an older man setting about the seduction of a younger woman and an older woman making similar moves on a younger man — too much for the sensibilities of her contemporaries. And so Sheridan's theatrical career came to an abrupt end and the play was never produced. Until . . .

Enter Liz Kuti, actor, writer, and research student at Trinity College, who in her exploration of 18th-century women's writing encountered a manuscript fragment of *The Trip to Bath*. "I was drawn to the play," says Kuti, "the keen social observation, the brilliant characters, and I got very excited by the notion of trying to finish it. At the end of Act Three, the point of real drama has arrived . . . and then we read 'here the manuscript ends.'"

In trying to write an authentic-seeming ending to the play, Kuti found herself in the role of detective. "For the story line," says Kuti, "I first thought, where are the clues? Basically, in the structure and conception of this type of play, the clues to the ending are all there in the first three acts . . . I was fairly technical about it all. The plotting was almost mathematical: Act Four spells disaster and in Act Five the resolution is produced." Kuti worked closely too on each character: "I examined their speech patterns and their turns of phrase, those indications of personality." She found the characterisation particularly strong, doubtless owing to Sheridan's previous experience as a novelist. And while the play had never been publicly



**THE DIRECTOR:** *Rough Magic's* artistic director, Lynne Parker

performed, it clearly had been aired within the family; Kuti notes in the character of Mrs. Truefort the origins for Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Sheridan's play *The Rivals*; the two share the same effervescent linguistic contortions. Such an interesting piece of revitalised theatrical history, and yet it had never been performed. Until . . .

Enter personage number three: Lynne Parker, artistic director and founding member of Rough Magic, well known for their interpretations of costume dramas and their commitment to new writing. Parker first learned about *The Trip to Bath* during Rough Magic's production last year of *The School for Scandal*, written by — coincidentally — Richard Sheridan. Kuti, who was appearing in the production in the pivotal role of Maria, told Parker of her work on the Frances Sheridan script. Parker, her curiosity piqued, scheduled a rehearsed reading, and liked what she heard. "Frances Sheridan had a very modern sensibility; I liked the play and — unusually —



**THE SCHOLAR:** Actor/playwright Liz Kuti

the female characters were very strong, essential to the plot and not mere accessories to the male stories. I just felt that this is us." In keeping with the strong female energy emanating from the script, Parker has assembled an all-female creative team for the project — lighting designer Tina McHugh, set designer Bláithín Sheerin, and costume designer Jacqueline Kobler.

**T**HE KUTI/SHERIDAN PROJECT, under the new title *The Whisperers* (Parker felt it needed a more intrigue-laden title than *The Trip to Bath*, which remains as a subtitle) will be the first production of a revitalised and partially re-staffed Rough Magic. When founding member and producer Siobhán Bourke decided last year to leave the company to focus on developing film projects, many wondered if this would spell the end of the line for Rough Magic. But Parker and her board decided instead to re-energise, regroup, and forge ahead with a new producer who would

build on the company's already-strong foundations. After an international search, Rough Magic found its new producer in Deborah Aydon, general manager of London's Bush Theatre, which has played host to a number of Irish writers and companies over the years, including Rough Magic. Parker sees Aydon's decision to come on board as "a terrific vote of confidence for Rough Magic and for theatre in Ireland." [See opposite for a profile of Aydon.]

The lack of viable mid-sized performance spaces in Dublin has been thwarting the development of many independent theatre and dance companies, and Rough Magic's history and identity have certainly been shaped by the fact that they have existed so long without a permanent home. While long-term plans include creating a new space for themselves and other companies, in the short term they've creatively addressed the problem by getting out of town; *The Whisperers* will premiere at Limerick's Belltable Arts Centre (a connection forged in part through the new Rough Magic company manager Loughlin Deegan's past links to Limerick; he used to serve as the Belltable's press officer.) The production will have its Dublin premiere not in the centre city but in the new Civic Theatre in Tallaght.

*The Whisperers*, as Lynne Parker rightly suggests, offers "an ironic coda to *The School for Scandal*." She might also add that it offers a stimulating start to Rough Magic's next ten years. Doubtless Frances Sheridan would have heartily approved, and would have delighted in watching how our century's politically correct audiences will receive her bawdy and riotous drama. ■

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

# New at the Helm

Karen Fricker meets Rough Magic's new producer, Deborah Aydon.

DEBORAH AYDON COMES TO Dublin after eight years as managing director of London's Bush Theatre. Having begun her career working in small-scale British regional touring with Trestle Theatre Company and then serving a stint as an administrator with Cheek by Jowl, Aydon took on her position at the Bush in 1991 at the same time as artistic director Dominic Dromgoole. "We were both very young — 26," says Aydon, "and had more energy and chutzpah than experience."

Despite Dromgoole and Aydon's greenness — or probably, in part, because of it — the Bush boomed in the 1990s, securing its place as one of Britain's focal theatres for new writing. They not only commissioned and produced a record number of productions in their tiny West London home, but pursued and fostered ongoing lives for the theatre's productions through touring, West End transfers, and first-look deals with film companies.

"We had to close down for six months in 1997," recalls Aydon, "while the brewery that owns the building redid the pub underneath the theatre, and it was very gratifying when we did reopen how much feedback we got, how much people had missed the theatre, and that was an affirmation of the place we'd made for ourselves." During that renovation, Dromgoole moved on, and Mike Bradwell took over as artistic director. "I'm glad to say the theatre hasn't lost momentum since the changeover," says Aydon.

Current developments at the Bush include embryonic plans for a new building — "a new kind of pub theatre where it's a theatre with a pub and not vice versa," according to Aydon, and a major lottery grant — £200,000 over three years — which they are channeling into writers' development.

Given the Bush's success, what would make

Aydon want to move on? The primary reason she cites is her interest in Irish plays: "The Bush has always had a very strong relationship with Irish theatre and Irish writing — from Billy Roche's *Wexford Trilogy*, which we produced, to Rough Magic's own *Digging for Fire* and *New Morning*, through to Bedrock, Corcadorka, many of Conor McPherson's plays, and now Mark O'Rowe. So it just seemed like a natural move to me."



"And," continues Aydon, "Lynne [Parker]'s plans for the future of Rough Magic are incredibly exciting — more new writing and possibly a new venue in Dublin which would be managed by Rough Magic but that would host other Irish companies as well as ones from Britain and the rest of Europe." Since accepting the Rough Magic job late last summer, Aydon has split her time between Dublin and London, which she admits is "exhausting. But I've got the laptop and the e-mail, so it's almost possible to be in two places at the same time. I'll be in Dublin permanently from the beginning of August." ■

# Not the Same Old Razzle-Dazzle

*Over the last six years, writer/director CONALL MORRISON has rapidly moved to the forefront of Irish theatre. He has directed at many theatres throughout Ireland, from Belfast to Kilkenny to Dublin, and is an associate director at the Abbey Theatre. His international reputation too is on the rise; his acclaimed production of the mini-megamusical Martin Guerre is currently on tour around the U.K., and will open in the U.S. in September. JOCELYN CLARKE caught up with Morrison in a Dublin hostelry to talk about directing — how, what, and most importantly, why.*

**JOCELYN CLARKE:** You started directing at Edinburgh University. What was it about directing that you particularly liked?

**CONALL MORRISON:** It satisfied a range of things. Working with people was a wonderful conduit for my imagination. I thought I could address things, issues and ideas in this wonderful kind of active environment which I found very energising. It's not that I do it as an ongoing psychotherapy course — though there is an element of that — but I get to really dig in. If you are working on a range of things — from *Translations* and *Three Sisters* to *King Lear* to a play I wrote myself, about Lenny Bruce — you get to muck into the most incredible range of ideas and experiences. Writing and directing ultimately gives me a kind of eloquence that I don't feel I have in natural life. And just getting involved and being in control of a playpen like that I found hugely intoxicating.

I also discovered that I had a certain aptitude for it, that it runs in my veins. When I was directing something, I realised that there was a core of an idea in there that really demanded articulation or there was something about the dramatic language of a piece that says "come on, take me on board and engage with me and turn me into a three-dimensional event." All of that really began to cohere for me. And all the while you are also trying to work out whether you are actually just trying to prolong your student career or if you are just deferring getting the job in the bank. But I found that my imagination, my intellect and my emotions were very deeply engaged in the work that I was doing. So I stuck with it.

**The projects that you choose always involve a full-on engagement, not only for you as a director but also for the audience as well.**

I would like to think so. I am very aware of the preciousness of stage time. On the whole, I think people would rather spend 20 minutes at a bus stop in the rain than 20 minutes in a theatre where something is boring them. The capacity for the stage to be so electrifying, so engaging, and so dynamic, has a flip side — that you can also be so bored, so frustrated, so dismayed, so distressed by what is on the stage. So I take very seriously the contract with the audience.

That doesn't mean that I am going to try and give an audience *42nd Street* every time. It can be absolutely anything, from the shortest, smallest one-man show up to an entire tap dancing razzle-dazzle spectacular, but each individual piece must know what its individual character is, and precisely why it has the right to be on the stage, and precisely why it has the right to demand engagement and concentration from an audience in a live environment. It's not a little manifestation of somebody's artistic ego. It has to exist as one side of the equation, the other one being the audience.

Unless it knows why it's going to connect into that, it's not a piece of theatre, though it could be a very fine piece of literature, something you might want to read or listen to.

There is nothing easier than turning

people off theatre, and there is a wee bit in me that believes that the theatre community has a communal responsibility to avoid letting that happen. Unless something is special — not special because somebody is hanging from a rope 90 feet over the stage, but unless every single thing on the stage has that degree of hav-



**BEHIND THE SCENES:** Conall Morrison in rehearsal for Martin Guerre at the West Yorkshire Playhouse

MICHAEL LE POUR TRENCH/COURTESY WEST YORKSHIRE PLAYHOUSE

ing really carved out why this individual story needs to be told by these individuals to these individuals, unless that flint-hard sense of identity for each piece is properly explored and properly honoured, then theatre becomes a gray, boring, dead art.

**How did you find moving from the relative literary austerity of the Abbey Theatre to the razzle-dazzle of the Cameron Mackintosh organisation, who are producing *Martin Guerre*?**

It wasn't really razzle-dazzle because we did *Martin Guerre* in the West Yorkshire Playhouse, which was a very deliberate decision on Cameron's part. What this production needed was to get away from the potentially deadening environment of the West End, and what it needed was a more Spartan and more rigorous approach. Doing it outside of London was very helpful psychologically because the piece has such a history with its two previous productions, neither of which were viewed as being total successes even though it ran for two years in the West End and won an Olivier Award. Compared to the 14-year run of *Les Miz* and the ten-year run of *Miss Saigon*, *Martin Guerre* was considered to be the runt of the litter. Physically and psychologically, taking it away from London was very liberating for all concerned.

What was good about it was working with people who were at the top of the musical theatre profession — [bookwriter and co-lyricist Alain] Boublil, [composer and co-lyricist Claude-Michel] Schönberg and co-lyricist Stephen Clark, the orchestrator and musical director Bill Brohn, designers John Napier and Howard Harrison — people who were at the top of the tree. I have a certain musical ear but I am not musically trained. I said to the cast that I wouldn't know a key if it shoved itself up my hole and unlocked my arse, but I have a good stomach for it. But working with people who were so knowledgeable and so experienced was a delight, and because they were all very passionate about what they did there was no sense of "who's the Paddy newcomer?"

I was very up-front with the cast. I had

worked in music theatre before, and I had used a lot of music in my shows — I had just done *The Colleen Bawn* with a live musical score by Conor Linehan — but I had never done a musical before where



MICHAEL LE POUR TRENCH

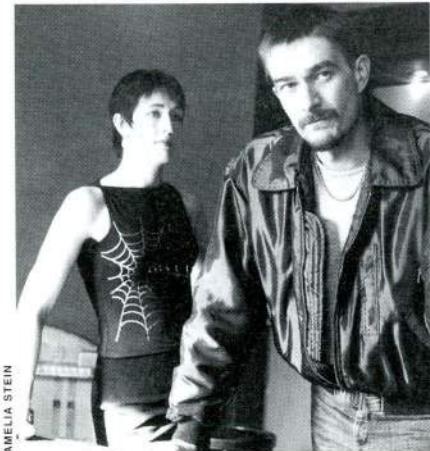
**PASSION PLAY:** Matthew Cammelle and Joanna Riding in *Martin Guerre*.

everything is through-sung, where everyone is wearing high-tech radio mikes, that has a serious band and a whole lot of money being thrown at it. Because these people had all come from the world of musical theatre, I told them that they would have to bear with me, and that if they found I was talking nonsense, they should point it out and we would move on.

But in the meantime, I threw it back on them and demanded that they do a lot of research, that we would have a lot of discussions and would really go into the story and the characters in great depth — which a lot of them wouldn't have done before. So we kind of met halfway, and my kind of inexperience was matched by some (but not all) of their inexperience.

Ultimately it was great craic.

While my future is very much going to lie in the world of, as it were, straight drama, just to put my toe in the pond of musical theatre and to realise how high the emotions are that it excites, how passionate the following is, and how high the stakes are is hugely exciting stuff. And that includes the risk factor. If you fall, you fall from a great height and you fall hard — especially with a piece that had such a difficult history. I had — and indeed it came quite easily — to direct *Martin Guerre* as a brand-new piece. The



AMELIA STEIN

**WEB OF DECEIT:** Cathy White and Vincent Higgins in Morrison's production of *As the Beast Sleeps* by Gary Mitchell

plan was to start with first principles and from scratch, with a new team, new script, and a new theatre, but at the same time to be real about it, because there was a history. And I think we came out the other side of it.

Your next production is Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* in the Abbey, as part

of the Friel Festival. Are you looking forward to it?

I am hugely looking forward to it. I have directed *Translations* in Edinburgh and *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Lyric in Belfast. And just working on Friel is an absolute delight. *The Freedom of the City* particularly excites me because it hasn't been done since its Abbey premiere in 1973. I think it is an astonishing piece of theatre. It is incredibly visual, robust and highly emotive, but yet it is beautifully balanced in the way that Friel deals with the sensitivity of the topic — Bloody Sunday. Though the play is very much its own entity, it is also very much in the world of that time — the early 1970's in the North, particularly Derry. I am intimidated and wary of it because it is such a sensitive topic, especially because the Bloody Sunday Tribunal is up and running as we speak, and because that event has such a dark iconic status in Nationalist memory and mythology. So I am really going to have dig into it, talk about it, think about it, and I think it's going to be very challenging.

*The Freedom of the City* has huge epic Brechtian elements — reporters and ballad singers — as well as a beautifully structured drama of three people at its centre. I think it is going to take people by surprise because it's just sitting there at the bottom of the Friel drawer in a lot of people's minds. But it's going to come bollocking off that stage with a considerable level of white heat. Regardless of whether I get it right directorially or not, just re-animating that play at this point in time — in the aftermath of Enniskillen and Omagh and our responses to those events — it is going to be quite a remarkable event. So I am a bit scared by it but I am hugely looking forward to it. ■

Jocelyn Clarke is theatre critic of The Sunday Tribune.

# The Doctor Is In

*Operating Theatre are undertaking their first project in over ten years. WILLIE WHITE re-introduces the pioneering music-theatre company and their new production, Angel/Babel.*

**T**HERE IS CONSIDERABLE ANTICIPATION and excitement, and a fair amount of curiosity, surrounding *Angel/Babel*, Operating Theatre's new production, which opens in March at project @ the mint. Operating Theatre are one of few companies in Ireland devoted to experimenting with the interaction between

music and theatre, and between the performers' bodies and technology. It has been over ten years since the company last performed, and longer still since they created a new work.

Operating Theatre was "initiated," to use their own word, by composer Roger Doyle and performer Olwen Fouere in 1980. It has become something of a joke between the two that their artistic partnership came about because Doyle was looking for something more interesting than a pair of speakers to accompany a performance of one of his taped compositions. The two first met while they were both working at Project Arts Centre; their first production was *Thalia*, presented at Project in 1978.

Operating Theatre was soon formalised as a company to produce a form of theatre into which music was completely integrated. Their early output was eclectic and international: "Rapid Eye

Movements" and "Blue Light and Alpha Waves"—two 7-inch singles; a collaboration with James Coleman called *Ignotum per Ignotus*, which toured Holland; and *Switch*, with text by Philip Morgan, which was presented in a festival of new music at the National Concert Hall and featured Fouere as a telephone switchboard operator, who listens to the disembodied voices speaking down the telephone wires: "I work in a small room... I work in a small room in a large building... I work the switch... at night I hear the voices speaking down the wires." *Switch* employed the rudimentary sampling capabilities of the then-cutting edge Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument.

Operating Theatre's breakthrough came via a Special Theatre Projects bursary from the Arts Council, which allowed them to embark on their largest-scale project yet, *The Diamond Body*. The piece, with text by Aidan Carl Matthews,



**SELF-REFLEXIVE:** Olwen Fouere in Operating Theatre's *The Diamond Body*

told the story of a hermaphrodite owner of a gay disco on a Greek island. Fouere played both the hermaphrodite, Stephanos, and his lover, her voice amplified using a radio mike. Doyle wrote and performed a continuous musical score for the piece, which played at Project Arts Centre in 1984.

The company attempted an even more elaborate integration of music and performance in *The Pentagonal Dream* (1986)

with text by Sebastian Barry. Fouere's voice was treated to produce the piece's five male voices, and was filtered through a Vocorder to trigger Doyle's score. The company also undertook extensive touring with *The Diamond Body*, to London's Bush Theatre, Glasgow Mayfest, the Avignon Festival, and finally Caracas in 1988, but losses sustained through touring meant that the Venezuelan dates were to be the last

for Operating Theatre for some time.

Fouere and Doyle continued to work together on various non-company projects, including the Gate's celebrated production of Berkoff's *Salome*, in which Fouere played the title role and Doyle composed the music. Doyle, meanwhile, was working on the beginnings of a large-scale composition, the *Babel* project, based on the idea of a musical tower of Babel in which many different styles of music inhabit its various chambers. The diverse styles are broadcast over the fictional radio station KBBL (which, to Doyle's dismay, shares call letters with the cartoon Simpsons' radio station).

It was the creation of the new Arts Council Mise-en-Scene scheme — special funding for innovative or offbeat projects — that has enabled the rebirth of Operating Theatre and the creation of the *Angel/Babel* project. Doyle is creating the music for the production as a continuation of his ongoing *Babel* compositions; the *Angel* component grew out of Fouere's observation of a contemporary societal preoccupation with angels.

"I'm not really anxious about the millennium," says Fouere, "but I have noticed the huge increase in reported sightings of angels and I am interested in what that indicates." What particularly fascinates Fouere are the resonances between the a network of angelic presences and the networks created by contemporary electronic means of communication. "Angels have historically been the bearers of messages," she says, "now it seems that technology has assumed that role."

At the centre of this concept is the analogy of the World Wide Web as a nervous system, a system around which the body of an angel begins to form as a sort of incarnation of electronic impulses. Rather than starting from a conventional script,

which the collaborators felt would limit the shape of the final performance, Fouere has built what "script" for the piece exists out of fragments of text throughout the development process.

In the show, Fouere, the sole performer, will be suspended a metre above the stage floor with sensors attached to her body, which will be used to trigger lights and sounds — she will initiate sequences of Doyle's music rather than having the music be a set score which would dictate her performance. Refreshingly, the company are explicit that the emphasis in their work is on the theatrical, not on the catchall and often confused idea of multimedia.

The director of the project is Leon Ingulsrud, an American director and performer who has worked extensively with Tadashi Suzuki and Robert Wilson and now is a New York-based member of Anne Bogart's SITI company. Together Ingulsrud, Fouere, and Doyle, along with lighting designer Paul Keogan, are attempting to find theatrical expression for the abstract ideas behind the piece; Ingulsrud finds ironic parallels between their search for form for the piece and the nebulous form of the angel itself — what they're discovering, as they work, is "an expanding sense of how intangible all of it is."

Despite the fact that it features a performer floating in space, the creators of *Angel/Babel* seem to have their feet planted firmly on the ground. The piece represents another chapter in a two-decade long exploration of the relationship between music and theatre, embarked on by artists who believe strongly that there is a need and an audience for their kind of experimentation. Audiences will be able to judge for themselves when *Angel/Babel* begins performances on 19 March. ■

# Scots Theatre—with an Irish Accent

*Three of the most dynamic individuals working in Scottish theatre today are women who were born in Northern Ireland. MARK FISHER reports.*

**T**HEY'RE YOUNG, they're female, they're Irish, and they're running Scottish theatre. Or so it is easy to assume when you look at where the energy is coming from among the small-scale companies in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Take Nicola McCartney and her Glasgow-based LookOut company, Judith

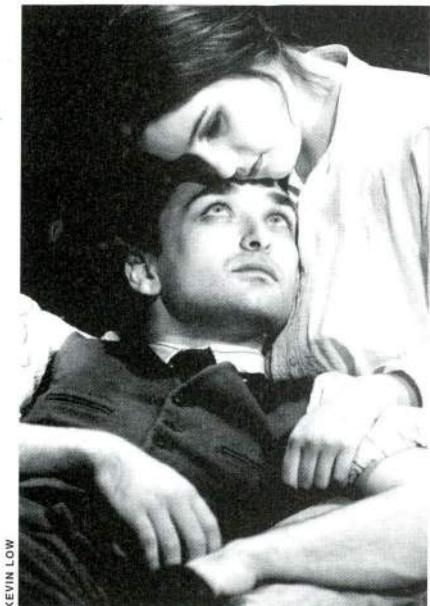
Doherty of Edinburgh's Grid Iron, and Cathie Boyd of Glasgow's Theatre Cryptic, and you'll see three of the most talked about figures on the Scottish theatre scene. All are from Northern Ireland — and none of them has hit 30.

Judith Doherty, 27, from County Derry, is the administrator-cum-producer of Grid Iron, a company earning a reputation for exquisite site-specific performances. In the Edinburgh Festival of 1997, she lured audiences deep beneath the council's City Chambers into the once sealed-off (and reputedly haunted) Mary King's Close for a late night staging of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, brilliantly directed by Ben Harrison. The show was a run-away success, and was repeated later in the year. It toured to the London Dungeon, and most recently to the Belfast Festival Fringe. Doherty has a gift for persuading

managers of non-theatre buildings that Grid Iron is what they need.

In the summer of 1998, the company repeated its success, this time with *Gargantua*, a foodie extravaganza inspired by *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais, performed in various rooms and floors of the hitherto secret bowels of Edinburgh's Central Library. Doherty is hoping to bring it to Belfast, as she is the company's millennium show.

It's important to her that Grid Iron be seen as a Scottish company, but at the same time she is unashamed of her Irish roots. "My background certainly informed my enthusiasm to come over to Belfast with *The Bloody Chamber*," says Doherty, who is unusual among administrators for being her company's driving force. "The theatre world in Scotland is a lot more active than it seems to be in Ireland. Doing a site-specific show in



KEVIN LOW

**STAR-CROSSED:** Joel Strachan and Iona Carbarns in Nicola McCartney's *Heritage*

Belfast raised a lot of eyebrows, whereas in Edinburgh it's just taken for granted. I don't think we could realise the plans we have for the company if we were based in Northern Ireland."

Before last year, Belfast's Nicola McCartney, 26, had done everything she could to play down her Northern Irish roots. Her plays for her own LookOut Theatre Company had tackled date rape, spiritual quest, revenge, and intercontinental travel, studiously avoiding anything so blatant as the Irish question. Then came *Heritage*, her autumn 1998 debut for Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, and her most accomplished work to date.

It was the play she said she'd never write. Born to non-practising Protestant

parents, with both Orangemen and Nationalists in the family, McCartney wasn't going to psychoanalyse her homeland just because it was expected of her. What was more, she felt plays about the Troubles rarely said anything people didn't already know. But when the idea for *Heritage* hit her, it was too great to resist.

Set in Saskatchewan, 1914-21, *Heritage* was a poetic exploration of the way exiles hold on to their old identities even several generations down the line. It was a Romeo and Juliet-style tale of Protestant girl meeting Catholic boy, the twist being that they're an ocean away from the country where those labels might mean something. In the absence of direct experience, they fashion an Irish mythology to their own liking.

As the Scottish parliament approaches, every playwright in Scotland seems to be addressing the issue of national and cultural identity, but McCartney brings a different slant: "I'm not writing about Scottish identity. I'm a voluntary exile, and what I'm writing about is specific to Ireland. It's universal too. Frontiers are falling in Europe, and there's a converse need to absolutely define your own cultural identity. It's a need for solidarity. People need to feel like they belong to a group."

IT'S A MEASURE of the receptiveness of the arts world that an Irish playwright like McCartney can talk about her home country by way of Canada, and still be welcomed as one of a generation of promising Scottish dramatists. Belfast-born Cathie Boyd, 27, artistic director of Theatre Cryptic, is someone who straddles such national barriers as a matter of course. Her 1998 Belfast Festival show, *Prologue*, was typical in its bringing together of Hungarian dancers,

Scottish musicians, and a script based on a book by Isabel Allende.

Since launching Theatre Cryptic while still a student in 1991, Boyd has tackled Brian Friel's *Lovers*; a new piece called *Child-Lover* by Michele Roberts; an adaptation of Françoise Sagan's novel *Bonjour Tristesse*; a monologue lifted from the Molly Bloom section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* called *Parallel Lines*, which was also seen in Belfast and in Dublin; and *Celle-La* by Québécois writer Daniel Danis.

Music is a fundamental part of Boyd's work. She commissions and develops the scores for her works in the same way that a dramaturg would work on a script. She has forged a working pattern based on the principle that a high investment yields a high return. Almost uniquely in Scotland, Theatre Cryptic commits itself to only one new show a year, the offspring of a lengthy gestation period. The theory is that the finished product will be of sufficient quality to justify a long and healthy life.

Boyd's approach, she says, has less to do with her Irish upbringing than with her chance arrival as a student in Glasgow at the height of its celebrations as European City of Culture in 1990. The ambitious international programme exposed her to a style of theatre-making she had never seen before. Within three months of her arrival she had the chance to see Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates*, Peter Brook's *Tempest*, and three shows by the Wooster Group. It was a special time, unique in the UK, and it gave Boyd a model to aspire to.

Surprisingly, she's never met Judith Doherty, but she shares her experience of finding a climate more receptive to theatrical creativity in Scotland than in Northern Ireland. The key influence of Belfast, where she had set out to be an actress, was to convince her of the kind of theatre she didn't want to make. "Growing



SHANNON TOFTS

**ECLECTIC:** Theatre Cryptic's Cathie Boyd

up there, and always witnessing political issues represented on stage, taught me exactly what I didn't want to do," she says. "I wanted to make something which was very beautiful to look at."

She adds, "Within Northern Ireland there's still a traditional approach to the arts. Scotland has a reputation for doing innovative work, even in relation to England or Wales. If I had stayed in Belfast, I wouldn't have founded a theatre company. I always knew I wanted to work in the arts, but only when I came to Glasgow, and said I'd work at Tramway did I know that the theatre is my language."

With the political situation shifting and settling in Northern Ireland and with culture on an upswing there, perhaps the next generation of theatre artists will not feel the need to leave their home country as did McCartney, Doherty, and Boyd. In the meantime, Scots theatre will continue to benefit from the burgeoning careers of these still-young artists. ■

*Mark Fisher is theatre critic of the Glasgow-based Herald newspaper.*



KEITH BRAME

## Barnstorming Belfast

*In response to comments that it was programming for an established audience rather than developing a new one, the 1998 Belfast Festival at Queen's inaugurated a Festival Fringe and Young at Art, a children's festival. Here's a first-person report from the directors of the two festivals, CAOIMHE McAVINCHEY and ANNA CUTLER, about the challenges and rewards of their first year on the job.*

**I** gently pushed open the last toilet door. A young man, with his hands thrust deep into his anorak pockets, looked up at me and wordlessly gestured for me to join him in his cubicle. I squeezed in. He closed the door behind us. I said nothing. He stepped towards me and whispered in my ear:

- What do you keep under your kitchen sink?
- A box of crockery and an old kettle belonging to the woman who lived in the flat before me.
- Have you ever watched group sex?
- How many is a group?
- More than three.
- Then no.
- Tell me a secret.

I paused.

—I can't. It wouldn't be a secret then.

He looked disappointed and opened the cubicle door for me to leave.

If you had gone to Full Moon, an installation in the Victorian toilets in Albert Square during the Belfast Festival Fringe, you might have encountered this man.

**I**HAD BEEN STUDYING and working on various performance projects in New York when Séan Doran, the programming director of the Belfast Festival at Queen's (BFQ), asked if I would be interested in coming back to Belfast to make a Fringe happen. I had been in Belfast for the '97 Festival and had been taken aback, not only at the diversity and quality of the BFQ programme but with Belfast city itself. The pubs were heaving and café culture was blossoming. At Robert Wilson's *Saints and Singing* I heard flickers of foreign accents in the foyer and saw a young enthused audience in amongst the familiar

---

**FRINGE FAVOURITE:** Grid Iron's The Bloody Chamber (*at left*)

faces — a much more cosmopolitan gathering than the parochial Belfast I had known and left. So I said my good-byes to New York and arrived in Belfast in May with six months to make the first Belfast Festival Fringe in nearly two decades.

One of the first, and most difficult, decisions we had to make was: Should we programme or should we have an open-door policy? Nowhere in the great artistic notebook in the sky does it state that a Fringe must have an open policy, but because Edinburgh, which has the best-known Fringe Festival in the world, is an all-comers affair, this has been read as the norm.

The primary defenders of open programming are those who see the Fringe as a learning ground and a stepping stone into the arts world. Open programming, however, often riles punters who have seen too many under-rehearsed and overpriced shows, many of them hosted under the umbrella of a Fringe. There is no doubt that having an open programming policy means that you are leaving the public susceptible to seeing some things that might make them wish they'd never left the house. But there is also the possibility that you, and they, may stumble upon a gem that invigorates and enthralls.

With this in mind the Belfast Fringe became a platform for anybody interested in showing their work, and a framework within which participants would receive co-ordinated support in doing so. There would be no selection procedures, the only limitation being the availability of space and the registration deadline.

Unlike Edinburgh, Belfast doesn't have a

wealth of equipped venues or a steady influx of visitors. However, it does have a thriving arts community. If nothing else Belfast Fringe '98 would be a call to these artists to use the Fringe as a platform to show their work at a time when there would be a considerable amount of international attention focused on the city.

So six months down the road, we found ourselves inundated with people wanting to take part. In the end there were over 120 different events crossing film, theatre, dance, visual arts, club events and literature in 46 venues across the city. A strong representation of local talent was happily placed amongst shows from England, Scotland, Hungary, Newfoundland and China. Events included Kabosh's celebrated *Mojo-Mickybo*, a "Dirty Weekend," The Belfast Jazz Orchestra, a Fringe Film Festival, and a skateboard workshop, to name but a handful of the eclectic mix.

The lack of traditional equipped arts venues became a challenge for performers, one that was taken on with great gusto by several companies. There was the *Full Moon* installation in the public loos; Lobe Dance performed *Fishfingers* in Blue Hairdressing; Catalyst Arts presented an exhibition,

*Dummy Dummy*, in Parks clothing shop; and Grid Iron Theatre Company staged an adaptation of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* in the dripping caverns of the weir under the Lagan River.

The international press, including Reuters, CNN and BBC World Service all jumped on the Belfast Fringe, seeing its re-birth as a breath of hope and a step forward for a city that has been cocooned in its own peculiar history. Maybe they were all looking for an angle, but maybe there is a grain of truth in their ideas. One thing is certain: Belfast could not have hosted a Fringe Festival of this size until very recently.

So what happens next? The Belfast Festival Fringe's future is still to be decided and is currently under discussion with BFQ and its funders. The Fringe has shown how it can work running concurrently with the main Festival but it may, for its future development, have to loosen its formal ties to BFQ — giving it the autonomy that any organisation needs to grow. Belfast has proved it has an appetite for Fringe. I can only hope that we get the chance again to feed it as heartily as we did this year. —CAOIMHE McAVINCHEY

HAVE QUITE A LONG HISTORY of working with young people in one form or another. I helped set up and run a children's arts centre in London, and have written plays for young people as well as working in schools and universities. I have also worked on several festivals, the most recent (before Young at Art) being the Belfast Festival at Queen's where I put together the "Beckett in Belfast" project in November 1997.

It was after this project that I sent Séan Doran a letter saying "Séan, don't you think there should be some children's events in the festival?" and I got a phone call back saying "Yes — what would you

like to see in it?" This was the start of my involvement with the first-ever international children's festival in Belfast.

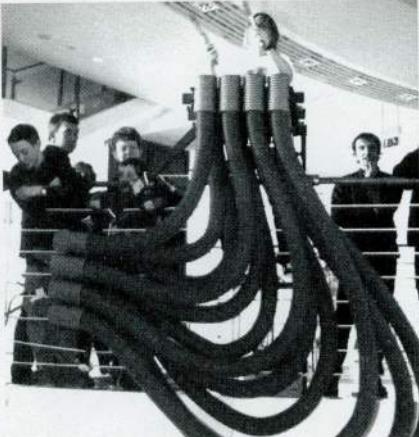
I was at that time unaware that two other organisations, VSB WheelWorks and the Old Museum arts centre, had already commissioned a feasibility study into the potential for a children's festival and

together with the BFQ had formed a partnership to put an arts festival for young people into place for November 1998.

It wasn't until much later, indeed March of last year, that I was actually taken on to coordinate this festival on a freelance basis, and was presented with the rather daunting task of getting together a quality programme for 0-18 year-olds within six months. I got my skates on and executed the swiftest research of my life: I contacted The Ark in Dublin, the Scottish International Children's Festival, and various other children's organisations. I watched numerous videos (mostly horrible, I'm sad to say) before I was able to put together a "wish-list" of Festival events. I based my list around the theme of journeys, and duly set off on a journey of my own to see all the events I'd shortlisted. Both VSB WheelWorks and the Old Museum also contributed to the programming and in August a confirmed programme, of 50% performance and 50% participatory projects, was finalised.

Without going into tedious detail, there was a massive amount of work to do in a very short amount of time on top of researching and programming events. Fundraising, venue finding, contracts, accommodation, travel, outreach, and publicity all needed attending to. I was also keen to get the Festival's image right, and sent a long list of words to our graphic designer to describe what the festival was NOT: flossy, pink, fluffy, kids on the block, jolly good fun etc. I was in search of integrity, quality, education, entertainment, sophistication, accessibility — basically excellence without elitism — a view firmly shared by all parties.

The work was of a very high standard, both in performance and participation but a few highlights may include the following: *Houseworks* by Theatre Rites, a truly magical experience in which a disused house was



NORMA BURROWS

**TOTALLY TUBULAR:** *Urban Strawberry Lunch* "play" the Waterfront Hall

transformed into a sensory exploration for children under five. Urban Strawberry Lunch, who make musical instruments from urban waste materials, worked with young adults in a percussion promenade where they literally "played" the Waterfront Hall — floor, railings and windows included. There was also Mimika, who presented *Landscapes*, an intimate journey through the natural world within a canvas dome. Running alongside the performances were workshops and exhibitions by and for young people; children's visual art was displayed across the city in shop windows and on Belfast's Black Mountain.

Young at Art had an audience average of 66%, a clear sign that there is demand for such a festival. So what about its future? As yet no decisions have been finalised. All I can say is that Young at Art plans to continue to provide the very best in the arts for as many young people as possible. This seems essential in a city where their voices have had a limited opportunity for joyful expression. —ANNA CUTLER

# *Slainté!*

Bottoms Up, *irish theatre magazine*  
from

## The Sackville Lounge

16 Sackville Place, Dublin 1  
Tel: 01/874 5222

*Open for drinks  
before and after the show*

# Over the Airwaves

**MAXINE JONES** offers an overview of current goings-on in radio drama.

RTÉ, IN THE PERSON OF Ann Walsh, has finally recognised radio drama as an art worth pursuing. The former "Arts Show" producer has been appointed producer in charge of radio drama and, before the summer, plans to introduce a weekend slot for the performance of a full-length play. Plays by Marina Carr, Paula Meehan, Declan Hughes and Joe O'Connor, as well as others staged by Project Arts Centre over the past few years, will be recorded in RTÉ's new drama studio. Ann Walsh also hopes to encourage playwrights to write specifically for the medium.

One stage playwright whose work transforms seamlessly to radio is Conor McPherson. On Christmas Day RTÉ broadcast the BBC production of McPherson's *This Lime Tree Bower*, set in a provincial seaside town. Hugh O'Conor plays Joe, a schoolboy fascinated with a supercool schoolmate; Peter McDonald is his older brother Frank, who helps out their dad in his fish and chip shop; and Brendan Coyle is Ray, a lecherous lecturer who dates their sister. They speak in monologue, each voicing his preoccupations in turn. While the format might seem static, the speeches are full of action. Joe describes seeing his friend rape a girl on a grave, Frank tells how he robbed the local bookies, and Ray lists his various sexual conquests in lurid detail. McPherson's strength is to let his charac-

ters seem to tell all, yet still leave huge gaps for the listener to fill in, creating a convincing tragic-comic world.

Less successful was John Waters' *Adverse Possessions*, broadcast by Radio 3 earlier in December. Despite a strong cast, including Pauline McLynn and Rosaleen Linehan, it was hard to suppress the yawns. The play begins with a funeral at which the deceased's unacknowledged English daughter turns up. A life-long bachelor, the deceased reared his brother's family, who expect to inherit his land. Huge wedges of exposition are awkwardly presented through the daughter's court affidavit and through a long account written down by her abandoned mother. A tedious bar-room chat between the lawyer and the claimants reminded me how much better Conor McPherson presents pub banter in *The Weir*, broadcast earlier last year on Radio 3 and repeated by both the BBC and RTÉ as part of their Christmas schedule.

One of the most ambitious and imaginative recent productions was *Troy* on Radio 3, a trilogy confidently scheduled over prime-time weekend slots. Written by Andrew Rissik and starring Paul Scofield as Hermes and Geraldine Somerville as Helen, it draws on Greek myth and Trojan legend to tell the stories of "King Priam and his Sons," "The Death of Achilles," and "Helen at Ephesus." This was radio theatre as an Event, rather than the poor relation it appears when the unique strengths of the medium are not exploited — the ability to make huge leaps of time and place and to depict gods.

Another Event was RTÉ Radio 1's New Year's broadcast of *The Coming of the Kings* by the late Ted Hughes, produced by Aidan Mathews and starring David Heap, Brendan Cauldwell, and Kate Minogue. Hughes' ability to keep to

rhyme and metre while producing humorous, natural exchanges and retaining dramatic tension is awesome. He switches from comic scenes between a grasping inn-keeper and his goading wife to far-reaching themes reminiscent of the Mystery Cycles of the Middle Ages.

Late-night listening on Radio 4 can throw up some pleasant surprises. *The Man Without the Mobile*, by David Pownall, (broadcast on 28 December) was an inventive and amusing half-hour drama which took a wry look at the mobile phone habit. In

a train carriage, several passengers are engaged in mobile phone conversations. The man without the mobile overhears another man lie to his wife about his whereabouts and engages him in a conversation about what he sees as the nightmare of always being available to whoever wishes to contact you. He remarks how rarely people speak to each other on trains, yet don't mind whole carriages overhearing their domestic conversations.

And so their conversation continues, interrupted by the half-conversations conducted on the mobiles around them, which evoke a wealth of domestic scenarios. While the unsubtle melodramatic ending sat a little uneasily with the quirkily observant scenes that preceded it, the play was nevertheless a fresh and enjoyable piece of radio drama.

Another humorous interlude was *The*



**PAINS OF YOUTH:** Ian Clegg in the original Bush Theatre production of Conor McPherson's *This Lime Tree Bower*

*Irish Play*, by Michael Butt, produced by Peter Kavanagh for BBC and broadcast on RTÉ 1 on January 8. A long-forgotten English playwright, played by Freddie Jones, decides to cash in on the vogue for Irish drama by renaming his play, *The Witch of Dagenham*, which had been rejected everywhere he'd sent it. The new title? *The Witch of Tralee*. He gives himself and the characters Irish names, changes "pale ale" to "porter," and hits the jackpot. The director insists on some changes: "Where's the cripple?", he asks.

"English audiences expect at least one character in an Irish play to be disabled physically or mentally," Jones and Dillie Keane, who plays the leading lady, expertly shift from Irish to English accents in this sharp spoof.

Back to RTÉ and their hope to inspire new writers for radio drama. The P.J. O'Connor Awards, a playwrights' competition to commemorate the late head of Radio Drama, will be judged in March. The three winning plays will be transmitted in the summer, and writers who show promise will be invited to join a radio drama workshop. RTÉ's reminder to contestants to submit clear carbon copies, however, lends the suspicion that they may still be a little short of the cutting edge.

*Maxine Jones is an editor and writer for The Sunday Tribune.*

# The Next Generation

SARAH FITZGIBBON on what's new in youth drama.

## ■ GET CONNECTED!

This April will see six youth theatres from the Republic descend on the Lyric in Belfast for the BT National Connections Programme '99. BT Connections, up and running since Connections '95, is an innovative and exciting initiative born out of the need for contemporary, unpatronising and worthwhile published scripts for youth theatres. Here's how the programme works: BT commissions 12 professional writers to create hour-long shows for performance by youth theatres across the UK and Ireland — the theatres themselves choose which of the scripts they prefer to produce. Adjudicators travel throughout the U.K. and Ireland and choose the best production of each play; these productions then travel to London's Royal National Theatre in July. This year's Connections authors include Alan Ayckbourn, Sarah Daniels, Dario Fo, Peter Gill, and Christina Reid. As in previous years, their scripts will be published together after the festival. These volumes of Connections plays have quickly become invaluable resources for youth theatre professionals tearing their hair out screaming "What will I do with them next?" For more information on BT Connections contact David Grant at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

## ■ NEW IN PRINT

This January saw the publication of *Youth Drama Ireland*, a new magazine created by

the National Association for Youth Drama to provide a forum for debate and discussion of youth drama on a national and international level. Volume One includes articles by Ciaran Gray and Judith Higgins on practising drama, by Martin Drury on Irish arts policy, by Gerry Stemberge (pictured) on "The Writer and Youth Theatre," and by Imelda Foley on the new Ulster association for Youth Drama. The issue also includes part one



ALAN O'CONNOR

of "Creating Drama Worlds," by one of the foremost authorities in educational drama, Cecily O'Neil; an interview with Augusto Boal; and book reviews. A good read!

## ■ CRAIC IN DINGLE

The first Féile Drámaíochta na nÓige, a joint initiative between the National Association for Youth Drama and Údarás na Gaeltachta, will be held in Dingle in March of this year. Ten young people from all over the Southwest, and 15 specifically from the Dingle area, will come together to express themselves through drama, movement and percussion and — doubtless — to have a great time. The taskmasters for the weekend are Ciaran Gray, Seona Ní Bhriain, Áine Moynihan and Fr. Tomás Ó hIceadha.

*Sarah FitzGibbon is the Development Officer of the National Association for Youth Drama.*

# irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

**subscribe**

**subscribe**

**subscribe**

*irish theatre magazine* is published quarterly and includes topical and timely articles about theatre in Ireland and Irish

theatre around the world. Subscribe and have the magazine delivered to you before it hits the shops!

---

**NAME**

**ADDRESS**

---

---

**TELEPHONE (DAYTIME)**

(EVENING)

---

**E-MAIL**

- I ENCLOSE A CHEQUE FOR £30 (CORPORATE/INSTITUTE)
  - I ENCLOSE A CHEQUE FOR £20 (INDIVIDUAL)

**Please make cheques out to:** irish theatre magazine  
14 Summerville Park, Dublin 6

# Entrances and Exits

*Comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre*

**RICHARD WAKELY** (far right), formerly of London's Hampstead Theatre, has taken on the position of Managing Director at the National Theatre Society (Abbey and Peacock Theatres).

**BAIRBRE NÍ CHAOIMH** (right) is the new artistic director of Calypso Productions.

**STEPHEN BOYD** has left as General Manager of Corcadurca Theatre Company and **DYANE HANRAHAN** is the new Company Manager.

At Barabbas...the company, **AMY O'HANLON** has been made Administrative Assistant to Company Manager **ENID REID WHYTE**.

**ALI ROBERTSON** is the new Theatre Manager at University College Cork's Granary Theatre.

Some big changes at Druid Theatre Company. **LOUISE DONLON** has left as General Manager to run the new arts centre in Portlaoise. At press time her permanent replacement has not been named. **MARIA FLEMING** has taken a job with the Film Board; her replacement as Druid Administrator is **ANNA O'SULLIVAN**.

**MARIE ROONEY** has a new assistant at the Gate Theatre, **RHONA MCAULIFFE**, who will also be working in Public Relations and Marketing.



**MAUREEN KENNELLY** has left her job with Fishamble Theatre Company but will continue her relationship with the company as a board member. Maureen is the new Administrator of Kilkenny Arts Week.

At the Samuel Beckett Centre in Trinity College, **FRANCIS THACKABERRY** has replaced **RICHARD SEAGER** as General Manager. Also at the Beckett Centre, **DANNY PIERSE** is the new Assistant Technical Director.

**DEIRDRE ENRIGHT**, formerly the Wicklow County Arts Officer, is the new Executive Director of the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork.

The indefatigable **BRÍD DUKES** is the Director of the Civic Theatre, Tallaght. **JOAN MALLON** will be working with Bríd as Administrator.

**HOWIE THE ROOKIE** by Mark O'Rowe

Reviewed 11th February, 1999 at the Bush Theatre, London by Dominic Cavendish; on tour to The Civic Theatre, Tallaght, Co. Dublin from 23 March - 3 April

OUTLINING THE DEFINING FEATURES of Mark O'Rowe's new play might make it sound like something old, something borrowed. *Howie the Rookie* takes the form of two 50-minute monologues, delivered by a pair of wayward, lecherous young Dubliners, the Howie Lee and the Rookie Lee, who relate with steadfast detachment the extraordinary series of events that bind their fates together in the space of 48 hours. The language is inventive to the point where it sounds invented; frequently coarse, it favours grotesque evocations of the body and its functions, as well as surreal violence. The seedy world it describes is inhabited by people with daft nicknames and lunatic behavioural traits: Peaches, the Avalanche, Ginger Boy.

While it undoubtedly possesses shades of Irvine Welsh, Conor McPherson (particularly his early monologue, *Rum and Vodka*) and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*, Howie the Rookie is far from derivative: it marks the arrival of a substantial talent. Despite the fact that London's Bush Theatre has the honour of sending Mike Bradwell's first-rate production off to open the Civic Theatre in Tallaght — O'Rowe's home turf — in March, it also confirms, yet again, that Ireland is leading the field when it comes to new writing.

O'Rowe seems to know instinctively how to craft a phrase in such a way that almost every word works a double-shift, carrying a particular comic weight and helping to build a richly detailed narrative. The monologists take sensory delight in the brutal economy and jabbing rhythm of their sentences and recount their stories as though everything was happening vividly

for the first time. ("People meetin', standin' 'round, yappin', strollin', chin-waggin'. Out of the way, we've not time, we're on business.") Gradually we realise that the lyrical banter is a means of leaving the tragic consequences of the laddish behaviour it celebrates to the last. The Howie Lee's involvement in a vendetta against the Rookie Lee for contaminating a



**THE LADS:** Aidan Kelly (top) and Karl Shiels in *Howie the Rookie*

mattress with scabies results in a fatality; he tries to atone for this by siding with the Rookie Lee in a gangland dispute over the accidental death of some Taiwanese "fight-in' fish."

There is a danger that the ludicrousness will overwhelm the more painful revelations. That you can be pulled up short from laughter is a testament to the skills of

Aidan Kelly (the Howie Lee) and Karl Shiels (the Rookie Lee). Both can hold an audience with the insouciant, vaguely insolent manner of ungroomed stand-ups, but both also have a still sobriety that well suits Es Devlin's forlorn, neon-lit roadway of a set. Scratching away at the scabby surfaces of machismo, O'Rowe discovers a lawlessness that can't be explained, only described. As the Rookie Lee puts it: "One minute, people's your buds, next, they're after you, some reason you don't know. Can happen, happens, goes on."

Dominic Cavendish writes about theatre for Time Out (London) and the Independent and Independent on Sunday (London).

#### **THE WHITE DEVIL by John Webster**

Loose Canon Theatre Company

project @ the mint, Dublin

25 January - 13 February 1999

Reviewed 27 January by Cathy Leaney

The Jacobean tragedy is a beast of uncertain parentage, and of unnerving habits. Here are deflagrating passions, distilled malice and alchemic opportunism, internecine families, rawest misogyny, poison, blades, and mayhem. The violence may, in these days, leave us unsurprised, but the pure energy of malevolent desire is shocking. In the Jacobean world Tarentinoid "cool" is out.

*The White Devil* is exemplary of all of this. Its Italian setting and the exoticism of its language create a steamy sauce for lust, ambition, revenge, anti-Catholicism, and lashings of death. There is nobody to like in this play; the characters, together, are a zoo of human depravity. Loose Canon's production at project @ the mint was a very domesticated affair which lacked the emotional urgency one has come to anticipate in their work.

In a wide, rectangular space, backed

with wrecked bubble-wrap screens stained yellow-orange, Webster's second-best play opens with Count Ludovico (Eugene O'Brien) suddenly before us, howling against his banishment, and setting the emotional pitch: "The violent thunder is adored by those/ Are pashed in pieces by it." The space is, later, sliced laterally by the slamming shut of bubble-wrap partitions, making a shallow fore-stage. The only furniture is a chair, a bench and two white cushions. It is clear the traffic of this stage will be prodigious. In the event, however, despite a hard-working cast, the space never came alive.

The pay-off we have come to expect from Jason Byrne's directing style for Loose Canon is a deeply concentrated, break-neck pace, and an engagement with the language of the play where every line is spoken with conviction and clarity of intention. This is a huge pay-off. It grounds the speech in situation and motivation. It invites and respects the intelligent attention of the audience, focussing on the actor speaking and eschewing elaborate spectacle.

For Loose Canon this has been, so far, a fortunate marriage of financial expediency and artistic integrity, perhaps. The honeymoon period included an absorbing *Measure for Measure* at City Arts Centre. Here, the intimacy of the space and the cohesive ensemble style of staging combined brilliantly with performances full of confidence, technical ease, and emotional truth. The result was a serious challenge to any view that Irish actors have not the training, nor the skill, to handle Shakespeare.

*The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Samuel Beckett Centre's Players' Theatre was a pleasure too, grotesquely funnier, full of actors enjoying themselves, except perhaps for those playing the female parts. In this gross-fest the women seemed more a product of the boy-actor performance

convention, functioning very much as plot devices, or focus points for the vilification of all that is not male. Are there any "real" women in these plays, then?

To return to *The White Devil*, this question is toyed with by Byrne's cross-casting of Karl Quinn as both Camillo and Camillo's mother-in-law Cornelia. As the latter, he looked somberly elegant in black coat-dress, modest harem pants, pumps, and pill-box hat, the phallic mother to the life. The '60s pill-box look was carried through in the costuming of Natalie Stringer as Vittoria, and in the subdued Jackie Kennedy look of Una Kavanagh as

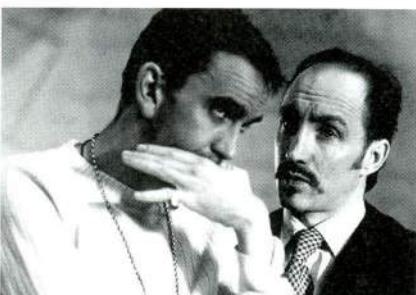
single style, or of the deliberate juxtaposition of styles. The sketches by designer Johanna Connor which decorate the programme hint at a desired cohesion in shape and the use of strong geometric motifs but these did not materialise in performance.

Even with a busy cast of 15, Byrne and dramaturg Liz Kuti had to cut some minor characters, and to conflate others. The most daring combination is of Vittoria's maid Zanche with the Conjuror. Who might be this combined magician-cum-home-helper? Eithne Woodcock was not helped by her long hessian-looking shift and bandaged skull-cap in embodying such a hybrid; as it was she might have strayed in from Purcarete's *Phaedra*. There was a fuzziness in definition too in David Pierce's brief but welcome comedic cameos.

Intense engagement with the language of the play may be more effective in intimate studio spaces. In *The White Devil* at the larger project @ the mint, where the audience is placed in a relatively formal relationship to actors, it was no longer enough. The huge commitment of the players oppressed their sense of ebullience with the action of the play. So many of the performances seemed to be taking place in the minds of the actors, but not in their bodies. One exception was Andrew Bennett, whose Eric Cantona in stripey silk and Egyptian Wonder make-up had a real sense of fun. Overall, I was conscious of admiring hard work where I wanted to be wowed by terrifying passion and to gasp at verbal fireworks. For a moment, at the Dumb Show scene, the action suddenly took off, but the theatricality was not sustained.

There were times when the crazy extravagance of the language (tortoise, camel, lion, and foolish mice all in one short speech) made me laugh with delight, but the play was shorn of its car-

AMELIA STEIN



**UNDERWORLDLY:** Phelim Drew and Michael McElhatton in *The White Devil*

the betrayed but venomous Isabella. Vittoria's notorious contradictions as a character were undercut by Stringer's assertive interpretation. She was more white than devil, and her courtroom speeches rang with post-feminist brass. This left some strange ellipses: for example, her first silent appearance on stage, which went unmarked by directorial interpretation. Vittoria was certainly made sense of here, but she might have been, at once, less neatly defined and more captivating.

Elsewhere, the costuming did not create any forceful impression, either of a

nal obsessions, its doomed politicking, its social anarchy. This problem was particularly pronounced in the character of Flamineo, played by Phelim Drew. Like Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* he is a man on the make: "Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes." He is another "white devil," and the play is deeply ambivalent about his ambition. Here he is left floating, a figure whose contemporary resonances are not fully imagined in the context of the production. Intense performances from Michael McElhatton and Ned Dennehy were ably articulated, but not allowed to spark into life.

This was a worthwhile opportunity to see an infrequently performed classic, in some ways cleverly adapted for contemporary performance; but the production was not the sinister, thunderous, vice-ridden, savage creature it could be. Loose Canon performs a valuable function in producing amazing old plays, and giving young actors the chance to play in them. Some necessary alchemy, on this occasion though, failed to incarnate this pale devil of a play.

Cathy Leaney is a lecturer in Drama Studies at University College, Dublin.

#### **BELFRY** by Billy Roche

Organic Theater Company, Chicago  
27 January 1999 - 7 March, 1999  
Reviewed 3 February by Jack Helbig

BILLY ROCHE IS NOT as well known in America as he should be; but perhaps the current production of *Belfry* at Chicago's Organic Theatre Company — the U.S. premiere of any of Roche's plays — will begin to change that. In this spare, beautiful memory play, the third in his Wexford Trilogy, Roche describes his corner of the world with clear eyes, unclouded by politics or sentimentality. He proves he understands the central paradox of play-



**STOLEN MOMENT:** Roderick Peeples and Cynthia Judge in *Belfry*

writing, that the best path to universality is through the particular. Certainly the enthusiastic audience for *Belfry* in Chicago, most of whom would have a hard time finding Wexford on a map of Ireland, was proof of that.

But perhaps there is something in Roche's writing that particularly appeals to an American sensibility, most notably Roche's practical, stoical message: when things go wrong you pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and get on with your life. His work is certainly redolent with American influences; he credits dramatists Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and the bohemian novelists Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller as influences.

In fact, though, *Belfry* reminds one more of John Updike than any other American writer. The play concerns a dreary middle-aged Wexford sacristan, Artie, who spends the entire evening reflecting on his one great moment of passion, a brief adulterous affair with a parishioner. Artie suffers a very Updike-like spiritual loneliness — and in a very Updikian setting, a large, empty church. And like the sad, solitary, horny Protestant minister in Updike's novel *A*

*Month of Sundays* Roche's sacristan hopes to find in the profane, secular world what's missing from his dry, religious life. Even Artie's implied redemption — achieved by retelling his story — is typical of Updike.

It's a measure of Roche's gift as a naturalistic playwright that he never gooses his story with moments of gratuitous violence — nor does he need to. When the cuckolded husband confronts Artie, there's no Hollywood-style fistfight, only an angry exchange of words. This dialogue is all the more moving in the current production because both Artie and the wronged husband, Donal, seem on the verge of tears throughout the confrontation — they've both lost the woman they love — but neither man can bring himself to break the blue-collar taboo against men crying.

Likewise Roche's love scenes are never

sensationalized; in fact, they are quite brief and even a little chaste. Artie is too guarded and emotionally backward to allow himself to be swept up in the sensuality of the affair. It is thrilling enough, in his tiny world, to have a woman around, paying attention to him, helping arrange the flowers for a funeral, or putting together a small birthday party for the altar boy.

Director Ina Marlowe — reportedly working closely with Roche — has come up with an almost perfect cast. Roderick Peeples is every inch the emotionally starved sacristan, moving with the weary pace of a man doomed to life in a prison of his own making. His voice alone speaks volumes about Artie's ambivalence over the affair and its aftermath. We can't even tell for sure whether he repeats his tale as a form of repentance or as a way to relive his all-too-brief romance.

Theatre and effects lighting for stage and corporate events.  
**The Electric Light Co.** are specialists in permanent and temporary lighting design and installation. We will supply everything from rigging and trussing, to theatre and intelligent lighting, smoke, haze or fog. Our staff have a wealth of knowledge in all aspects of lighting, rigging and effects.

If you have any questions or queries call Dieter or Barry at the number below, they'll be glad to help.



**the electric light company**

Unit 3D, Three rock road, Sandyford industrial estate, Dublin 18

Phone: +353 (0)1 295 3999 Fax: +353 (0)1 295 3799

e-mail: elight@indigo.ie

By way of contrast, Cynthia Judge as Angela, the woman in Artie's life, moves like a big cat that just discovered her cage has been inadvertently left open. Angela's seduction of Artie is swift and relentless. This take on their affair is a bit sexist, but it also suits Artie's subjective reconstruction of events: Angela is after all the woman who loved him and left him and his misogyny arises from his hurt.

Jeff Still makes a very credible working-class husband; exhausted by manual labor and trapped in his own rules of masculine conduct — he spends part of the first act destroyed because he lost a handball tournament — Still's Donal is a man who is less than the sum of his parts. From the moment you see him awkwardly try to embrace his wife, you know he's a cuckold and will be cuckolded in one form or another for the rest of his life.

By and large, the staging is good. Ina Marlowe, not always a strong director, fumbles less often than usual. She does cut some scenes off too quickly — Artie's first sexual encounter with Angela, for instance, ends before they get a chance to generate much heat, and there are moments when Artie confronts his sorrow that one can't help wondering whether Marlowe isn't in some way afraid of the deeper tones in Roche's powerful script. Or perhaps she's just overlooked them, stifling, in small ways, the full power of Roche's material.

Happily, Roche's play is too strong to be wounded by such petty lapses — just as Artie, to his astonishment, discovers that he's too strong to be destroyed by his failed romance.

.....  
Jack Helbig reviews theater for the Chicago Reader and the (Chicago) Daily Herald.

#### THE UNFRINGED FESTIVAL

The Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

21 - 30 January 1999

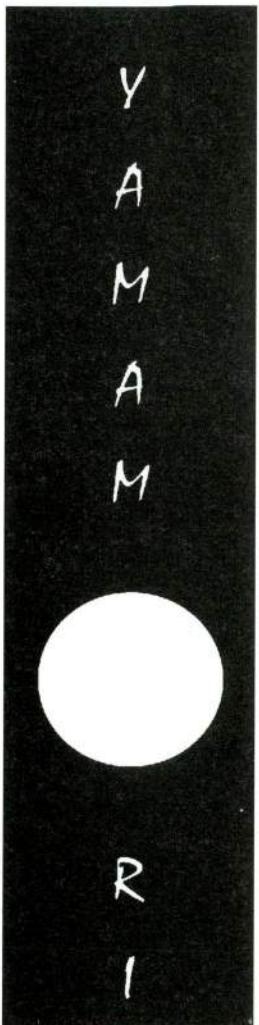
Reviewed 23 January by Jocelyn Clarke

ONLY TWO YEARS OLD, the UnFringed Festival at Limerick's Belltable Arts Centre is quickly becoming one of the most important festivals of new and experimental theatre in the West. The offerings in this years programme included some of the hits from last year's Dublin Fringe — the Corn Exchange's *Car Show* (from Dublin), Kabosh's *Mojo-Mikybo* (from Belfast), and Kaos' *The Master and Margarita* (from England) — as well as two productions not previously seen in Ireland, Arches Theatre (Scotland)'s *I Licked a Slag's Deodorant* and London-based Ursula Martinez' *A Family Outing*.

These latter two, which I saw on the Festival's first weekend, exploited the Belltable's unusual staging configuration for its UnFringed programme — both audience and actors were on stage together — and challenged its audiences in very direct but different ways.

Set among Glasgow's socially disenfranchised, Jim Cartwright's *I Licked A Slag's Deodorant* is a duologue between a deeply disturbed man and a junkie whore who form an unusual relationship of dependence and need. Like his previous plays *Road* and *To*, Cartwright successfully creates a claustrophobic world of emotional and psychological damage in his obsessive listing of physical cruelty — the man describes his beatings, the whore her clients — while simultaneously flavouring their words and gestures with a grim romanticism: the culmination of the man's desire is licking the whore's deodorant.

*A Slag's Deodorant*, however, remains for the most part dramatically unengaging as Cartwright's very descriptions impede rather than enable cohesive character



**72-72 Sth. Great Georges Street**  
**Lunch: Mon-Sat 12:30-5:30**  
**Dinner: Mon-Wed 5:30-11:00**  
**Thurs.-Sat 5:30-11:30**  
**Sun 4:00-11:00**  
**TEL: 475 5001/002**

development: We know what these people have experienced but never know why, or more importantly, who they are. Nevertheless, under Andy Arnold's strong direction, Nik Wardzynski and Cora Bisset offered performances of compelling physical intensity and emotional urgency, and the audience's proximity to the action almost shocked it into submission. *A Slag's Deodorant* is the emotional equivalent of being mugged; unfortunately we never understand for what purpose.

Ursula Martinez' *A Family Outing*, on the other hand, incorporates its audience's proximity into its dramatic and theatrical structure. Part post-modern situationist performance and part therapy encounter, Martinez' show is about her unusual relationship with her parents. She introduces her piece by explaining that, to avoid being embarrassed by her folks, she decided to do a show about and with them (the logic is compelling if you think about it) and describes their many character quirks and foibles — Milagros is a feisty Spanish woman who fell for the older and more conservative physicist Arthur, and the two have stayed together almost in spite of themselves. Then, as promised, she brings them out on stage.

On stage, all three bicker about family history; then Milagros dances to Gloria Gaynor's gay anthem "I Will Survive" and Arthur recites some Shakespeare. The performance gives the impression of being improvised but is clearly very tightly written, staged, and performed: Apparently forgetting their lines, both parents consult their scripts, most noticeably for their response to Ursula's lesbianism, which is, oh yes, that's right — heartfelt acceptance. The postmodernist playfulness of the piece imbues *A Family Outing* with a humour and knowingness which is at once disarming and compelling.

**PLAY-BOY**

Desperate Optimists

Reviewed 26 January 1999 by  
Dominic Cavendish at the Young Vic  
Studio, London; on tour to project @ the  
mint, Dublin from 16-20 February

LIVING UP TO THEIR NAME, the Irish duo Desperate Optimists apparently have unrequited ambitions to stage *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey. If this show, seen at the Young Vic in London, is a taster of what they would like to do to Synge's masterpiece, then it'll be no surprise if they continue to get short shrift. *Play-boy* shows scant regard for the specifics of the work it ostensibly holds up for our attention. Instead, it explores different perceptions of the play and provides a synthetic flavour of its initial shock value and comic verve by means of a self-regarding mock-cabaret.

Ambling up and down a walkway beneath multi-coloured lights, our host (Joe Lawlor) begins by talking us through the play's first performances at the Abbey in January 1907, which were marred by violence. Some vivid scenes are suggested — a stagehand threatening to chop the heads off anyone who went near the actors, for example — but we are not allowed to get caught up in the past. Behind Lawlor, on two video monitors placed on packing cases, loom headshots of half a dozen anonymous men and women. One of them pulls a revolver and aims it at the camera: The report sets a Lawlor off on an absurdly po-faced dance to a big-band Latin number, swinging cowboy boots in time to the music.

A bizarre Wild West theme is established which alternates with the video recordings. Neither strand could be said to develop, though they come together at



3 St. Andrew's Street, Dublin 2

Reservations: 677 5545

Tel: 679 9772 Fax: 677 0566

*Dublin's only Theatre Restaurant*  
Open 6p.m. - 12.15a.m. (last orders)

the end in a listless shoot-out. For the most part, the folk on the TV stare, smoke, mess with firearms, and use a play most of them can't accurately remember as a means of talking about loneliness and the appeal of violence. When they're not dancing, shooting, or spilling stage blood, Lawlor and his female assistant, Christine Molloy, are creating a tenuous Mexican link between the Chilean revolutionary Bernardo O'Higgins, the filmmaker Elia Kazan, Trotsky, and Synge himself. An affinity is implied between them and Synge's loner hero, Christy Mahon, whose charm resides perversely in his claims to have committed parricide.

At one level, *Play-boy* is nonsense; an hour of theatrical masturbation. But as an oblique description of the ambivalence society shows towards transgressors, it is peculiarly beguiling. In its irritating, contrary way, it suggests that, when it comes to understanding our darker impulses, we're none the wiser more than 90 years on.

#### **NORTHERN STAR by Stewart Parker**

A Tinderbox/Field Day/Belfast Festival  
at Queen's co-production  
14 November - 5 December 1998;  
Reviewed 27 November by Berni Sweeney

IN NOVEMBER 1998, Belfast's First Presbyterian Church hosted an unlikely congregation: Theatre-goers eager to see a co-production by Tinderbox and Field Day theatre companies and the Belfast Festival at Queen's. I was particularly excited about *Northern Star* because it heralded the reappearance of Field Day, whose productions have been scant in the 1990s after a prolific and exciting period in the '80s.

In *Northern Star*, Stewart Parker uses a series of theatrical styles to present United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken as he spends his last night of freedom in a disused barn with his lover Mary Bodle and

their child. In the introduction to *Three Plays for Ireland* Parker stated that his intention with *Northern Star* was to "use pastiche as a strategy," a strategy which can seem self-conscious and makes the play somewhat unwieldy. However, my first impression on arrival at the Church was that the combination of the venue and the subject matter — the Church had been an important site for the United Irishmen during the 1798 rebellion — made such a dramatic combination as to render a critical reaction to the production almost superfluous.

As I flicked through the programme on my way into the body of the church, I was daunted by the involvement of so many prominent Irish artists and commentators on Irish theatre and culture — Luke Gibbons, Marilyn Richtarik, Nigel Playfair, Kevin Whelan, Thomas Kilroy, Seamus Deane, Derek Mahon. Throughout the church Parker's use of the styles of renowned Irish playwrights to depict McCracken's "seven ages of Harry," was echoed by black-and-white images of each of these playwrights covering the windows of the church. Writers in the programme, playwrights on the walls and even within the fabric of the play — would there be room for Parker within this creative process, never mind actors, musicians and director?

The First Presbyterian Church is a beautiful building and Conleth White's lighting and Bob Crowley's set designs were effective without being obtrusive. A raised walkway extended the playing space through the middle of the church and a ladder on each side of the stage led to the galleries above. A noose hung above the stage. The most striking element of the design was a huge green banner hanging behind the pulpit with a harp centre, reading "Erin go Brách 1798."

The cast of eight worked well together, meeting the demands of the space and the

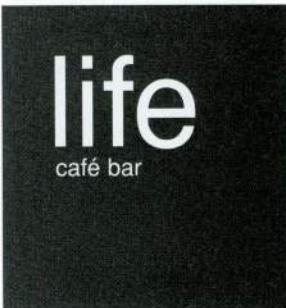
varied nature of the material. Paula McFetridge, Peter Balance, Simon Magill, Miche Doherty, Maggie Hayes and Sean Campion played a series of roles to create McCracken's last night of freedom and his memories of the gathering of the United Irishmen. Conleth Hill gave Henry Joy McCracken an eloquence while avoiding being lost under the weight of his words. The role of Mary Bodle, McCracken's lover, is among the least developed and thus most frustrating in the play, but Annie Farr held the audience as she sang from the gallery, making full use of the height of the church. Musicians John Fitzpatrick, Kevin Lawless and Roisin Hambley added a further dimension to a play which can seem language-driven.

*Northern Star* was recently produced by Rough Magic for the 1996 Dublin Theatre Festival and directed by Lynne Parker. Memorable for a strong performance by Stuart Graham as McCracken, this production made compelling use of a lambeg drum — as was indicated in the original script. This production's director, Field Day founding member Stephen Rea, chose instead to end the play with a more theatrical device, perhaps in reaction to political developments since the mid-'80s. The actors sang together as they moved from different areas of the church to gather under the noose. The backdrop dropped to the floor as the actors then faced the audience for an almost uncomfortably long time.

The strong performances, the timing of the production and the incredible setting indeed carried the event beyond the continuing difficulties of "pastiche as a strategy." Field Day and Tinderbox brought their best to the collaboration; I only hope that this will not be the last we see of Field Day's theatre.

---

Berni Sweeney is an actor and postgraduate student at the Samuel Beckett Centre.



**IRISH LIFE MALL**

**LOWER ABBEY STREET,**

**DUBLIN**

**TEL: 8781032**

**FAX: 8781037**

**MONDAY-WEDNESDAY, SUNDAY:  
12—11**

**THURSDAY THRU SATURDAY:  
BAR OPEN LATE**

**FOOD SERVED: 12—8**

**D.J.—LIVE MUSIC**

**BOOKING AVAILABLE  
RESTAURANT &  
PRIVATE FUNCTIONS**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

we are being offered is a condensation of Friel's theatrical career in the space of a few months. We will also witness Irish theatre's investment in its most marketable living product. The range and scope of the Festival will attract the attention of London and New York critics, and the exposure generated by the scale of the event will have collective benefits not simply for Irish theatre but for the nation as a whole. Irish theatre plc will become a Friel theme-park and will be the major advertising strategy in 1999.

What we are unlikely to see will be governed by the extent of the reverence in this homage. To respect the living author in a retrospective, conservatism governed by the aforementioned diasporic taste is certain to govern production concepts. What would be really stimulating and radical would be if, say, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* were to be directed and performed by a company from the diaspora (i.e., from the emigrant's perspective) or if some of our own new immigrants were to perform the play with Ireland as the location of their aspirations. The political resonances of such visions from outside Ireland might help us to come to terms culturally with our transition from economic emigrant to immigrant host.

More artistically, given the recent explosion of interest in the actor's body in this country, might it not be our wish or expectation for a Lecoq version of *Translations* or to invite Pina Bausch to dance *Lughnasa*. Foreign-language Friel (by, for example, Shimpei Fujiwara at the Bungaku-za, Tokyo — the foremost Japanese interpreter of Friel's work) should also have a place in this celebration, as our identity is, after all, constructed to a large degree by others from the outside. What I am suggesting, therefore, is a much less realistic



and insular approach. Diasporic Friel may be "exotic" or "marginal," but could also be deeply enriching. As for foreign Friel — it, too, can be the real thing!

But whatever the content, what happens when the festival is over and the canonical status of Friel is enshrined forever? As the DTF ends each year, a sense of poverty in the theatre community takes hold. The innovations of foreign imports whet appetites and yet the main repertory companies saunter along unperturbed. The innovative small-scale companies usually have channeled most of their efforts in exciting Fringe events. What we are left with is a long period of emaciation, temporarily halted by Pan Pan's annual Symposium each January which provides sustenance for the profession in workshops and demonstrations by the international avant-garde. The amount of work and its turnover decreases and audiences dwindle, while we wait for the next festival in Limerick, then Friel, then Galway.

Festivals thus are a kind of cultural bulimia, over-rapid consumption followed by subsequent impoverishment. A Friel Festival by the major reps should not suffer the same illness because only the content of their season is altered, not their structure and investment. And so radical re-visions are unlikely. Respectful retrospectives will be the order of the day as our theatres shore up rather than tear down the canon. As an emerging nation in the past this type of cultural practice made perfect sense. As a now cultural world leader it could be construed as smug folly. Irish theatre truly will come of age when the new companies begin to deconstruct the home canon, and do it as part of a celebratory festival. Would it be too subversive to think of a Friel fringe? ■

---

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

*John M. Keating*

*Beer, Wine & Spirit Merchant*

*Bar & Restaurant*



*Are you coming for a Pint?*

9 — 10 Jervis Street, Dublin 1 Tel: (01)8724031

# **PJT INSURANCE SERVICES**

**39 Main Street, Santry Village, Dublin 9**

**Telephone**

**(01) 842 5813 or 862 3316**

**Fax**

**(01) 842 3830**

**E-Mail**

**pjtins@iol.ie**

## **THE THEATRE INSURANCE SPECIALISTS**

**Insurance arranged during 1998 for Project @ The Mint, Olympia Productions, Rough Magic, Second Age, Barabbas...the company, Tivoli Theatre, Fishamble Theatre Company, Irish Modern Dance Theatre, The Machine, Dance Theatre of Ireland, Passion Machine, Dublin Youth Theatre, National Association for Youth Drama, Bickerstaffe Theatre Company, Calypso Productions, Operating Theatre Company, Garter Lane Arts Centre and many more.**

**If you need an insurance quotation speak to the experts.**

**Contact Peter Thomas or Claire Dumbrell at any time.**

**Members of The Irish Brokers Association**