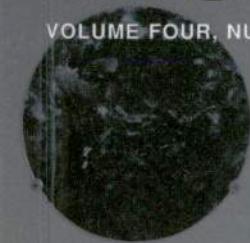


# irishtheatre

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**ON THE COVER:** Katherine O'Malley as Lady Macduff and Drew Barnes as one of her children in Pan Pan's Mac-Beth 7. Photo: Patrick Redmond.

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# Really Listening

**I**N OUR LAST EDITORIAL, IN RESPONSE to the scrapping of the previous Arts Plan, we urged the sector to let the Arts Council and Government know clearly and forcefully what its priorities are. We also questioned the suddenness with which the Plan was set aside, and wondered what alternatives the Council had in mind.

We now know. A new Plan is mooted after a year of consultation (more on this in our news section). That the Council has acted so swiftly and decisively is surely a good sign; now, again, it falls to the sector to participate effectively in the consultation process.

In contrast to previous such processes, the sector now has a major asset in Theatre Forum. Along with other representative bodies such as the Association of Professional Dancers in Ireland and the Sculpture Society, Theatre Forum is a means by which artists and arts workers can make their concerns and priorities known to decision-makers. Theatre Forum was a strong voice in last year's protest against funding cuts, and it is clear from its recent AGM that establishing and communicating the sector's priorities to the Arts Council is one of its key roles.

Being good communicators is part of what brings people to the forefront of our industry. But communication is a reciprocal process.

One thing that the Theatre Forum AGM did make us wonder, however, is if we, as a sector, are as good at listening as we are at talking. Established and predictable voices dominated the day's conversations, while the majority of people in attendance — most of them younger women — sat in silence. Being good communicators is part of what brings people to the forefront of our industry. But communication is a reciprocal process. Such well-attended sectoral gatherings are important and rare; at them we need to make sure that we are really hearing the voices of everyone in the sector, particularly its younger members. It is they who will inherit and hopefully benefit from the hard work all of us are doing now.

Speaking of new voices, an exciting new one that you will be hearing from at *itm* is that of Belfast-based researcher, arts consultant, and editor Ophelia Byrne, who will be guest editing issues 20 and 21. If you have any ideas, announcements, or concerns for the magazine, please contact her online at [ophelia@utvinternet.com](mailto:ophelia@utvinternet.com), or through the usual magazine channels.

We're listening!



# Meet the New Plan

**O**N 24 MAY AT THEATRE FORUM'S ANNUAL GENERAL Meeting, Cork Opera House's executive director Gerry Barnes spoke for many in the theatre sector when he confessed to a severe case of "consultation fatigue," after nearly a decade of talking to arts funders and consultants toward numerous review and planning documents, some of which have hit the bin before their expiry date, others

of which have never seen daylight.

Tired? He didn't know tired.

That same day, the Arts Council was announced that it was undertaking a "major consultation process" as part of the preparation of a new Arts Plan, which will be published by the summer of 2005. "The Post-Plan Era," so named by *itm* in issue 18, has turned out to be a rather brief epoch: not four months after dumping the second Arts Plan and prompting the resignation of director Patricia Quinn, the Arts Council has declared that it is continuing with a process of formal planning so as to provide a vision and guidelines for the development of the arts in Ireland.

How is the theatre sector responding to being called on to consult yet again? It is

surely to the credit of our industry that *itm* was unable to rouse anyone to serious grouching. "Of course we'll agree to consult," says Barnes. "Consultation is like motherhood and apple pie. You can't not be for it."

That said, some arts workers are raising larger questions about this Council's choice to re-enter the planning process. "Who's to say that they won't abolish this one? It's more for the convenience and the administrative comfort zone of the Arts Council that these Plans are put together. I don't know an artist in the country that makes art because of or around an Arts Plan," says John Breen, artistic director of Yew Tree. Still, in Breen's view, consulting is the only way to stay in the picture: "The

current Department [of Arts, Sport, and Tourism] and Arts Council have a template for how they see things moving forward. If we in the sector are not involved, we are going to be the losers."

Declan Gorman, artistic director of Upstage Theatre Project, welcomes news of a new Arts Plan: "I was one of the people who went on the record that I was disturbed when they threw out the old Plan. None of us had been given any notice and we had no signal of what would be coming in its wake. I am a fan of consultation — but consultation is also good PR and customer relations for this Arts Council. They are trying to send a signal to counteract an image of past Councils being inhospitable and inaccessible."

Theatre Forum CEO Tania Banotti reports that the sector is questioning the consultation's duration. "People are saying that they can't face into another full year. Consult, fine, but if there is going to be energy or momentum you can't sustain that over 12 months."

Questions have also been raised about the timing of the new Plan, but the Arts Council's acting director Mary Cloake told *itm* that it will be "ready in draft form in time to inform the [Council's] funding

bid [to Government] in the spring, and certainly in time to inform funding decisions for 2006. The publication document is obviously the final stage, but a draft Plan will be ready much earlier than this."

What concerns, then, will theatre workers be bringing to the consultation table? One subject comes up again and again. "We must, must, must address multi-annual funding (MAF) again," says arts consultant Jane Daly. MAF was a focal point of discussions at the Theatre Forum gathering. Banotti and Forum board members Johnny Hanrahan and Anne Clarke reported that they had been told by a deputation of current Arts Councillors that MAF was currently "off the table" for discussion, because the Council itself receives funding year by year from Government.

Nonetheless, many in the sector are insisting that MAF must be reconsidered; Cloake's response on the subject is promising: "A discussion of types of funding, new programmes of

grant-aid that might suit the needs of the arts, a review of the multi-annual funding experience from the perspective of those organisations who received it, those who did not, our own view, and so on will certainly be part of the debate."



# what's news

## FREE THE AUDITORIA REPORT!

Another recurrent topic of conversation at the Theatre Forum AGM was the review of performance arts venues throughout the island, funded by both Arts Councils, which, though nominally completed in 2002, has never been made public. At repeated sectoral assemblies, Gerry Barnes has drawn attention to this issue. "All of us in the venues sector spent a lot of time working towards the Auditoria Report — assembling and analysing information," he recently told *itm*. "We would like to know the results and the picture it paints overall, so that we can go back to our boards with a barometer of our performance."

"I appreciate the frustration that many people have experienced in relation to the wait for this Report," said Mary Cloake in response to a query from *itm*, saying that Auditoria will remain in draft form until the new Arts Council have taken a view on it. The Council also intends, according to Cloake, to discuss the report with the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism and with local authorities before publication. While the Council will issue a copy of the Report as a discussion document during the Arts Plan consultation process, some in the sector might see it even sooner: on foot of the AGM discussions, Theatre Forum has requested the Auditoria Report from the Council under the Freedom of Information Act.

## WINNERS' CIRCLE

Paul Meade, Michelle Read, and Breandán M. Mac Gerailt are the winners of this year's Stewart Parker Trust playwriting awards... Morna Regan won the European Authors' Award at

the 2004 Heidelberg Theatre Festival for *Midden*, and Ursula Rani Sarma won the Heidelberg Audience Award for *Blue...* Hilary Fannin and Mark O'Rowe are this year's Abbey Theatre's writers-in-association, an initiative sponsored by Anglo-Irish Bank... Bryan Delaney is the winner of the Everyman Palace Theatre 05 Commission, a €10,000 writing commission sponsored by Cork 2005 for a new play to be performed at the Everyman... Delaney is also one of the writers chosen for Rough Magic's SEEDS II initiative. Two other playwrights, Neil Bristow and Rosemary Jenkinson, and three directors — Tom Creed, Darragh McKeon, and Matthew Torney — in addition to Delaney will receive mentorship, professional experience, and travel funds as part of the SEEDS programme.

## Druid on Overdrive

**A**t press time, Druid was in advanced negotiations to bring its acclaimed production of *The Playboy of the Western World* to the West End, and to bring its full DruidSynge programme to the 2005 Edinburgh International Festival. Next in DruidSynge is *The Well of the Saints*, premiering at the Town Hall, Galway in Sep and playing the Dublin Theatre Festival in Oct; and *The Tinker's Wedding*, which will be rehearsed in late summer and tour to rural venues in and around Wicklow. Garry Hynes directs these and indeed all the DruidSynge productions.



BRYAN DELANEY



MORNA REGAN

#### McARDLE FALLS FROM TREE

Kathy McArdle, artistic director of Project Arts Centre from 1999 to 2001, has been made redundant from her position as director of the Lemon Tree Arts Centre in Aberdeen, Scotland, which she held since early 2002. On 14 May, the Aberdeen *Evening Express* reported that the venue, which receives some £230,000 of public funding, had accumulated losses of £140,000 under McArdle's stewardship. The Lemon Tree's board chairman, Councillor Scott Cassie, stepped down a week before McArdle was let go, "in disgust over the financial mess," according to the *Evening Express*. While it was reported that inaccuracies were found in the Centre's monthly accounts, the new chairman, Aberdeenshire councillor John Loveday, stressed in statements to the local press that McArdle was not accused of wrongdoing and that she would be

offered a severance package.

The *Evening Express* reported that McArdle left Project after having faced a 147-name petition against her decision not to renew a member of staff's contract, an exodus of senior staff, and accusations that she had created a "seriously hostile work environment" at the Dublin arts centre. The newspaper wondered why the Lemon Tree had not checked McArdle's references more thoroughly. "Recruitment procedures must be made more rigorous," it argued.

#### UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

*The Shaughraun* plays on the Abbey mainstage through 31 Jul. The centenary season continues with *The Playboy of the Western World*, touring nationally before it lands at the Abbey from 3 Aug-11 Sep, and then continues on a U.S. tour. Stewart Parker's *Heavenly Bodies* plays at

## what's news

the Peacock from 23 Jun-31 Jul, followed by Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (11 Aug-22 Sep)... Angel Exit's *Bolt Upright* plays at the Clonmel Junction Festival (8-10 Jul), the Earagail Festival, Letterkenny (12-15 Jul), and the SPROG Festival (30 Jul-1 Aug). Other theatre at Junction includes Skipalong's *One for Sorrow* (7-8 Jul) and Donal O'Kelly's *Jimmy Joyced!* (10 Jul)... Also at the Earagail Festival is *Rural Electric*, a new commission from Little John Nee, which premieres 9 Jul at the Parish Hall in Dungloe and tours rural venues... In addition to its Donegal dates, Donal O'Kelly's *Jimmy Joyced!* is touring extensively through Oct.

Barnstorm's next production is *Martha* by Jan Manley, playing in Kilkenny in Oct and then touring... Barabba's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* tours nationally through 3 Jul... Bedrock's production of *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill plays at Project, Dublin from 29 Jun-20 Jul... Next up at Bewley's at lunchtime is the devised Dorothy Parker tribute, *Just a Little One*, back after a successful run earlier in the year (21 Jun-10 Jul)... Classic Stage Ireland's inaugural production is Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*,

playing at the Helix from 16 Jun-3 Jul... CoisCéim will premiere its new show, *Chamber Made: Room 409* at Kilkenny Arts Festival (7-11 Aug), and will also present *Swept* at the Festival (11-15 Aug, both at the Ormonde Hotel)... Corcadorka's latest is *Losing Steam* by Raymond Scannell, playing at Cork's Marina Commercial Park from 15-26 Jun as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival. The Everyman Palace is presenting five productions as part of the Midsummer Festival, including the Irish premiere of *Stitching* by Anthony Neilson (16-26 Jun)... Cork Opera House in association with Yew Tree are presenting Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* from 9-14 Aug. The production then tours to Town Hall, Galway (17-21 Aug) and An Grianan, Letterkenny (24-28 Aug)... Dark Horse presents Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* at Andrew's Lane Studio until 10 Jul; it then plays at the Civic from 12-24 Jul; OMAC in Belfast (29-30 Jul) and the Riverbank, Newbridge (6-7 Aug)... Edward Farrell Productions is touring Adrian Dunbar's production of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* to the Town Hall, Galway (21 Jun-3 Jul), among other venues... Focus presents the Irish premiere of *Jesus Hopped the A Train* by Stephen Adly Guirgis, from 31 Aug-18 Sep... The Gaiety School of Acting's graduation production is *Universal Export* by Alex Johnston and Ioanna Anderson, running 21-26 Jun in Project.

The Gate's production of Shaw's *Pygmalion* plays from 1 Jul... Graffiti's latest is a new play by Raymond

## We're Back—Did You Miss Us?

After a brief hiatus, *itm*'s website is back up and running at the new address of [www.irishthemagazine.ie](http://www.irishthemagazine.ie). And if you're not yet a subscriber to our free online newsletter, which periodically zings a breaking review of a major Irish theatre production as well as news and listings into your inbox, contact us at [subscribe@irishthemagazine.ie](mailto:subscribe@irishthemagazine.ie); your electronic life will never be the same.



JIMMY JOYCEDI

Scannell, *A Day in the Life of a Pencil*, which tours from 4 Oct.... Island is running a rep season this summer in the Belltable, Limerick. A premiere production of *Where He Lies* by John Barrett will alternate weeks with Friel's *Lovers*, from 12 Jul-7 Aug. *Lovers* then plays a week at the Town Hall, Galway (9-14 Aug).... Lane Productions is presenting *A Night in November* at Andrew's Lane through the summer, and touring Marie Jones' *The Blind Fiddler* to the Belfast Opera House (through 26 Jun) and the Assembly Rooms in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (6-30 Aug). *Triple Espresso* is back for an extensive tour starting in Galway on 2 Aug and ending

up at Siamsa Tíre, Tralee (4-9 Oct). And *Alone it Stands* tours nationally from 6 Sep-6 Nov... Little Red Kettle will present a new full-length play with a cast of 50 children, written by Ben Hennessy, in Waterford from 9-14 Aug... The Machine's production of *The Matchmaker* finishes up a national tour at An Taibhdhearc, Galway from 21-26 Jun, and returns in the autumn. Meanwhile, its production of *Shirley Valentine* tours through Oct.

Ouroboros' production of *Amadeus* by Peter Shaffer continues at the Samuel Beckett Theatre through 15 Jul... Púca Puppets' *Songs in her Suitcase* tours the Republic and NI through 8 Aug... Red Dress' production of *The Three Sisters* continues

at the New Theatre, Dublin through 26 Jun... *Riverdance: The Ten Year Celebration* plays at the Gaiety through 28 Aug, followed by *Stones in his Pockets* through 25 Sep... Rough Magic's production of *Take Me Away* by Ger Murphy will play at the Traverse Theatre as part of the Edinburgh Fringe from 8-28 Aug... Conall Morrison is reviving his play *Hard to Believe* for Storytellers. It plays 6-30 Aug at the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms, runs at the Riverside Studios, London from 2-26 Sep, and tours Ireland extensively in Oct... TEAM is touring *Fusion*, a new play for post-primary pupils, from Sep-Dec. ■

# What will you remember?

**PATRICK LONERGAN** reports on the third Abbey Debate, "Memory and Repertoire," and assesses the impact of the series as a whole.

**A**N INTERESTING FEATURE OF THE ABBEY'S CENTENARY BRANDING is its use of the future tense. The banner covering the theatre gears us up for its next 100 years, and the phrase "what will you see?" appears throughout the centenary literature. In part, this is just smart marketing, presenting the Abbey as forward-looking, while fostering a sense of expectation in audiences. But perhaps it also reveals the ambivalence many feel about the theatre's past. Yes, we're proud of O'Casey and Synge—but we're also frustrated with the endless revival of their plays in tourist-driven, "heritage" productions. We are vaguely embarrassed by the Theatre's output from 1930 to 1970. And many commentators suggest that our focus on the Abbey's role in Irish theatre history has caused us to overlook other important theatres and movements.

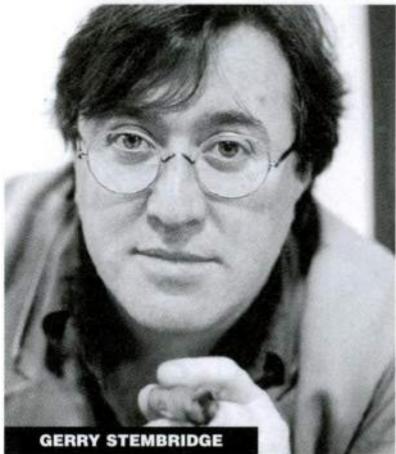
This third and final Abbey debate, on

"Memory and Repertoire," attempted to come to terms with the many tensions between the Abbey's past, present, and future. For the most part, it did so successfully, giving us six excellent presentations that covered a range of issues.

Declan McGonagle and Ailbhe Smith both focused on the politics of memory. McGonagle pointed out that, as a national institution, the Abbey confers value on dramatists and their works by including them in the national repertoire. Smith

argued that this process often involves unexamined assumptions about what is theatrically "valuable," and drew particular attention to the way in which writing by women continues to be unjustly ignored.

The other four speakers considered the value of the repertoire. Helen Meany discussed the relevance of Greek tragedy to contemporary Ireland, and spoke about the importance of the body and music in Irish theatre since 1980. Declan Donnellan



GERRY STEMBRIDGE

and Herbert Blau talked about the conflicts that arise between reviving plays and uncovering new work. And Gerry Stembridge reconsidered the Abbey's output during the theatre's "dark age" from 1930 to 1960, arguing that old plays can be brought to life by being placed in new contexts. Stembridge called for an Abbey in which a "guiding intelligence" was evident across a variety of productions, displaying a well-informed enthusiasm for the theatre that left many suggesting that he'd make a fine successor to Ben Barnes.

In common with the previous two debates, however, there appeared to be an unwillingness to push certain points to their obvious conclusions. In particular, the debate seemed haunted by the recent controversies about the Abbey's centenary programme, which is itself an act of public memory — a statement of what we consider valuable, theatrically and socially, right now. The Abbey may have produced plays by women last year, and it may produce plays in Irish next year — but this debate implied strongly that the exclusion of both from this centenary year is a serious oversight that both reveals and reinforces many of our society's prejudices. The discussions throughout the day provided a discomfiting reminder that, even if contemporary audiences decide to overlook the many omissions from the centenary programme, future generations are unlikely to be so forgiving. This made the debate an important event, but it was disappointing that this issue wasn't tackled more directly.

So what was achieved by these debates overall? Perhaps the most important message to emerge is that audiences have huge expectations of the Abbey. We want the theatre to produce new writing, old writing, international work, and Irish-language drama. We want it to reflect, examine and transform our society's values. We want it to be "relevant" and "entertaining" and "excellent." We want it to tour. We want translations of world classics by Irish writers — but no more versions of *Antigone*. We want the theatre to keep up the good work with its script publication, outreach work, and its archive. We want it to develop actors, writers, directors, and audiences. And so on.

Too often the debates became side-

## what's news



THE SHAUGHRAUN

tracked when these aspirations were treated narrowly as criticisms of the theatre's recent past under Patrick Mason, or its present under Barnes. Audience members with good suggestions were often told that the Abbey had done or would do what the person proposed. Barnes, for example, usefully pointed out that the Abbey has recently commissioned plays by women, that it has toured extensively since 2000, and that it plans to produce work in Irish. All of this is good news, but the Abbey also needs to ask why — when it's doing all of these things — so many members of its audience express dissatisfaction anyway.

It would be easy to dismiss that dissatisfaction as "Abbey bashing." But, in fact, these debates revealed that large numbers of people feel entitled to express a personalised sense of what the Abbey could become. This is very positive, showing that there is potentially a lot of

goodwill towards the theatre out there. For that goodwill to be harnessed, however, audiences must feel that the theatre is listening to them, that their entitlement to constructive criticism is respected (even if they aren't experts), and that their views form part of the process of defining the Abbey's future as our national theatre. The Theatre is making a great start by posting transcripts from the debates to its website ([www.abbeytheatre.ie](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie)) — but the process shouldn't stop there. The question that began this series was "what will you say?" If that phrase was a genuine invitation — and not just smart marketing — then we now need to know the answer to a new question: what does the Abbey think of what we have said? 

*Patrick Lonergan is completing a PhD on Irish theatre at NUI Galway, and is this magazine's books editor.*

KIP CARROLL

# Discussing Diaspora

What happens to Irish theatre when it moves outside its originating context?

**BETH NEWHALL** reports on an innovative conference about theatre touring.

**T**HE FIRST PUBLIC CONFERENCE OF THE IRISH THEATRICAL DIASPORA project — “an international network of theatre scholars dedicated to promoting research on the production and reception of Irish theatre inside and outside Ireland”— was something of a red carpet affair. The speaker list for “Irish Theatre on Tour” read like a who’s who of Irish theatre scholarship, led off with an opening address by no

less than Seamus Heaney.

On the opening evening, Trinity’s Nicholas Grene elaborated on the purpose of the Diaspora project, of which he is the chairperson, emphasising the organisation’s commitment to exploring the interaction between dispersed Irish populations and theatre, and how representations of Irishness shape, and are shaped, by location. With similar convivial enthusiasm, Heaney took the podium to speak about his experiences in theatre, focussing on his adaptation of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, retitled

*The Cure at Troy*, and *Burial at Thebes*, his *Antigone* adaptation that had just completed its Abbey run. Adaptation and translation, in fact, proved to be the key theme of Heaney’s address. He shared an anecdote about the loan of a mug used as a prop by a fit-out touring theatre company that visited his hometown. After the players returned the item, it took on a new significance for Heaney. The mug had been “translated” from the quotidian into the extraordinary by its appearance on stage. Quoting his poem “Station Island,”

## what's news

Heaney remarked that the mug had been "dipped and glamourised from this translation," and was never the same — an apt metaphor for theatre's power to move and change those it touches.

Like Heaney, the evening's keynote speaker, Richard Cave, professor of drama and theatre arts at Royal Holloway, London, opened anecdotally when speaking about Abbey tours in England. When a colourful leaflet advertising an upcoming "Diaspora Music Festival" arrived in the post, it inspired Cave to investigate the meanings of "diaspora." He found that the ubiquitous term had a surprising number of definitions, referring not only to minority emigrant populations, but also to scattering or sowing in an agricultural sense — evoking positive images of fertilisation. In a lecture of intelligence and eloquence, Cave frequently returned to the multi-layered resonance of the word as he chronologically charted the changing responses to Abbey productions visiting England. Ultimately, he concluded that in the current globalised theatre scene, Irish theatre need no longer depend on the reification of a binary "other" to represent Irish identity on stage. Rather, Irish theatre can define itself on its own terms, and thus has the potential to take on the connotations of "diaspora" as a source of creative renewal — a spirit colorfully captured in the festival leaflet.

The next day's programme opened with a panel about the Abbey on Tour. Adrian Frazier of NUI Galway spoke on the Abbey and Hollywood, Peter Kuch of the University of New South Wales discussed the Abbey's tour to Australia in 1922, and Anthony Roche of UCD offered a particularly interesting paper examining the collision of politics and culture in Lady

Gregory's Abbey tours within Ireland. Roche noted that in 1906 and 1908 tours to Gregory's native Galway, she interfered with the program, pulling productions of *The Gaol Gate* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* because she felt the plays would feed into a potentially explosive spirit of agrarian unrest. Roche attributes Gregory's actions to her bifurcated identity as both a nationalist playwright and Ascendancy land-



SEAMUS HEANEY

owner, and posits that in these instances, when proximity brought her dual roles into conflict, Lady Gregory's usual political dexterity failed her.

In a refreshing change of focus from the Abbey, Patrick Lonergan of NUI Galway began the second panel, "Touring outside Ireland," by looking at Druid's tour of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, suggesting that critics have tended to under-

value Druid's role in shaping McDonagh's work. While McDonagh has been criticised for invoking Irish rural stereotypes for the amusement of the middle classes, Lonergan argues that Garry Hynes, in her direction, has worked to emphasise the artificiality of McDonagh's world and, by extension, Ireland's perception of itself. Addressing similar questions of representation, Richard Pine of the Durrell School of Corfu, spoke on "The Gate: Home and Away." With a specific focus on the way the Gate insisted on both the distinctive Irishness of its productions and their universal significance, Pine examined tours by the Gate from 1935-62. Melissa Sihra of Queen's University, Belfast closed the panel by analysing the implications of the critical reception of Marina Carr's plays in the United States. Sihra used Carr's plays as a lens through which to examine the position and perception of culture in performance. Irishness, she argued, has largely become a collection of images, especially in North America. Carr's plays, working from without this accepted image reservoir, thus challenge comfortable representations of Irishness.

While the papers of the "Abbey on Tour" panel demonstrated research and complexity, there were nevertheless moments during that session that felt slightly stale. The second panelists' engagement with questions of Irish identity, representation, and diaspora in a late 20th-century context gave their papers especial relevance that stood out in the conference as a whole.

Following the second panel, John P. Harrington of New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute gave the day's keynote speech, addressing the Abbey's history of touring in the United States, and how the perception of a specific "Abbey

brand" has developed in the US as a result. The day's last panel, "Touring within Ireland," opened with Helen Burke of Florida State University exploring the intersection of folk and local performance traditions with Irish tours by Smock Alley Theatre in the early 18th century. Mark Phelan of Queen's University, Belfast followed with a lively paper about 19th-century melodrama in Belfast and Dublin. He noted that at Irish Nights in Belfast theatres, although Loyalists and Republicans separated themselves within the audience, the violence between sectarian groups was as ritualised and performative as the melodramas onstage. Lionel Pilkington of NUI Galway concluded the panel by speaking about tours of Dublin's Pike Theatre.

Throughout the conference, the participants' passion for the topics made every paper an informative and worthwhile experience. Poster displays of works in progress by Enrica Cerquoni, Deirdre McFeely, and Carmen Szabó added a colorful backdrop and interesting reading during coffee breaks. Given the high level of scholarship, it is regrettable that we never heard from theatre artists themselves other than Heaney. While the goals of the organisation revolve around the promotion of research, the exclusion of playwrights, directors, and other artists seems bound to limit the scope and relevance of that research. Irish Theatrical Diaspora has tentative plans for another conference in New York in the autumn. Should they include some practitioners in their list of participants, it promises to be truly the scholastic event of the season. 

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*Beth Newhall is completing an M.Phil in Irish drama at Trinity College. For more information on Irish Theatrical Diaspora, see [www.itd.tcd.ie](http://www.itd.tcd.ie).*

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JIMMY FAY responds to some thoughts about direction offered in issue 18 of *itm*.

THE LAST ISSUE OF *itm* made grim reading if you are a director in this country. In fact most issues of the magazine make grim reading if you're a director.

A swift perusal of reviews from that edition lays the blame squarely at our feet: "Central to this failure is X's direction of the actors/I have to lay the blame with first-time director X who refused to allow the play to breathe/X's production failed to make... story engaging and real for an audience." Elsewhere in the issue, David Horan strongly advocates director training and says that Irish theatre is at a "low ebb," and the scribe from Quare Hawks talks about the need for mentoring.

Are we currently in a stagnant place? I am not so sure. I think theatre is in a time of crisis, but every few months I think that. It will never have the appeal of cinema, the intimacy of a novel, or the exhilaration of a live music gig. Many will argue otherwise, and fair enough. Theatre is a shifting platform for ideas and experiences.

But to be pragmatic, there really is no such thing as training and mentoring for young directors in this country. The directors I know who have maintained a career over at least five years have pretty much created their own opportunities. In our current climate this seems unlikely to change; nowhere is the Irish artistic

inferiority complex more prevalent than in our building-based theatre institutions.

But are all the problems currently in Irish theatre the sole fault of our current crop of working directors? Well, yes and no. A lot of direction can seem staid and nervous. When we do make a song and dance about "theatricality," it tends to be over-reliant on showmanship, and unable to engage in a truthful human gesture. We still treat audiences as 19th-century spectators. Maybe that's the fashion, but it's numbing.

However, I think some directors are gaining confidence and breaking away, very forcefully, from our culturally dominant text-based realism. As a working director in love with text and realism, I find it exciting to see productions such as Pan Pan's *Macbeth 7*, Operating Theatre's *Passades*, and Loose Canon's *Medeamaaterial*, that are at once theatrically exhilarating, probingly polemic, and dramatically intense. These productions are haunted by such seemingly un-Irish anxieties as the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent climate of fear, yet uniquely of their own theatrical world.

And in them, in my most humble opinion, lies a sort of alternative signpost for Irish theatre direction. fm





# Business As Usual?

**I**N THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS might have seemed glib, even a little cruel, but ultimately they were irrefutably correct. "It's business as usual as far as the board is concerned," said Niall Carroll of Galloglass Theatre Company shortly after the resignation of Theresia Guschlbauer last year.

With a remarkable number of high-level positions in the Irish arts sector currently vacant, **PETER CRAWLEY** turns the spotlight on the groups of people who will be making these crucial appointments: boards of directors. What do boards do, exactly, and what is the appropriate relationship between boards and arts organisations?

Having founded the company and served it for 11 years, Guschlbauer could no longer adhere to an artistic policy of touring European classics. Unusually, Guschlbauer had been sitting on the board of the company until the previous year when she was asked to step down. Frustrated at ceding so much control of the company to the board of directors, she claimed that in their hands the company's emphasis veered "towards the financial side, or the managerial side of it, to the neglect of the artistic aspect of it."

It's an extreme example, but such an apparent gulf between artistic and financial interests reinforces that weary schism at the heart of the term "theatre company." The Galloglass board, though, honoured an original vision. The company continued. Carroll was right. It was business as usual.

In the broader scheme of art and commerce, the board must serve as the final repository of all responsibility. That is, if we can neatly distil the theory behind it. Ronan Smith, executive producer of Abharn Productions and a board member of the Ark Cultural Centre for Children and the Dublin Fringe Festival (both of which happen to be at the moment in a state of executive flux) explains: "The formal theory is that a company tends to be a legal entity, so this company — which is no one person's possession — is actually in the charge of its directors. They are responsible for everything. They choose to delegate the functioning of management to executives, but they remain ultimately responsible."

## BUSINESS AS USUAL?

Yet some still remain oblivious to the demands of administration: "A lot of people go on boards thinking it's something like a philanthropic committee," Smith cautions. "It isn't." In the majority of theatre companies, where the board is non-executive, the single most important function of the board is the appointment of the executive. "The reality is that the personality of the executive has far more impact than anything the board will do," Smith says. "In a sense you're exercising a power which gives a far greater power." But he agrees that there is no clear consensus about the role of the board among Irish arts organisations: "I do think that there needs to be a process of education or clarification about what it is that boards do."

Although no precise figures are available, it is estimated that in a single conversation about boards of directors, the phrase "corporate governance" will be deployed roughly once every 20 seconds.

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## COMPANY LAW

ALTHOUGH NO PRECISE FIGURES ARE AVAILABLE, IT IS estimated that in a single conversation about boards of directors, the phrase "corporate governance" will be deployed roughly once every 20 seconds. It is then somewhat disconcerting that there seems to be no strict definition for the term:

1. "Corporate governance is a topic recently conceived, as yet ill-defined, and consequently blurred at the edges..." — Maw *et al.* (1994)
2. "Can be defined narrowly as the relationship of a company to its shareholders or, more broadly, as its relationship to society." — *Financial Times* (1997)
3. "A field in economics that investigates how to secure/motivate efficient management of corporations by the use of incentive mechanisms... often limited to the question of improving financial performance." — [www.encycogov.com](http://www.encycogov.com).

"It's like discussing 'philosophy,'" admits James Hickey. "It means what you want it to mean." Hickey, however, would like it to mean more. A partner with the law firm Matheson Ormsby Prentice, where he heads its Entertainment Law Group, Hickey is currently chair of the broadcasting subcommittee of Screen Producers Ireland; he was chairman of the board of directors of the National Theatre Society Limited (the Abbey) for nine years, and chairman of the board of Project Arts Centre before that. When it comes to arts boards, Hickey has two main theses.

"The first is that the board of directors [needs to] comprise a balanced group of individuals — a make-up of people from different backgrounds with a balance of wisdom in the board. The second is that people need to be educated and trained in these matters." These matters are those of, of course, corporate governance.

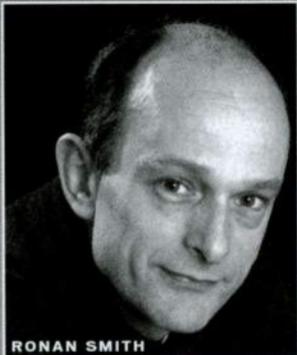
"A particular area that is of huge interest to corporate lawyers at the moment is the whole business of independent directors," says Hickey, referring to directors who are neither shareholders nor members of the staff or the company — the usual model for theatre

companies. The main concern is that there aren't enough independent directors on the boards of publicly traded companies, and without such impartial supervision this can lead to all sorts of potential abuses (see WorldCom, Enron etc.) "I know you will laugh at me," says Hickey, "but the biggest fear amongst corporate governance people in the commercial world is not that somehow the chief executive will be dominated by the board, but the board will be dominated by the chief executive."

This is not to suggest that the relationship between the board and the executive is a power game of threat and deceit, even in the arts. Fundamentally, it needs to be a supportive structure where the board safeguards the finances, sponsorship, and legal matters of a company while monitoring its artistic remit, holding regular, minuted meetings while the chair keeps close contact with the executive outside of them. Any distrust that enters the equation points to a schism — whether real or imagined — between the two sides of the board table. "This sector is quite split between artists and administrators anyway," agrees Annette Clancy, an arts consultant, psychotherapist, and chairperson of Gúna Nua Theatre Company. "It's one of these ludicrous conversations that goes on, and I think the next level of that splitting is going to be about boards."

#### THE BOARD ON THE COUCH

THERE HAS BEEN A CONSPICUOUS LACK OF formal board development programmes in the arts, Clancy points out. "Much of the work that I've been doing in the sector over the last number of years is just creating spaces for boards to think about what they do." Simple issues of confusion arise over whether they should be "hands on" in running the company. "Board development — although it's beginning to creep in as a condition of funding from the Arts Council — hasn't really been an area of development in much the same way as professional development or staff development hasn't either. So why should we expect some boards to work very well if we set them up with a task, when they don't have a job description, a contract or an idea of what the role is in the first place?"



RONAN SMITH

**The reality is that the personality of the executive has far more impact than anything the board would do.**

In a sense you're exercising a power which gives a far greater power.

“ ”

## BUSINESS AS USUAL?

When certain board appointments to arts organisations can be made by the State (The Abbey, for instance, has two such appointments on its board, while the Arts Council is made up exclusively of Ministerial appointments) not even the Government sets a clear precedent for what the role of a board member involves. Clancy will not discuss specific organisations, but a typical frustration she encounters can arise from the "politicised" nature of boards. "The motivation for people sitting around that 'cabinet' table is sometimes very difficult to discern," she explains. "Not everybody has a very clear idea of what the core vision of the organisation is, nor how to work towards one goal."

The kink in  
the logic is that  
while the duties  
of a board  
require interest,  
passion,  
professionalism,  
expertise, and  
a lot of hard,  
hard work,  
almost without  
exception  
members work  
on a volunteer  
basis.

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## POLITICAL AGENDAS

HAVING SERVED ON THE ARTS COUNCIL AND THE BOARDS OF the National Museum, the National Millennium Committee, and Temple Bar Properties, Eithne Healy, currently chairperson of the board of the Abbey, is something of an expert in Government appointments. When holding such positions, Healy concedes, "people always think that you're reporting to Government" and so, initially, the politics of such appointments worried her. Surprised by her first ministerial appointment to the Arts Council in 1993 ("I didn't regard myself as a political person") she now considers such contact to be more serendipitous than strategic.

"They appoint you because they think some of the skills you've got in the last few years might play a part in the development of whatever the organisation is," she suggests, although how one comes to the attention of the relevant Minister must depend on the circles in which one moves. For all their interest in the National Theatre, however, Healy maintains that the Government are "hands off" with the Abbey — "but when there are problems then we [the Government appointees] bring Government into play."

Healy admits that the growing emphasis on corporate governance "has made everybody who sits on a board sit up, because you do have to answer. In our case we answer to Government."

Hickey meanwhile points to rumblings at Government levels about the aptitude of State appointments: "I'd see it as quite a proper thing that anybody appointed to a State board would be required to spend a day in some kind of corporate governance instruction arrangement. Why not spend a day sitting down in a room with somebody who's experienced in explaining to people, quickly, the issues about corporate governance?"

And although Clancy considers corporate governance part of "London School of Economics-speak," she recognises that such terminology has been imported into the arts sector for good reasons. "There are different kinds of boards just as there are different kinds of arts organisations. Many of the building-based organisations would

have been started by amateur groups or local community groups who have been operating out of a management-committee model of governance and then reached the point at which they need to professionalise. That can be a challenge." For the board, according to Clancy, "on one level there's less hands-on work, but it also brings with it a whole range of responsibilities as employers — the legal and financial responsibilities."

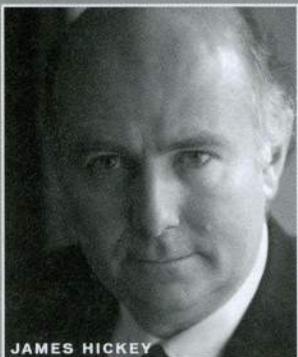
#### HOW BOARDS ARE MADE

WHEN A BOARD IS EITHER FORMED OR, AS THE lingo goes, "revitalised," targeting the right people may not be a fine science, but it is crucial. "You're going to different constituencies to try and get a panel that gives you what you need," explains Smith about a process not dissimilar to headhunting. "A useful board member, in addition to having an ability to work on the level of strategy and to have empathy for the vision of the organisation, would also benefit having a particular expertise."

The kink in the logic, however, is that while the duties of a board require interest, passion, professionalism, expertise, and a lot of hard, hard work, almost without exception members serve on a volunteer basis. "People's motivation for being on a board may well be philanthropic," admits Smith, "but the work they do when on the board and how they handle their responsibility may be more legal, so you're looking for a little bit of each."

It's a lot to ask.

"Of non-executives," Smith reminds. "That's the point. [In the commercial world] that theory of the non-executive director is that they sit on a board with executive directors and they provide an outside eye. In the arts model you have an *entire* board of non-executives." (Notable exceptions include the long-standing artistic director of the Gate, Michael Colgan, who also sits on the theatre's board.) Smith wonders if an entire board of non-executives is entirely satisfactory. "We are being made to make these fundamental decisions and in fact we are all quasi-informed, because we are volunteer non-executive directors, and clearly the level of commitment a person gives can vary greatly."



JAMES HICKEY

**I'd see it as quite a proper thing that anybody appointed to a State board**

would be required to spend a day in some kind of corporate governance instruction arrangement.

## BUSINESS AS USUAL?

### ABOVE BOARD

IF THE BOARD STRUCTURE IS ORIGINALLY PREDICATED ON A commercial model, while the "professionalisation" drive of the last few years has seen a corporate mentality percolate through the arts sector, one wonders if bottom-line thinking is practicable in the arts. Curbing financial risk may also curb creative risk, denying us the dividend that can't be accounted for: art, in other words. "The Abbey has to be run like a business," counters Healy, "and that will benefit the art. After 20 years of involvement in the arts I'm passionate about the theatre, but the days of the starving artist in the garret are over." Or, as Hickey puts it, "You need a practicable business model if you're not going to go bust." The artistic director may have freedom over the artistic policy, but not the freedom to bankrupt the company in its pursuit.

A board can also have a marked influence on artistic content, albeit usually in subtle ways — although in the case of younger independent theatre companies, that presence tends to be stronger. "I find that [the board] has been even more radical than I have in terms of thinking creatively about how to implement the key ideas of the company's vision," says Corn Exchange a.d. Annie Ryan. While recognising that they set her salary, scrutinise the company accounts, and, in a worst case scenario, could even fire her, Ryan is comfortable with the board's authority. "I think it's because I've taken my time to choose people who I really trust. Although it's my company, the idea of the company is separate. It exists without me."

The relationship between board and executive is a delicate balance: close but objective, supportive but questioning, philanthropic but legally responsible. Like corporate governance, though, at times the role seems ill-defined, blurred at the edges.

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### BOARD OF EDUCATION

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOARD AND EXECUTIVE IS A DELICATE balance: close but objective, supportive but questioning, philanthropic but legally responsible. Like corporate governance though, at times the role seems ill-defined, blurred at the edges. People may see boards differently, but on one point they all agree. Unpaid board members, laden with such responsibilities, in an arts sector driven to professionalise its practices, must be made aware of their duties.

Smith suggests that an organisation such as Theatre Forum could set up a sub-committee to produce occasional papers. Clancy argues for a thinking space and a conceptual space as well as a governance space for boards. And Hickey points to the UCD's Institute of Directors courses in corporate governance: "People can be taught this." As the boardroom door closes on another interview to discover the next executive of an influential arts organisation, the next stage of the Irish arts rests in these hands. •

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*Peter Crawley is a freelance journalist and critic and is news editor of this magazine.*



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# I Have a Dream

If money and other real-life concerns were no object, how would you commemorate 100 years of Irish theatre and look forward to 100 more? **GAVIN QUINN**, artistic director of Pan Pan, kicks off this issue's submissions by agreeing to an interview.

**itm:** Gavin, how would you commemorate 100 years of Irish theatre?

**GQ:** By creating a reality T.V. show called "Live at 3.01." It would be broadcast every afternoon at 3.01 pm, live from different theatre rehearsal rooms around the country — perhaps following one production for a week, then another for another week...

**itm:** So are you saying that rehearsal rooms could be the new *Big Brother* — the lies, the skulduggery, the sex, the intrigue... ?

**GQ:** No, more than the general public would have unparalleled access to the creative process. It would give the audience a completely fresh sense of "dusty" theatre.

**itm:** And how would you look forward to 100 more years of Irish theatre?

**GQ:** Well, theatre is all about the now, so perhaps even the notion of celebrating past achievements is inappropriate. The emphasis certainly should be on the present and the future. And since the future is hard to predict, and if I was forced to make a prediction I could only describe it as a dream... perhaps the one I had the other night after thinking all day about the future of Irish theatre for the next 100 years.

**itm:** Tell us about your dream, Gavin.

**GQ:** I am in an auditorium watching a contemporary theatrical performance, and the year is 2056. I look around me and the other members of the audience are all sobbing — big loud, beautiful,

## I HAVE A DREAM

uncontrollable sobs — and then suddenly without warning the sobbing stops and they all begin to smile. I try to turn my attention to what's happening on the stage, but I can't seem to focus on it. I am too distracted by the beaming faces that surround me. And then the dream ends.

**itm:** Hmm... how would you interpret your dream?

**GQ:** Well, it doesn't seem that straightforward to me, but I might proffer that the sobbing audience represents all the missed great theatrical experiences of your life, and the smiling represents the feeling of elation when a show is over.

**itm:** If you were to be more specific, does it contain a message for the next 100 years of Irish theatre?

**GQ:** I feel the message is definitely there. Stop putting on crap, lazy productions with no thought, imagination, or love put into them; but do really good ones instead that the audience actually enjoys and gets something out of.

**itm:** Interesting, Gavin. Yes... Well, that's all we have time for. Thanks.

**GQ:** Thank you too.

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*The Chair Women by Werner Schwab, a co-production by Pan Pan, Scarlet Theatre, and Ludowny Theatre will be presented in this year's Dublin Fringe Festival at Project, Dublin, 6 – 9 Oct.*

## Diving In

Selina Cartmell,  
artistic director of  
Siren Productions,  
exhorts Irish  
theatre practitioners  
to embrace  
collaboration.

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**W**E WAKE UP AND LOOK OUTSIDE OUR WINDOWS AND view the world, or how we perceive our world today. We turn on the news and see the world turned upside down by people who appear to have no sense of justice or what is humane. To take account of this and still feel theatre has a meaning or a role in our lives is a difficult and confusing task that we, as creative practitioners, face each day. I feel all practitioners should look at how we understand each other in and outside the rehearsal room.

At the final of the three Abbey Debates, entitled "Memory and Repertoire," a member of the audience questioned the role of the director who "fiddles" with rather than services the text. Director Declan Donnellan responded by turning the question on its head, asking what if the writer was there to serve the actors, audiences



and director? I agree with Donnellan's suggestion and want to take his point a step further and ask — what if we were all there in the rehearsal room to serve each other, to inspire and take responsibility for what we do? This way of working is risky and is never safe. It is dependant on all partners in the group being energised with a common vision.

I hope in the future Irish theatre will embrace and support collaboration and its practitioners who have the desire to create work with all their soul, heart, and imagination. Through collaboration we can reach out and have a common vision. In collaboration we rely on one another to make art. This interdependence is fundamental and has equal value for everyone. When coming together with our varied and often contradictory experiences, we bring together languages, outlooks and ideas that are often kept apart by powerful individuals or groups who thrive on separation, or institutions that are slow to change.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, tells an Indian story about a grain of salt that wanted to know just how salty the ocean was, so it jumped in and became one with the water

of the ocean. In this way, the grain of salt gained perfect understanding. I believe we must become participants to really understand something or one another — we too must jump in, like the grain of salt. In this way, we open the avenues to trust; to confidence; and to hope. By coming together with these ingredients, we give the theatre its health, we provide for its growth, and we guarantee its survival.

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*Selina Cartmell recently directed Passades (pictured previous page) for Operating Theatre. She is currently developing a production of Titus Andronicus for the cash and carry space in Thomas Street in 2005.*

## Step Right Up!

How do we get the next generation of theatregoers into the halls? Carmel O'Reilly, artistic director of Súgán Theare Company in Boston, wonders if money is the only thing that will talk.

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Celebrating 100 years of Irish theatre is relatively easy, but ensuring its continuity for the next 100 years may prove more difficult. It's tough enough in this age of plenty to lure young people away from a plethora of choices, some of which weren't around ten years ago, never mind 100: restaurants, clubs, pubs, ballgames, rock concerts, comedy clubs, Broadway / West End-style touring shows, TV, videos, movies, and the Internet.

How can we ensure that theatre will retain its vitality and relevance over the next century if we cannot attract younger audiences in sufficient numbers? As an Irish theatre artist working in America, where the arts are largely unsubsidised, it is hard for me to talk about what the next 100 years of theatre will be like in Ireland. But because the problem of an aging audience base has already been recognized in America, I can offer some insights into what companies are doing here to bring younger audiences into the theatre.

There's no magic potion, except the magic of the theatrical experience itself. We must lure them in the door and work that magic. And if, for the purposes of this discussion, money is really no object, perhaps we need to use that money to bring in that young audience. One drastic thought is to pay young people to go and see a play:

"Are you under the age of 25? Don't miss this excellent opportunity to earn some money and enjoy a great night out. Ireland is celebrating 100 years of theatre by offering a reward of €30 to all those under 25 years of age who attend a current play production. You will receive your reward after the performance. Limited to one reward per run of show for all shows through 2005..."

Obviously this kind of bribery is going too far. Theatre is not a consumable like detergent or chocolate. But marketing to young adults should be a top priority. Deeply discounted tickets,

special school performances, under-25/35 nights, state-of-the-art technology, sophisticated venues and the like are required. Also, programming should reflect the world they live in and address the needs of younger audiences.

With any luck, the opportunity to experience live theatre, hopefully at its best, will instill a love for theatre and create lifetime theatregoers.

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*Súgán Theatre Company, the only theatre in the Boston area devoted to Irish plays, was recently awarded the 2004 Gold Medal of the Éire Society.*

## In Living Colour

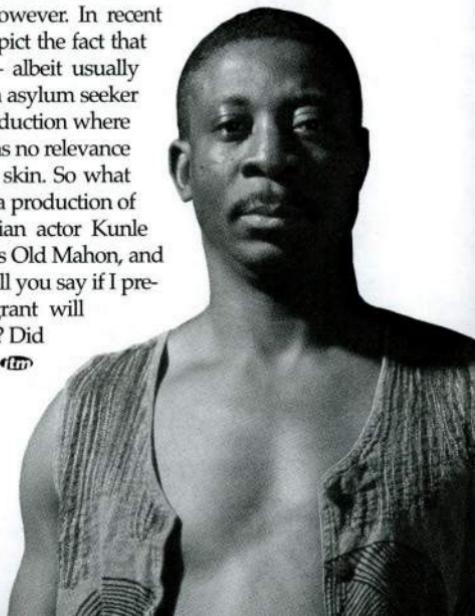
**N**O T IN A HUNDRED YEARS," I HEARD SOMEONE WHISPER to his friend when I stated recently in a conference that I am looking forward to staging a Nigerian play on the Abbey stage. But if you are reading this piece in *irish theatre magazine* and not in *Metro Eireann* (Ireland's only multicultural newspaper); if an M.Phil student of Drama at Trinity College is writing her thesis on the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in Irish theatre; if writer Roddy Doyle said that Arambe's recent production of the Nigerian play *The Gods Are Not To Blame* was the most exciting and exhilarating presentation he has seen for a long, long time on an Irish stage, you will agree with me that the next hundred years of Irish theatre will definitely be a lot more colourful than the last.

Many changes have to occur before then, however. In recent years, a number of productions have tried to depict the fact that Ireland is no longer a monocultural society — albeit usually through the introduction of a character who is an asylum seeker or a refugee. I have yet to see an Irish theatre production where a black actor comes on stage to play a role that has no relevance to his/her background or the colour of his/her skin. So what will you say if I tell you I am looking forward to a production of *The Playboy Of The Western World*, with Nigerian actor Kunle Animasaun as Christy Mahon, John Kavanagh as Old Mahon, and a Chinese actress playing Pegeen Mike? What will you say if I predict that a grandchild of a Congolese immigrant will become the artistic director of the Abbey Theatre? Did I hear someone say not in a hundred years?

Bisi Adigun (pictured), artistic director of Arambe Productions, looks forward to an Ireland beyond monoculturalism.

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ROS KAVANAGH  
Arambe's future plans include a performance of *The Gods are Not To Blame* at the Factory Theatre, Sligo on 17 Jul; and African Griot, a three-day showcase in Project, Dublin, 4-6 Nov.





# Irish Theatre Repair Service

**W**ELOCOME TO ART CAMP." THIS GREETING, BRIGHTLY issued by one participant of Thread, introduces us to the Dublin Fringe Festival's experimental two-week shut-in, drawing 13 artists and four mentors from different performance disciplines to explore new approaches to text and performance.

Leaving behind the distractions of cities and funding applications for the distractions of the captivately isolated Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annaghmakerrig, the tone of this inaugural project possessed something both of the structured activities of summer camp and the discipline and duty of boot camp. There would be theory, text, multimedia, long discussions, great food and, most certainly, questions. There would not be deadlines, a creative orthodoxy, defined goals, sleep or, necessarily,



answers. It would witness astonishingly ambitious projects, disorienting esoteric inquiries, and the birth of something called Flexistentialism.

Not for the last time, Fringe director Vallejo Gantner squints towards Annamakerrig's neighbouring forest and articulates a familiar puzzle: If a tree falls in the woods... Although each participant has applied for Thread with an outline to develop a particular project, no one is under pressure to bring those ideas to fruition. Outside this close-knit community, there is no observer; no audience. Apart from the occasional loitering journalist, if a performance happens near these woods and there is no one there to see it, will it make a difference? Thread may be about process rather than results, but nonetheless at times Gantner can seem worried.

The Irish theatre, as he (and many others) perceive it, is not taking risks. Beyond the nail-biting prospect of staging a play and hoping that people come to see it, companies have been too cowed by the realities of unpredictable funding (hand-to-mouth) or wild gambles (make-or-break) to engage with pushing the boundaries of form and content. "For us," says Gantner, "it was critical that we start getting more involved in the work we do and try to add value to the experience of being in the [Fringe] Festival for companies. Too often in the Festival we would see people coming in with really ambitious proposals and falling at the last hurdle."

This April, the Dublin Fringe brought together mentors and Irish practitioners for a two-week "art camp" residency at Annaghmakerrig. **PETER CRAWLEY** reports.

The idea of Thread was to create a test site for collaboration, a prototypical community to counter a lack of experimentation and, more simply but no less deadly, a lack of communication, "Theatre is stuck in very formal, structural plays," says Vallejo Gantner.

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The idea of Thread, then, was to create a test-site for collaboration, a prototypical community to counter a lack of experimentation and, more simply but no less deadly, a lack of communication. "Theatre is stuck in very formal, structural plays," says Gantner. "Dancers and choreographers were afraid to use text as sources of inspiration. Theatre was afraid to use bodies in space. Ideas of structure, composition, and dramaturgy weren't being explored by directors, writers, performers, and choreographers. We thought we should provide opportunities for the practitioners. Not only to provide an environment where they could develop projects that answered that call, but also to mentor them and try and provide some skills. Because the training infrastructure in Ireland is abominable."

Thread's training infrastructure is reliably hip, its tools consisting of bounteous space, studios, musical and recording facilities, digital video cameras and G4 Powerbooks; its mentors decanting up-to-the-minute theories, technologies, and practices. Abbey commissioning manager Jocelyn Clarke (also dramaturg and playwright for New York's SITI Company and Sligo's Blue Raincoat) discusses playmaking and process. Steve Valk, of the Frankfurt Ballet and now dramaturg with Daghda Dance company, is quite a theory junkie, applying treatise to praxis by way of quasi-scientific terms — he discusses "social choreography," "utopian architects," and "cultural scientists" with near-proselytising enthusiasm. Planning group workshops during a late-night mentors' meeting, Valk volunteers an idea: "One thing I thought is that they could build a cyborg — an audience member cyborg." John Collins, artistic director of downtown New York theatre company Elevator Repair Service and sound designer for New York's Wooster Group, is more rooted in practicality. "Can they do that in an hour?" he asks. And research fellow with Media Lab Europe, Michael Lew, well, he's something else... As proficient with GPS-based audiophonic production as he is handy with generative composition techniques, willing to demonstrate his wireless controller for a multitrack video sampler (for theatre) while outlining the non-linearity of new narrative forms, Lew could feasibly build an audience cyborg in less than an hour.

The participants, predominantly young and ranging from directors (John Breen, Jason Byrne, Caroline McSweeney, and Thomas Conway) and composers (George Higgs and Ailis Ni Riain) to choreographers (Rebecca Walter and Fearghus Ó Conchúir) and writers (Oonagh Kearney, Donal Toolan, Erin Marie Pantaja, and Jeffrey Gormly), have a brave, even confrontational dynamic. On day two, for instance, came "a revolution" resulting in the early template for workshops being cast aside. "They're an incredibly smart group," admits Collins. "It's just intimidating." Having



adapted so quickly to the early exercises, "we needed something that would be more engaging."

The frame of the first week of Thread involves morning workshops, leaving the afternoons free for individual projects while mentor presentations or original performances occupy the evenings. On Wednesday night in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre's library (dubbed "The War Room" by the mentors, after *Dr. Strangelove*), Gantner, Collins, Valk, and Lew adapt to the day's feedback and bat ideas back and forth before eventually agreeing on the next day's workshop. Giving abstruse theory (architectural writings from Valk's stash) to two groups, they will ask them to write a performance text, which will then be performed by the other group. "If it fails," says John Collins as the meeting ends, "it will fail in the most productive way."

This is quite germane to Thread's endeavours: challenging but non-prescriptive. For Collins, whether staging a production in total darkness, performing from the auditorium, or reading *The Great Gatsby* to a theatre audience, his Elevator Repair Service company engages in "problem solving." As a mentor, he is "wary of being programmatic," of saying "This is how it works." "The main thing that you can get from something like this is intellectual stimulation," he tells me. Given the time constraints, Thread should aim to "stimulate impulses." One way of doing this, he considers, is to create "an impossible problem to solve... Crisis reveals new tools." Reassuringly, the group are fast adapting, and

#### CAMPERS

(previous pages,  
left, then right)

Michael Lew in  
"The War Room,"  
Oonagh Kearney  
mourns the "late"  
John Breen; this  
page: Fearghus Ó  
Conchúir at the  
piano.

although Collins introduces the explosive new task as "a little on the impossible side" both teams have learnt to stop worrying and love the bomb.

Wrestling with Frederick Kiesler's *Manifesto on Correalism* in the War Room, Breen constructs a dialogue while Byrne and Pantaja attempt to understand what a "cyclotron" could be, and Walter draws a shape resembling a melting moebius strip to suggest a path for movement. "The more prescriptive we are the better," reasons Breen, quite sensibly, "otherwise it will be just too abstract." Upstairs in the music room the other group have fewer qualms with Daniel Libeskind's ideas on "the end of space." One stage direction, offered by Gormly, and written in one of a number of music score sheets taped together to resemble an open box, goes: "Searching for invisible keys to doors that do not exist."

An innocent spectator (were there one around) might find the resulting performances just too abstract, both of which become quite striking physical interpretations after Higgs' group jettisons "the imposition" of dialogue. But this, as you are continually reminded, is about the process. Ultimately, Thread is dictated by the artists — by the following Friday the morning workshops have been abandoned and collaborations begin in earnest, while the mentors contribute dramaturgical support to a myriad of different projects from interactive theatre performances and scored monologues to multimedia dance theatre.

"I think it's different for everybody," muses Walter. "Some people are here for very specific collaborative projects." "And other people are just here to absorb whatever they can," says Pantaja. "Some people are here just to learn the act of collaborating."

This, according to Ganther, is a skill for which the conditions of training in Ireland do not adequately provide. "It's not that the artists are lacking," he says, "it's just that there needs to be opportunities provided to create a laboratory. We saw [Thread] as a laboratory for research, development, ideas and a place to try things out." Finding a common language between drama, dance, music, and technology has been Thread's principal challenge, best expressed by Walter as developing from an inscrutable "tower of babel" through a tentative "Esperanto" of discussions into the fluency of debate. "It's a much more dynamic meeting of ideas," she nods.

Where previously the Fringe's collaboration with Rough Magic on the playwriting project, SEEDS, sought to nurture new voices, now Thread is principally concerned with form, representing all the artforms present under the Fringe rubric. It doesn't aim to establish an alternative Fringe orthodoxy, however, where all boundaries are removed and every form cross-pollinates. "I don't think that it should have to be interdisciplinary," says Ganther, "but I think that the Festival has to have as its primary purpose

Founded by  
Jeffrey Gormly,  
producer of  
new company  
nervousystem  
and perhaps  
Thread's most  
argumentative  
participant,  
Flexistentialism is  
mentioned so  
often that I am  
unsure at first  
whether it is  
a philosophy, a  
religion, or a  
cocktail hour.  
It is, I learn,  
all of the above.

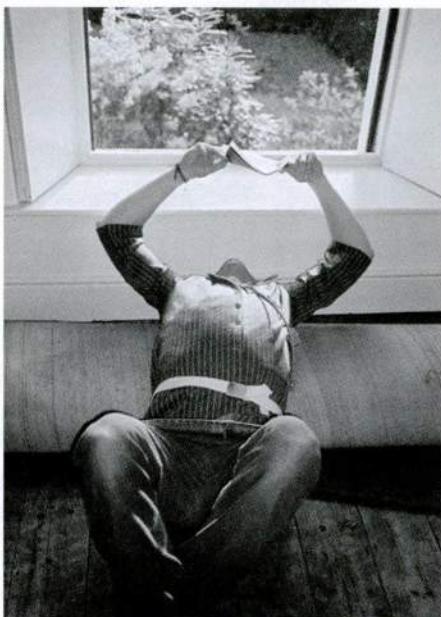
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the support of innovation and new ideas and artists who can change the way you look at the world."

Which brings us neatly to Flexistentialism. Founded by Gormly, producer of new company nervousystem and perhaps Thread's most argumentative participant, Flexistentialism is mentioned so often that I am unsure at first whether it is a philosophy, a religion, or a cocktail hour. It is, I learn, all of the above. "Flexistentialism is in," admits Valk. "We kneaded that whole thing constantly into the process here... It's given people an energy." The core tenet of Flexistentialism is pretty simple: the mind is a muscle of unlocked potential. You need to exercise it. "It is by expanding the realm of the possible," says its manifesto, "that the actual will take shape." Like every encouraged impulse in Thread — be it a startling concept of Ó Conchúir's in which the performer is first glimpsed, by video, writhing within a placental sack before tearing free to dance in a space sensitively prepared by Byrne, or Breen's indefatigable drive to present an opera with a libretto based on interviews and punctuated by witty video intermezzos — one wonders if Flexistentialism will have a life outside the seclusion of this warm and tirelessly enthusiastic community. "Unreal" frequently described the experience, but, deep down, the Fringe and an all-too-conservative Irish theatre could do with real dividends.

Collaborations are bound to follow, according to Byrne. Some manifestation of Valk's social choreography (participational updates of the 1960s "happenings") may take place during this year's Fringe; and Willie White, director of Project, who comes to visit a final presentation, might speak for the theatrical frustrations of a generation when he tells me he is "sick of seeing old-fashioned work and old-fashioned ideas." Whatever loose ideas can be woven together from Thread — the mutability of form and text, the vitalising potential of problem solving, or the arresting kuan of that tree falling in the woods — without enabling risk-taking projects like this one, Irish theatre will fall deeper into hoary routine and eventually, as Gantner (soon to depart the Fringe) must realise, there will be nobody there to see it.

CAROLINE McSWEENEY



#### FLEXI

Jeffrey Gormly demonstrates his philosophy.



# What a Riot!

**COLM TÓIBÍN** offers an excerpt from his first play, **BEAUTY IN A BROKEN PLACE**, which plays at the Peacock Theatre from 11 Aug-11 Sep.



**COLM TÓIBÍN WRITES:** *Beauty in a Broken Place* centres on a key moment in the history of the new Irish state and the Abbey Theatre. Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* offended the memory of those who had fought for Irish independence. His right to be heard was in conflict with solemn duties towards the dead. O'Casey is an isolated and playful genius, protected by Yeats' and Lady Gregory's belief in freedom of speech, protected also by his utter contempt, at least in theory, of those who wish to close his play down. The world of the Abbey in these years is fragile, beset by issues of class and race, beset also, and perhaps most significantly, by a rising caution and dullness, which will affect not only the theatre in the years to come, but the entire nation. Some of these battles are being fought still.

This excerpt intercuts scenes from rehearsals of the world premiere of *The Plough*, directed by Lennox Robinson, and Yeats' and Lady Gregory's worried discussions about the play.

LENNOX ROBINSON: I will speak the lines, but they come from offstage and they are loud and you must all stop and listen like you had heard thunder. (*Clears throat*) The last 16 months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. Heroism has come back to the earth. War is a terrible thing, but war is not an evil thing. People in Ireland dread war because they do not know it. Ireland has not known the exhilaration of war for over a hundred years. When war comes

to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the Angel of God.' Now Miss Delaney, even before the Covey speaks, you must be ready. You must speak like someone interrupting.

MISS DELANEY: Yes, Mr Robinson, I'm ready now. Hold on, sir, till I get myself going now. 'They may crow away out o' them, but it ud be fitter for some o' them to mend their ways, an' cease from havin' scouts out...'

ROBINSON: Miss Delaney, could you forget that Rathmines was ever civilised? Perhaps if you went for a walk in these very streets, and listened...

MISS DELANEY: You want me to talk like...? (*pointing at Miss Mooney*)

ROBINSON: I do.

MISS DELANEY: That won't be hard. 'They may crow away out o' them.'

ROBINSON: More!

MISS DELANEY: '...watchin' for th' comin of th' Saint Vincent de Paul man, for fear they'd be nailed lowerin' a pint of beer, mockin' th' man with an angel face, shinin' with th' glamour of deceit an' lies.'

ROBINSON: Now, Miss Mooney, come rushing in, and let us hear you. And I will read the next lines, so Miss Delaney, do not stop. Fast now, out with it, loud.

MISS MOONEY: 'An' a certain lassie standin' stiff behind her own door with her ears cocked listenin' to what's being said, stuffed till she's straining with envy of a neighbour thryin' for a few little things that may be got be hard strivin' to keep up to the letter an' th' law, an' th' practices of th' Church!'

ROBINSON (*stiffly*): 'If I was you, Mrs Gogan, I'd parry her jabbin' remarks be a powerful silence that'll keep her tantalisin' words from penetratin' into your feelin's. It's always better to leave these people to th' vengeance o' God.'

MISS DELANEY: 'Bessie Burgess doesn't

put up to know much, never havin' a swaggerin' mind, thanks be to God...'

ROBINSON: Swaggerin', Miss Delaney, swaggerin'.

MISS DELANEY: That's what I said.

ROBINSON: Yes, but it came from the outer reaches of Rathgar. Could you say it, Miss Mooney?

MISS MOONEY: Swaggerin'.



YEATS: One longs, you know, for poetry.

LADY GREGORY: This new play, which he wants to call *The Plough and the Stars*, is his best play so far. There is some magnificent drama.

YEATS: Yes, he is locked magnificently into the particular.

LADY GREGORY: He is our greatest discovery. I think perhaps of all of us he has...

YEATS: The common touch.

LADY GREGORY: I am sorry you have not read it yet, but when you do you will realise that it will offend not only the few — we are used to that — but the many.

YEATS: I have seen enough of it just now to feel that I can manage for a while longer without reading it.

GREGORY: It will offend our friends as well as our enemies.

YEATS: That is why we have friends.

## play excerpt

LADY GREGORY: So what shall we do?

YEATS: Defend our poor playwright, what else can we do?



MISS DELANEY: '...but goin' on packin' up knowledge accordin' to her conscience: precept upon precept, line upon line; here a little, an' there a little. But (*with a passionate swing of her shawl*), thanks be to Christ she know when she was got, where she was got, an' how she was got...'



LADY GREGORY: This will be the hardest battle. They will hate it, all of them, and they will come to the opening night because they love their top hats and a state occasion. Those who do not come will hate it when they hear of it, but when they come I'm afraid they will hate it more. And then there is the small matter of the new member of the board, Mr. O'Brien.

YEATS: Yes, O'Brien is not stupid, and there is nothing which causes greater mischief than a half-clever man. Worse than a dolt. One wishes the River Liffey would be set aside to keep the two types apart.

LADY GREGORY: I rather thought that it entirely devoted itself to that purpose.

YEATS: Yes, but not enough, not enough at all. I must speak to the Government about widening it. He is one of the new mob, O'Brien, he has been let into the Kildare Street Club as a gesture to the

Free State. He is most effective when he puts his thoughts on paper. We should ensure that he does not get the opportunity. I believe the National University is riddled with Jesuits.

LADY GREGORY: Most of them are English. No one, fortunately, can understand a word they say.



MISS DELANEY: '...while there's some she knows, decoratin' their finger with a well-polished weddin' ring would be hard put to it if they were assed to show their weddin' lines!'

ROBINSON: Now, have a very great fit, Miss Mooney.

MISS MOONEY: (*plunging into the centre of the floor in a wild temper of hysterical rage*) 'Youl rip of a blasted liar, me weddin' ring's been well earned be 20 years be th' side o' me husband, now takin' his rest in heaven...'



YEATS: We will have to make cuts.

LADY GREGORY: Let O'Brien suggest them. He is, after all, the new member of the board with the ear of the government and it will make him feel wanted and trusted. He will think we are giving into him.

YEATS: He will suggest the wrong cuts. Perhaps it would be better for all of us if we offered him five pounds for his horse.

LADY GREGORY: Let us wait and see.

**THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRISH THEATRE,**  
edited by **Shaun Richards**

(Cambridge, 2004)

and

**PERFORMING IRELAND**, edited by **Anna McMullan and Brian Singleton**  
(*Australasian Drama Studies*, Issue No. 43)

REVIEWED BY THOMAS CONWAY

THESE VOLUMES SHARE A DESIRE TO survey recent theatre in Ireland. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Theatre* covers an entire century, and aims for a general readership; the special edition of *Australasian Drama Studies* starts with the advent of the Celtic Tiger in 1993, and contributes to the conversation within professional and academic circles.

Considering the two together, however, highlights a striking difference between a dominant critical practice and an emergent one. In the first, authorial intention is researched using publications and archives; while in the second, performance history is tracked by reference to performances and video archives — and by interviews with practitioners, attendance at rehearsals, and even by writers taking the creative helm themselves. The dominant critic considers dramatic literature; the emergent critic addresses writing as just one element in a performance. *The Cambridge Companion* for the most part ratifies the dominant practice, but *Performing Ireland* promotes the emergent — providing a compelling case for this growth area in Irish studies.

*The Cambridge Companion* collects 19 essays from academics, and appears to be aimed mainly at students in the liberal arts, providing exemplary models of the kind of essay expected of those students. It makes room for emergent criti-

cal practice in its later essays, but mostly delivers what has been pre-ordained as canonical. It appears to presuppose that being produced at the Abbey confers canonical status, and so the overall narrative is dominated by that theatre. Adrian Frazier discusses the early Abbey's ideology, while Richard Cave considers the theatre's use of set design. And individual essays on Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory make a case for their canonical status.

Writers pre-dating the foundation of the Abbey are considered in terms of the Abbey's claims to authenticity. Stephen Watt considers homegrown Dublin melodrama in this context, and Neil Sammells discusses Oscar Wilde's promotion of style over authenticity. Similarly, Gearoid O'Flaherty and John P. Harrington's essays on Shaw and Beckett respectively, reductively consider those writers in terms of formative encounters with the Abbey.

The narrative also considers such writers as O'Casey, Friel, Murphy, Mc Guinness, and Marina Carr — mostly in terms of their relationship with the Abbey. Helen Lojek and Nicholas Grene consider how Friel and Murphy broke with the enervating dramaturgy of their predecessors, but a performance context would have offered a more nuanced account of the anger animating their work. Cathy Leeney and Vic Merriman consider two of those predecessors, Teresa Deevy and M.J. Molloy, discussing their wonderful, even liberating, images of deviance, and the violence to which their characters subject themselves in order to adjust to civil norms. These critics disagree interestingly on Marina Carr, however. Leeney praises Carr's resistance to patriarchy, while Merriman compares her with Martin

## book reviews

McDonagh, arguing that their plays encourage audiences to laugh at Ireland's past. That laugh has certainly been heard too often in the '90s, but focussing on it overlooks the truly subversive achievement of both playwrights.

Merriman's piece is one of three dissenting essays in the volume, each of which clinches its argument through reference to performance. Lionel Pilkington argues that the Abbey colluded with the objectives of the State, not just in the dark years under Blythe but throughout its history, by promoting non-militant norms in civil society. Merriman considers the separate allegiances of writers to either labouring or middle-class constituencies. Brian Singleton recalls radical interpretations of O'Casey's work, contradicting Ronan McDonald's earlier discussion of O'Casey's politics.

The highlight, however, is Marilyn Richtarik's essay on Field Day, which bucks the volume's trend by veering away from the Abbey to investigate plays and playwrights in a performance context. She refers to programming and touring policy, to ideology, and to the different political contexts of the plays' reception when they toured.

This widening of context is also the objective of *Performing Ireland*. In their introduction, Singleton and McMullan acknowledge the dominance of "the analysis of text and authorial vision over the study of embodied practices of text and performance," and show their determination to make redress. The volume has its own blank spots, however: it repeatedly discusses the Celtic Tiger

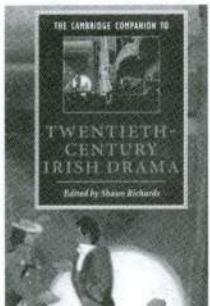
without acknowledging its polarising effects, for example. A central concern of *Performing Ireland* is the commodification of Irish identity, and it thus emphasises critical practices that explore alternative models of identity.

Melissa Sihra alerts readers to previously overlooked radical stage strategies in Marina Carr. Aoife Monks charts the differences between the Dublin and London productions of the Deborah Warner/Fiona Shaw *Medea*, showing how the production caught a moment of transition in Irish gender relations. Stephen Di

Benedetto defends 30-something male writers against the charge of gratuitousness when they stage explicit sexual acts.

Alternative identities are more convincingly considered by David Cregan and Cathy Leeney. Cregan shows just how daunting Frank McGuinness' homoerotic strategies are, by referring them to the legalisation campaign that lasted from the 1970s into the '90s. Similarly, when desperate optimists theatre company collaborated with Dublin Youth Theatre, Leeney discovered young people writing back against technologies and disabling narratives.

By contrast, Mark Phelan finds that Tim Loane's *Caught Red Handed* doesn't go far enough, deconstructing Unionism only to offer its absorption into an all-island state. Paul Murphy shows Dermot Bolger working with Irish identity in transition, but finds an even more challenging reworking in Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum! Asylum!*, when a Ugandan asylum seeker asks to make Ireland his home, thereby exposing Irish



identity to new definitions. Fascinating considerations of Irishness as "other" take place in Australian and New Zealand contexts: Julie-Ann Robson finds Irishness defamiliarised in *Milo's Wake*, and David O'Donnell discusses how *Irish Annals of Aotearoa* merges Maori and Irish identities.

The *Cambridge Companion* for the most part uses a national frame for its essays, which accounts for its omissions — crucially Northern Ireland's theatrical output. It acknowledges Field Day, Barabbas, and Wet Paint Arts, but ignores other progressive currents that survived alongside the Abbey throughout its history. Nor does it give a sense of the resurgence of theatrical activity in the 1990s.

No such omissions are made in *Performing Ireland*. It comprehensively charts new configurations of identity in new practices, and new locations. This makes for a more enabling and enriching critical practice that engages with theatre practitioners, better serving undergraduates, professionals, and general readers alike.

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Thomas Conway is a freelance director and a director of the Everyman Palace Studio.

#### **CRITICAL MOMENTS: FINTAN O'TOOLE ON MODERN IRISH THEATRE,**

**edited by Julia Furay and**

**Redmond O'Hanlon**

*Carysfort Press, 2003*

**REVIEWED BY MARK FISHER**

FOR FINTAN O'TOOLE, CONTEXT IS KING. Where most critics start with the detail and work outwards, O'Toole starts with the bigger picture and works in. His reviews for *In Dublin*, *The Sunday Tribune* and *The Irish Times*, collected here in an Ireland-centric anthology, assume that theatre is a public act. And being a left-

leaning political thinker, he believes that public acts should be discussed in terms of the wider world in which they take place.

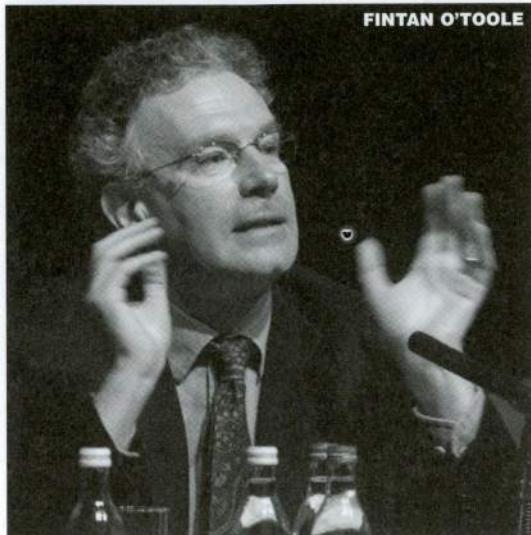
Although his medium is journalism, O'Toole is an essayist who has little in common with the overnight reviewer. He is not inclined to kick off with the snappy opening phrases typical of newspaper writing. Even when he does, you feel the weight of authority behind him: "Goodness, in the theatre, is seldom any good," he says, definitively, to introduce a Conall Morrison play. Or this, to review Dermot Bolger: "Irish theatre, from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, was driven by the intensely dramatic conflict between tradition and modernity."

With O'Toole, you don't just find out about (in these cases) *Hard to Believe* or *April Bright*, you discover the position of those plays in the history of stage evil or modern Irish drama. Conversely, he's often at his most glib where his inferiors are strongest. "It finishes tonight and is worth catching," he says feebly at the end of a magnificent 1500-word account of Bolger's *Holy Ground* and *In High Germany*, in which he encompasses Greek tragedy, Shakespearean vocabulary, pre-19th-century circus, modern sporting plays, and recent Irish politics.

So what is the context of Fintan O'Toole? As a theatre critic living in Scotland, I want to know about the society that makes such a man possible. I don't believe you get great critics without great theatre. It is no coincidence, for example, that Kenneth Tynan's rise as a critic coincided with that of Beckett, Osborne, and Pinter. Likewise, O'Toole has had the privilege to get his teeth into a meaty body of work, from Friel, Murphy, and McGuinness to McDonagh, Carr, and McPherson. That work has not simply

## book reviews

FINTAN O'TOOLE



been worthy of his considerable skills of observation, perception, and communication — it has stretched them too. He would be nothing without these writers.

Take his review of Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*. It's hard to decide what is more impressive: Friel's raft of classical allusions, or O'Toole's ability to spot them. That he is also able to set the play in the context of Friel's previous work reveals the intellectual power to take serious playwrights seriously. He can justify his conclusion that there is "no dramatic yeast to make all these heavy ingredients rise" because he has fully engaged in Friel's project.

O'Toole not only considers it worthwhile to subject theatre to serious examination, but writes in the confidence that readers think it's worthwhile too. Unlike his London counterparts, he doesn't try to draw the reader in with flippant gags, but starts with the assumption that people are

interested. No one in Irish theatre should take this for granted, nor should they forget that for a critic to write routinely at such length is a special privilege. Still thinking of context, it's a shame this book doesn't give information about O'Toole's background. Without it, we can only assume he arrived fully formed at *In Dublin* in 1980, and it's only through guesswork that we figure out that he is also a political commentator. This is frustrating for those of us living further afield than Ireland.

*Critical Moments* does, however, create intriguing contexts of its own. By focusing on Irish drama, it serves as a textbook introduction to the key modern players. Similarly, by juxtaposing reviews of the same play in different productions, it reveals O'Toole's development as a critic.

Less successful is the section on O'Toole's supposedly political writing (a pointless exercise since, in O'Toole's view, theatre is implicitly political) and a poorly structured interview between the critic and a self-indulgent O'Hanlon.

But, above all, it works as a showcase of O'Toole's authority and clarity of thought. Yes, at his worst, he's so preoccupied with context that he forgets to tell you anything about the play. But, at his breathtaking best, he captures something of the physical business of theatre and the metaphorical business of what it all means.

Mark Fisher is a freelance writer and critic based in Edinburgh.

PAUL McCARTHY



National University of Ireland, Galway  
*Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh*

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# entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and going in Irish theatre.

**MAURA O'KEEFFE**, founding managing editor of *itm*, is leaving the organisation. She will be greatly missed. The new position of general manager of *itm* is being advertised... **MARY-ELIZABETH BURKE KENNEDY** has left her position as artistic director of Storytellers Theatre Company to pursue a freelance career. She worked with the company for 15 years; the position has been advertised... **VALLEJO GANTNER**, director of the Dublin Fringe, is leaving after this year's festival to pursue a freelance directing career. The position has been advertised... **ERIC FRAAD** has stepped down as artistic director of the Ark. Currently, general manager **BELINDA MOLLER** is acting director at the centre, while the board reassesses its structure... **DOMINIC CAMPBELL** and **MARIA MOYNIHAN** have departed the St Patrick's Day Festival as artistic director and chief executive respectively. Their positions have been advertised...

Axis Arts Centre have appointed **ROISIN McGARR**, formerly company manager of Irish Modern Dance Theatre, to the position of programming manager while **MARK O'BRIEN**, previously a freelance director and composer, has taken on the role of local arts development officer with the centre. Both are new positions...

**AOIFE WALL**, previously of the Everyman Theatre, Cork, joins the Pavilion Theatre as box office and marketing assistant while **CAROLYN BROWN** has been appointed as the theatre's box office and promotions manager... **CATHERINE McNALLY** has left her position as administrator



BURKE KENNEDY



O'KEEFFE

with Big Telly. Her role, restructured to become the position of deputy general manager, has been filled by **HANNAH MCKENZIE**...

**ONAGH MONTAGUE**, formerly with the Galway Arts Office, has been appointed the new company administrator of Corcadorca following **FIN FLYNN**'s promotion to the position of company manager... The Millennium Forum Theatre has appointed **PAUL MASON** its new conference and events manager, while **CATHERINE MING** has been made its marketing officer and **ROBBIE KYLE** its finance officer. These are all new positions... 

**BIRDIE BIRDIE by Michael Harding**

The Factory Theatre, Sligo

9 - 20 March, 2004

Reviewed on 9 March BY SUSAN CONLEY

THE STAGE IS BLACK, WITH FEW SET PIECES. The actors speak, very slowly, very quickly, and then very slowly again. The movements are alternatively jerky, alternatively smooth, and there is an atmosphere of heightened theatricality. Actions are repeated, key thematic lines are repeated, movements are repeated, alternatively jerkily, alternatively smoothly, and the soundtrack occasionally drowns out the actor's voices.

If it's Sligo, it must be Blue Raincoat. The company have been creating their own particular brand of performance since the early '90s, a hybrid of disciplines culled from the work of American avant-garde director Anne Bogart; via her, the work of Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki; and the practice of corporeal mime as taught by Corinne Soum. All these forms take as their basis the use of the body as an integral deliverer of meaning, and in the hands of artistic director Niall Henry and the core actors in the group, form has generally taken precedence over content. Some of Henry's best work was in fact his direction of *The Playboy of The Western World*, in the Peacock Theatre in 2001, that allowed Henry and his band

of actors (some of them Raincoats) to wed their idiosyncratic physical practice to a text that still managed to keep its integrity.

Michael Harding's plays hark back to a Joycean kind of discourse, with his production of *Talking Through His Hat*, an idiosyncratic rendering of the madness of Jonathan Swift, an excellent example of self-conscious word-play, unconventional narrative, and often unsympathetic lead characters. Last year's production of *Swallow* in the ESB Dublin Fringe Festival, starring the writer himself

**TWEET TWEET**

Sandra O'Malley in  
Birdie Birdie



## reviews

and directed by Judy Hegarty-Lovett, was what appeared to be a vigorous step forward for Harding, as he gave an excellent performance of a reflective script that was both gutting and appalling, whose main character was a deeply misanthropic misogynist.

So, an idiosyncratic theatre company meets an idiosyncratic writer. What resulted was an edgy alliance, with Harding seemingly the lone wolf, and the Raincoats very much in their own world of constructing performance. The result, *Birdie Birdie*, is an amalgam that did not take advantage of either contributor's strengths, and played up their weaknesses.

A woman is confined to her bed, definitely hysterical, possibly insane; a strict nurse and surly aul' fella are her only companions. They are all trapped in a room and have access to the outside world via a periscope. A dapper man, who is possibly the woman's husband, comes in, and leaves a mysteriously ringing phone when he nips out again some time later. The text has all the aura of *Endgame* with none of the tension, and shifts between repetition and sheer nonsense, with some healthy doses of anachronism and scatology. The closing image, that of a spotlight lovingly fading out on a recently emptied chamber pot now stuffed with lilies, implies a notion of beauty among the waste, but little that came before that composition of flower and porcelain spoke to the potential of beauty, and the image fails to hold as a unifying metaphor.

The staging is bare, with many recognisable Blue Raincoat props (we've seen that bed before!) and many recognisable Blue Raincoat "moves," to a point of repetition that doesn't move the story forward. Walking around and around in cir-

cles, as the nurse does around and around Birdie's bed, may mean something existentially — i.e., there's nowhere else to go, no other way to appear threatening and powerful — but such blocking quickly becomes dull, and leeches the movement of its meaning. There seems to have been no dramaturgical intervention that might have bridged the synaptic gap between Harding's text, which may have been trying to demonstrate the loneliness of mental instability, and the Raincoats' physical vocabulary.

Despite its 80-minute running time, *Birdie Birdie* felt like one of the longest theatrical experiences in recent memory. The Blue Raincoats have made a concerted effort to bring a new theatrical language to Ireland, and have injected some interesting physicality into a dramatic landscape that is largely verbal. *Birdie Birdie*, however, is an occasion in which form and content failed to merge.

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

### THE BURIAL AT THEBES:

**Sophocles' Antigone as translated  
by Seamus Heaney**

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

5 Apr - 1 May 2004; reviewed 7 Apr

BY LOUIS LENTIN

A RIDDLE FOR SPHYNX. WHICH IS MORE perilous, to scale the peak of *Lear* or the pinnacles of Sophocles? Answer: "Be bold and resolute." For resolute read "have purpose" — sadly absent in this Sophoclean venture.

The signs and omens at base camp appeared propitious. Translation by Seamus Heaney, our laureated poet; direction from Lorraine Pintal, a Québécoise of



**FILIAL** Kelly Campbell as Ismene in *The Burial at Thebes*

and young talent. Unfortunately the Gods failed to smile, abandoning the venture to flounder in its own inept wilderness.

Inept translation/version; inept direction and design; and most unfortunately, as a result, some inept performances. Great dramatists are inevitably great poets, but the opposite does not necessarily hold. Words provide the threshold to deeds, deeds and conflict to action. Drama is con-

interesting pedigree; design by her Québec colleague Carl Fillion; the cast, a suitable mix of the tried and trusted,

flict in action, facilitated by the right word, the right combination, the right rhythm, doomed by the wrong. By opting for a three-beat rhythm, Heaney denied *The Burial at Thebes* essential dramatic emphasis.

The problem with "versions" of the Greeks also lies in a reconciliation of ancient and modern. Either abandon all pretence of the old, as in Conall Morrison's excitingly specific version of *Antigone* last year for Storytellers, or attain a balance. Sophocles/Heaney's *Antigone* does not exist in a dramatic vacuum, and a reduction to an implausibly local vernacular with lines like "I'll flush 'em out," "Your conscience is what's doing the disturbing," "All hands get a move on..." makes such a balance impossible. Conflict and urgency in this verbally dependant drama become reduced, dramatic tension flattened.

It was further flattened by direction that, lacking shape and purpose, wandered pathless, shamefully reducing this great, clamorous, reverberative tragedy to an avoidable "local row," a family spat, best resolved by Creon administering a firm slap to stubborn Antigone's bottom! She didn't need to be strung up.

It is played in and out front of a large, cold, concrete and steel edifice, an intrusive post WWII palace, devoid of even a faint resonance of the past. It may suit crass Creon, however: "He's a new king, but he's right/For this city at this moment." Which city? Thebes? Difficult to tell.

Preceded by danced foreplay, Antigone

delivers the news. "Ismene quick come here! Eteocles has been buried/As a soldier, with full honours... But not Polyneices./Polyneices is denied/any burial at all./Word has come down from Creon./There's to be no laying to rest... His body's to be dumped." Try putting excitement and urgency into that.

Zap to *Prime Time*... Why does Antigone defy Creon's law? From a sense of religious duty? "I disobeyed because the law was not/The law of Zeus nor the law ordained/By Justice... dwelling deep/Among the gods of the dead." Or perhaps from a filial sense of her brother's due? "Not for a husband, not even for a son/Would I have broken the law/But with my father gone, and my mother gone/Where can I find another brother, ever?" Someone needed to choose, preferably the director. The actor can't play the two equally: one must dominate.

Joined later by Tiresias: "Because of you, Creon.../That's why we have this plague/...You have forbidden burial of.../One who belongs by rights to the gods below... No earthly power... exerts authority over the dead." Final word to Chorus: "Wise conduct is the key to happiness./Always rule by the gods and reverence them."

Any questions on the absolute power of the state; state versus morality? Any relationship to current abysmal debacles? No? Well, that's it then.

The cast worked their hearts out; but hindered by a flaccid script, and direction that failed to interpret, create a thematic line, or above all to provide dramatic structure, they were battling through, words and lines flowing to little apparent purpose. Maybe the Gods know who/what the split Chorus represented, certainly not the people of Thebes.

*Antigone*, a much-told tale, "occupies a unique place in European consciousness" (Kitto). Knowing the storyline, we need to be emotionally and intellectually churned. Sadly, this telling avoided both grandeur and the drama of characters torn between irreconcilable voices, and signified nothing.

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## THE CASTLECOMER JUKEBOX

by Jimmy Murphy

Red Kettle Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 15 Apr 2004 at the  
Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

BY FINTAN WALSH

GREAT THEATRE CAN BE MOVING, provocative and challenging. Its immediacy is unique; its formal possibility unrivalled. Innovators from Sophocles to Lepage have consistently proven this. That said, and without betraying my allegiance completely, there is something uniquely seductive about a live music gig. The consuming pulse, the orgiastic heave, the sly wink from the bass guitarist are all part of its commanding allure, largely incomparable in traditional theatre practice.

Red Kettle attempts to harness the magnetic energies of both these forms in its latest production, *The Castlecomer Jukebox*, directed by Jim Nolan. Drawing on the showband phenomenon which swept Ireland in 1960s and 1970s, the play dramatises the reunion of a once-famous group in preparation for the summer season at a local hotel. The get-together is not without its complications, however, as the band become embroiled in insidious devel-



opments of their own and others' making. Complications begin (as they often do) with the news that the President of the United States is to make a trip to the local area. Asti, the local government minister, divulges this news to her long-time acquaintance, Eamonn, (who is nicknamed Hitler, presumably owing to his autocratic leadership) promising that she will arrange for the President to stay at his hotel on the condition that he slips her the all-too-familiar brown envelope. Further, Asti demands that her husband be allowed play keyboard in the Castlecomer Jukebox band, forcing Ginty (Mick Lally) to abnegate his role. Like any competent businessman, Hitler agrees to let Asti's husband fulfil his unlikely dream and donates €20,000 to the minister. His pact with the corrupt leader marks the beginning

#### HAIL TO THE CHIEF *The company in The Castlecomer Jukebox*

of the plot's didacticism and unfortunately, the production's descent.

Though I primed myself to embrace the expected nos-talgia of the play, hoping to find in it a nugget of the endearing self-consciousness found in Christopher Guest's recent film *A Mighty Wind*, I was greatly disappointed. Not even John Waters' programme note could persuade me otherwise. His figuring of the showband era as "seductive and dangerous" was wholly unconvincing in the context of this production, given its inability to recreate the magnetic concert dynamic on stage. It is perhaps for this reason that social realist plays about Queen and Abba have been lost to their rousing musical counterparts, *We Will Rock You* and *Mamma Mia*. (Thankfully, I have never seen such plays, but I'm sure they exist). Thus it would seem that the only palatable way to re-introduce the showband to the

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Irish stage is by way of affectionate self-mockery or an excellent musical adaptation. This production followed neither route.

Instead, Murphy's play favours rudimentary moralising to such an extent that the quasi-political context appears to be tacked on for credibility. The play beats the viewer on the head with the importance of loyalty between friends and business partners as well as the difficulties involved in reconciling tensions between the past and present, between regional commerce and international affairs. The unlikely relationship which Murphy forges between U.S. politics and the band's internal relationships makes for strained identification, a strain also visible in the performances. Too often the actors crowded the stage together, desperately trying to stay in role, in between extended silences and stilted dialogue. The customary nod from Lally or the girlish grin from Honor Heffernan were recurring testaments to this difficulty. The latter's talent would have been better used if she were allowed to do more frequently what she does best — sing.

All was not damned however. Peter Halpin gave a spirited performance in his role as young Horse, a charisma matched by Sean Lawlor as Dixie. Unexpectedly, the interval was enriched by a stroll down memory lane with Paddy Cole, who was sitting next to me. Alas, none of his charming anecdotes made their way into the script. Admittedly, many older audience members seemed to enjoy the show, at times hazarding a sing-along, though the generational appeal is no excuse for the overall anaemia. Leaving the theatre I counted my blessings that no one hurled underwear at Mick Lally, nor begged the obvious — "Spit on me Mickey." Though

such a development might have invigorated the performance, it would have caused this reviewer, at least, unwelcome anxiety.

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### **THE CHERRY ORCHARD**

**by Anton Chekhov, in a new version**

**by Tom Murphy**

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

19 Feb - 13 Mar 2004; Reviewed 3 Mar

**BY HEATHER JOHNSON**

THIS NEW VERSION OF *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* by Tom Murphy brings out the richness of Chekhov's original, particularly its deft combination of the tragic and comic which here is made to strike a not unfamiliar cultural chord. Avoiding any heavy-handed transposition to the world of the Anglo-Irish big house, Murphy nevertheless draws out the relevance to modern Ireland of Chekhov's theme of rapid cultural change and a Modernist loss of reassuring certainties. In this regard, Murphy need only highlight the Chekhovian focus on the relationship of money to personal freedom and class identity. Certainly, young Socialist Yasha's refusal of the gift of money, on the principle that it would compromise his sense of freedom, may strike a contemporary audience, tellingly, as an unduly idealistic reaction. Just as timely are Murphy's references to "sinning" and his depiction of the elderly character Firs' silent prayers beside painted religious icons, offering as it does a commentary on a passing generation — not only in turn-of-the-century Europe but in contemporary Dublin. Chekhov's story of a family's loss of their ancestral home and its individuals'



**NICE FEZ** Des Cave  
in *The Cherry Orchard*

adjustments to new circumstances, is set against the euphemistic "business" of revolution and post-imperial nationhood; an analogy between Russia and Ireland in the early 20th century is a fruitful aspect of Murphy's creative interpretation.

In a sense Murphy's version sides with a futurist take on change, favouring the more optimistic accents of the play (voiced by Anya, for instance) over its more nostalgic concerns of loss, regret, and alienation from the present. Murphy's evident feel for *The Cherry Orchard* is strongly supported by Patrick Mason's direction and his eye for visual composition. The treatment of Chekhov's

central symbol, the estate's cherry trees, is characteristic of the subtle staging: an eerie light (as designed by Paul Keogan) illuminating the actors' faces indicates the special presence of the trees. Designer Joe Vanek's set is subtle and unobtrusive with a minimum of furniture (a bookcase, a screen) and subdued, faded colours, while the Abbey stage provides the wide canvas necessary to convey the implicit historical sweep of this canonical play.

A few performances were edgy: in her Abbey debut Gemma Reeves as Anya seemed anxious about voice projection resulting in a stagy performance, though her pertness conveyed the necessary youthful optimism of the character. Dylan Tighe played Yasha rather nervously, while his northern accent was an interesting choice for the ardent socialist. Much depends on the portrayal of the mistress of the house in *Cherry Orchard* and Donna Dent, a young and coquettish Lyubov Andreyevna Ranyevskaya, portrays a self-absorbed woman — her affairs of the heart contributing to the debilitating financial problems. Dent's stunning wardrobe did much of the work to suggest the character's significant role in the family. Playing Ranyevskaya as naïve suggests that events are happening *to* her; but a degree of gravitas is needed to win the audience's empathy for the real impact of the family's subsequent loss. The governess, played by Clara Simpson as a stray cabaret per-

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former, borders on caricature, but her comedy provides variety of pace and at times projects a kind of hysterical response to the old order's collapse.

Overall excellent casting brings out the play's potential nuances. Tom Hickey as servant Firs, with his dishevelled hair and slapping slippers, embodies the spirit of the house (ageing, noble, anachronistic), while capturing the tenor of tragic-comedy in Chekhov's plays. The oldest surviving member of the household, Firs remains behind in the deserted house, inadvertently locked in (eliciting audience laughter) and, in a visually poignant final scene (beautifully lit by Keogan), he lies down in exhausted acceptance of an era's end.

Another memorable performance is provided by Lorcan Cranitch, whose Yermolay Lopakhin is not the greedy businessman waiting maliciously to supplant the family (as in some productions); rather, he is a more sympathetic character whose ambitions are motivated by abuse suffered in his own past. Cranitch handles the play's decisive moment — when it is confirmed that the house has been sold — brilliantly. He carries the tension of the scene in which we actually see the shift of power from the old world to the new. Mason's direction nicely captures the whirl of emotion leading to this scene, and then, in his positioning of the actors, presents a kind of tableau before which Cranitch delivers his speech of success. Unfortunately, the powerful implications of this scene ebb before we reach the play's end, so that there is a sense of resignation rather than tense resistance or regret as the family approach the moment of their final departure. The dramatic climax occurs in the earlier scene, somewhat diminishing the emotional charge of relinquishing one's past. Murphy's *Cherry Orchard* takes

us to the heart of the clash of cultures that occurred at the turn of the 20th century. In doing so, he ultimately alerts us both to modernity's forward drive and to the considerable act of (cultural and personal) repression which is required to deny that the world is changing.

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### **CROON by Johnny Hanrahan and Daphne Wright**

Meridian Theatre Company and the National Sculpture Factory  
Everyman Palace Theatre and other venues, Cork

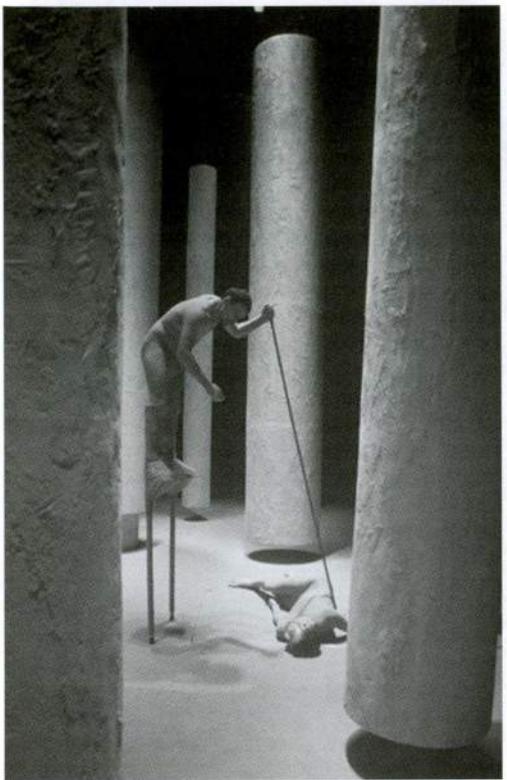
3 - 7 Feb 2004; reviewed 3 Feb

**BY ALANNAH HOPKIN**

THE OPENING OF *CROON* WAS EAGERLY awaited, having been postponed from November 2003, after a two-year collaboration between playwright and director Johnny Hanrahan and sculptor Daphne Wright. While many sculptors and other artists have designed theatre sets, *Croon* was conceived from the start as an equal collaboration. Wright was to be as involved in the text as Hanrahan was in the visuals.

Most Irish theatregoers are familiar with Hanrahan's gutsy, multi-media productions with Meridian. The work of Daphne Wright, born in Longford in 1963 and now based in Bristol, was less familiar, even though the Crawford Gallery recently hosted her wonderfully eerie installation, *These Talking Walls*.

The show began, for the promenade audience of 25, next door to the Everyman Palace, in a standard red-carpeted function room in the Metropole Hotel. There was a white wooden ramp, and a large



**ENCHANTED FOREST** Croon

white vat, with blank white windows on it, almost as tall as the room. On the floor was a clay puppet, face down, while a man in shirt-sleeves sat on a chair on the ramp. The audience was free to wander at will, shifting vantage points as the action changed.

A humming sound came from the vat, while the man (Crooner) donned his dinner jacket and smoked. For the next 30 minutes the tawdry, off-key Crooner battled it out with the voices in the vat, ver-

bally attacking the figure on the floor, leading up to an extraordinary moment of high drama, when the blank windows of the vat open to reveal a 16-voice choir singing a beautifully harmonious rendition of "The Last Rose of Summer."

The audience was then ushered on a ten-minute walk to a large warehouse smelling of cat piss and concrete. All around were starkly lit, unfinished breeze-block buildings, defaced by graffiti. A figure in a boiler suit, called Maintenance, emerged from a tin shack pushing a coffin-like wheelbarrow, and ran at the audience. Against a menacing electronic sound track she shouted a list of elements from the periodic table, and angry phrases: "I'm a technician, not a magician," "Hey there! There's a *man* coming round!" Eventually, the audience was summoned out of this area.

After walking back to the Everyman, the audience was ushered onto the stage, to wander amid classical pillars. There was a queasy moment when you realised the pillars were floating inches above the ground, and saw a body on the floor, a real version of the smaller one in first scene. A shout of "Hey!" announced the stilt-walker, Demagogue, who roared aphorisms: "Man's heart makes the plans, Baxter gives the answer," "The logic of desire is perpetually foreign." Like Maintenance, he moved in straight lines, as you scrambled out of his way. The body on the ground

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breathed audibly and moaned. (The word "croon," besides referring to singing, also means to lament, mourn, or groan). Again the audience was summoned out suddenly, *in medias res*, and that was the end.

The debate began during those pleasant walks across the city — ambulatory intervals — and is still going on. What was it all about? Who is Baxter? How do the three parts relate? Part one seemed to embody a battle between classical ideals of beauty and our inner yearning for harmony, and tawdry contemporary reality, personified by the Crooner. This part alone would have made an interesting, original, thought-provoking event.

In comparison I found the concrete-block wasteland of part two, the world destroyed by mankind, simplistic and hackneyed, and quite simply not frightening enough. The third part, in which one could reasonably expect a return to the themes explored in the first part, was frankly baffling. While obviously links with the first part were intended, through the moaning figure lying on the ground, neither the text, nor the character of Demagogue were any help in puzzling them out.

Actors were generally less important than the amazing sculptural forms. Jack Healy was suitably sleazy as Crooner, and Jan Didereren was both menacing and magnificent on stilts, while Ciarán Fitzpatrick played Old Groaner with conviction. Cindy Cummings delivered a memorable, energetic, extremely physical performance as Maintenance, which for many was the highlight of the evening.

Musical director Nicole Panizza deserves a special mention, as does the Choir's impeccable performance. Cormac O'Connor's ambient soundtracks added greatly to the experience. The lighting

design, by Lucy Carter in collaboration with Tom Creed, was strong and flexible.

We look at art differently from the way we look at theatre, and the intellectual and imaginative receptive process is also different. Ambiguity and opacity are more readily tolerated in contemporary art than in theatre. If an installation does nothing for you, you are free to leave, but here, because it was theatrical performance, you felt compelled to stay for the allotted span.

*Croon's* identity as art — a series of sculptural installations — was far stronger than its theatrical identity. The words and characters were secondary to the visual and aural experience. The text was *Croon's* weakest element, overshadowed by the strange, enigmatic beauty of its art and sound. In the end, it seemed to resemble Wright's work, in its creation of enigmatic "other-worlds," on which the viewer can let his or her imagination play freely, rather than Hanrahan's more down-to-earth theatrical one.

In theatre, the audience expects a certain level of information and context, however experimental the experience, which was simply not offered in *Croon*. If it had gone on speaking to us in the metaphorical way that the first part did, then one might have had an intellectually and artistically satisfying evening. But try as I might, I cannot find links between the three scenarios. One must conclude on this evidence that the theatrical and the artistic are best kept apart, and left to work in their own distinct ways in their separate worlds.

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## DANCING AT LUGHNASA by Brian Friel

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

24 Feb – 1 May 2004; reviewed 13 Apr

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

DANCING AT LUGHNASA PREMIERED at the Abbey in 1990, and was produced more often than any other play at the theatre during the subsequent ten years — using the same director and designer every time. Our understanding of the play has therefore been conditioned to an unusual extent by people other than Brian Friel — by Joe Vanek, whose design has now become iconic, and by Patrick Mason, whose direction is regarded by some as an inspiring highpoint of recent Irish theatre, but by others as a sentimentalised betrayal of Friel's text. This over-familiarity, together with

the film version of *Lughnasa* and the influence of *Riverdance* on our perception of the play's famous dance scene, have combined to blunt the play's impact.

The value of this production, directed by Joe Dowling, is that it makes *Lughnasa* strange again. The Abbey premiere opened with music, its cast in tableau against an expansive set that was lit in a soft autumnal haze. Here we open with a darkened stage, the gloom of Rupert Murray's lighting creating a sense of familial warmth being threatened by an uncertain future. Robert Jones' set emphasises the Mundys' isolation: the interior of their cottage is initially closed to us; beside it, a grass footpath disappears upwards.

The only sound we hear is the voice of Peter Gowen who, as the play's narrator Michael, stands in a severe

**GO GIRL** O'Neill,  
Walsh, Bradfield, and  
Irvine in *Lughnasa*



PAUL McCARTHY

spotlight that underscores his distance from the action. His opening monologue is delivered with a disconcerting, arrhythmic speed that disorientates the audience, stopping us from settling into the play. These characteristics — gloom, isolation, and urgency — dominate the unfolding action.

Almost every performance deepens our understanding of the characters. Although Ben Price's Gerry is disappointing, often ill-at-ease while singing and dancing, the rest of the cast are excellent. Maggie's humour can dominate the play, but Derbhle Crotty holds back, allowing other aspects of her character to surface. John Kavanagh's Jack is mischievous but dignified: we understand why his sisters look up to him — and why they're frightened by him. Catherine Walsh's Agnes is bursting with suppressed energy, so that her departure now seems tragically inevitable. And Aisling O'Neill nicely draws out Chris's vulnerability and propensity to depression.

The strongest performances come from Dawn Bradfield and Andrea Irvine. Bradfield's characterisation of Rose is so complete that she dominates the play. Irvine brilliantly humanises Kate, playing her lines without irony, so that her character now occupies the emotional core of the drama.

A problem arises with the presentation of Michael, however. Friel places different elements of the drama into tension with each other throughout *Lughnasa*. Movement competes with language, the religious with the secular, tradition with modernity, memory with forgetting. The play is disturbing precisely because it leaves these tensions mostly unresolved. The most important tension is between what Michael tells us and what Friel shows

us. For example, Michael claims that we'll see a marriage ceremony in the second act, but Friel instead gives us a ceremony of leave-taking. Michael isn't just an unreliable narrator: Friel constantly emphasises that he is "narrating" memories that he couldn't possibly possess. The characters often draw attention to Michael's absence from the action, much of which happens in different places simultaneously. And even if Michael had witnessed these events, it's unlikely that, as a seven-year old boy, he would have understood them.

So any director of *Lughnasa* needs to work out how to present the tension between Michael's memories and the action on stage. Here Dowling seems to have chosen to present a straightforward memory play: he has Michael relate emotionally to the action, and even brings him onstage for the dance scene (Friel's script emphasises that Michael wasn't there). And, significantly, the spotlight lingers on Michael long after the lights have gone down on everyone else: whereas Patrick Mason's original production led audiences to think of *Lughnasa* as being about a middle-aged man's nostalgia, here we're being told that the play is about a middle-aged man's sense of loss. In both cases, the masculine aspects of the play are being given too much weight. So although Gowen does his job well — and although his performance seems to be motivated by a need to remind audiences of *Lughnasa*'s tragic aspects — Michael is unbalancing the play.

It would, however, be wrong to over-emphasise one flaw in an excellent production, in which Dowling and his cast persuasively show how much can be gained from continuing to explore Friel's troubling, and great, play.

**DEFENDER OF THE FAITH**by **Stuart Carolan**

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

16 Mar - 24 Apr 2004; reviewed 10 Apr

BY PETER CRAWLEY

AN ANATOMY OF THE PROVOS. A Greek tragedy's worth of violent familial destruction. A detective story. A body count. Stuart Carolan's gripping first play is neither short of ideas nor shy of big topics. It does seem to be short of time, though, and so, in just 90 minutes, we rush invigoratingly through the politics, dubious moral positions, and fraying allegiances of a Republican family, leaping over any gaps in the narrative or snags in the style as we go.

Set in a farmhouse in

South Armagh in the mid-'80s (the drama simply sketches the context, almost in fear of boring its audience) Carolan's play begins as a barbed comedy that quickly bleeds into menace, exposing deep-seated convictions as unshakeable as they are imponderable. Hatred in this house, like faith, needs no explanation, and agnostics are not tolerated. "Thomas, does my Daddy not know that I hate the Brits as much as he does and you do?" worries Danny, a ten-year-old crudely admonished by Gerard McSorley's fearsome patriarch, Joe.

He's right to wonder. Any deviation from the convictions of these extremists is sniffed out, then stubbed out, while everyone sustains a violent poise. For all his vicious talk, in fact, there is

**CROCODILIAN** FrankMcCusker in *Defender of the Faith*

TOM LAWLER

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something even more brutal in the way McSorley whips a tea towel from its peg; something unsettling about how eldest son Thomas (Laurence Kinlan) returns a defiant stare. There is reason for such friction: there's an informer among them and Joe has brought a senior IRA member, JJ (a marvellously icy Frank McCusker, polite as a crocodile), into his home. But the tension in this family runs deeper still.

Director Wilson Milam is here dealing with a far more intelligent and thorny play about paramilitarism and family dynamics than Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which he also directed. Milam responds to Carolan's sinister humour and desperate circumstances by zoning in on the characters and sealing off the exits. If Dick Bird's design, boarded by encroaching panels of corrugated iron, were not imprisoning enough, the sound of a helicopter beating down between the scenes is deeply foreboding: the rotary blades of Damocles.

The play, however, is more concerned with other metaphors. Sniffing cows, squealing pigs, drowned puppies — Carolan riffs from a farmyard of symbolism. "I think all animals know it's coming," muses JJ. "That's why they try and run." Fair enough, but with so many dumb beasts, drowned pups, sick calves, and little lost lambs yet to follow it can border on the leadenly illustrative.

One of these mysteriously "drowned pups," Thomas' deceased younger brother Shamey, weighs heavily on his mind, perhaps to distract us from a subtler allusion. Thomas' mother is removed from the play not by death (too clichéd), but holed up in a psychiatric hospital, allowing Thomas to wonder, quite incidentally, if he will visit and "pretend I'm her husband." Meanwhile the kind, dim-witted,

suspiciously morbid farmhand Barney (Tom Kilroy) is noticeably concerned with the swollen feet of a previously murdered tout. The Greek for swollen foot, as Barney might recall, is Oedipus.

Carolan seems to enjoy this level of fatalism. He allows so little surprise in unmasking the informer, in fact, that the "tout hunt" comes across as little more than a McGuffin, a plot thread along which he can string more incisive allusions. The play even seems to skip a couple of scenes between uncovering and executing the hapless informer, lending all remaining twists an air of Oedipal inevitability. Sooner or later, someone's going to put a foot in it.

That, however, goes for the voice of the play too. A naturalistic portrayal of people hemmed in by language, as much as hatred or suspicion, can dependably deploy a flow of earthy intonation and meaning. "The Boss man may be a thick cunt, but he's not stupid," says Joe, sensibly. But when Carolan smuggles significance into metaphors, his later attempts to extend Thomas a lyrical lifeline is bound to seem unconvincing. Kinlan bears the role of surly, vengeful usurper with effortless conviction, snug in Milam's grubby naturalism, hands in pockets and utterances similarly constrained. But neither he nor Milam can find the right conditions for a painfully exposed and uninhibited monologue that concludes the play, one of Carolan's few self-indulgences as a first-time playwright.

Elsewhere, though, his talent burns bright in a production astutely attuned to his ideas. As one of the few new plays to burrow into the Abbey centenary programme, it sends an optimistic message for new work on a national platform, urging us, in desperate times, to keep the faith.

## THE DESERT LULLABY

by Jennifer Johnston

Galloglass Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 29 Mar 2004 at the

Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

THE TITLE OF JENNIFER JOHNSTON'S play suggests exotic romance, but in fact the desert in question is El Alamein, where the protagonist's father met his death in 1942, and the lullaby is "Lili Marlene," her father's favourite song. It is an odd title, giving no hint that the action of the play hinges on an incident of incest, and the devastation that its consequences wreaked on the heroine's life.

This is the second time that Caroline FitzGerald, Galloglass Theatre Company's new artistic director, has staged this play: she also directed its world premiere, at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, in 1996. Here, it was chosen by Galloglass for an eight-venue tour, with Cork being the final destination. It was a practical choice for such an operation, with a small cast of five. It was also popular with its Cork audience, provoking the light laughter that comes from comfortable recognition of the cultural references, and familiarity with the characters' background.

The set features the somewhat faded drawing room of a country house, with a central window upstage giving a distant glimpse of the world beyond. A corner downstage right represents the garden.

As the lights go up, an elderly woman sits on a bench there, reminiscing about her youth. She is Flora, daughter of the big house. Nellie is cooking a special dinner, and they will drink wine. Flora, once categorised as "harmlessly insane," knows Nellie is celebrating an anniversary, but as yet she is not sure why. Nellie is indoors, mending Flora's blouse; they are mistress and servant.

As Flora's memories intensify, scenes from 1943 are acted out behind her and Nellie by a younger cast. A gauche,



**REMEMBERING**  
*Plunkett and Colgan*  
in *The Desert Lullaby*

teenage Flora is being taught to dance by her schoolboy brother, Eddie. He is rebelling against their mother's retreat into mourning, following the death in the war of her husband — Flora and Eddie's father.

The second act opens with Eddie, dressed dashingly in his father's red Irish Guards jacket, dancing with Flora, who is wearing her mother's "butterfly dress," the pair of them quaffing champagne with alacrity. The audience has already sensed what is to come. The act takes place offstage, and next day Eddie leaves,

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ostensibly to return to school, but in fact to join the army. He is killed, and an uncomprehending Flora finds herself pregnant — uncomprehending because, she says, "...it was not Eddie and Flora who did that thing, it was the lovers."

Nellie remains ignorant of the baby that Flora was forced to give away, the event which precipitated her madness; and we realise that even after all these years of intimacy, Flora has still not told her. One of the great ironies of the play is that although Flora was born with all the advantages, in the end it is Nellie who has the happier life.

There is something oddly complacent about Johnston's treatment of the incest theme, a lack of anger at Flora's mother forcing her to give up the child for adoption, and thereby ruining her mental health. There is also a strange failure to apportion any blame for the seduction to the brother Eddie, who remains, for Flora as much as for Nellie, the epitome of glamour, good humour, and youthful energy. It is hard to believe that Flora has lived with Nellie all these years, and never once told her the truth — especially as there are hints that Flora likes to drink more wine than is good for her.

The weakest element in an otherwise sound production was the set by Sabine Dargent, which, while nicely in period, was frankly dull to look at, colourless and bland. The demarcation between house and garden could have been clearer; and there could have been more contrast between the drawing room of 1943 and the way Flora and Nellie lived in the present day; perhaps Paul O'Neill's lighting could have made a stronger contribution.

The pleasure of the production lay in excellent performances, under Fitzgerald's well-paced direction. Geraldine

Plunkett used her beautiful speaking voice to great effect, and successfully carried off the difficult, potentially unsympathetic part of older Flora. Eileen Colgan brought great warmth to Nellie, making her both practical and humorous, a perfect counterpoint to the more verbose Flora. Katy Davis as the young Flora made a convincing metamorphosis from gauche schoolgirl to glamorous young lady. Aileen Mythen as the young Nellie had few lines, but used mime and gesture most effectively, and revealed a lovely singing voice. Stephen Kelly was energetic and appealing as the handsome young Eddie; you could understand why both Flora and Nellie adored him.

**DIGGER, DOC, and DEE-DEE** by Volker Ludwig, Adapted by Maeve Ingoldsby

Barnstorm Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 15 Mar 2004 at the Town Hall Theatre, Dundalk BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

*DIGGER, DOC AND DEE-DEE* IS YET another innovative and energetic production from Barnstorm. Adapted by Maeve Ingoldsby, the play centres around the life of a young girl named Dee-Dee who is attempting to cope with life in a new apartment and a new school. Before long, Dee-Dee befriends two boys named Digger and Doc who also have their own family problems and worries. It soon transpires that the school bully is terrorising the children, Dee-Dee's father has left, Digger's mother is dead, and Doc's parents are too busy to spend time with him.

The play offers an interesting insight into a world of childhood pressures and anxieties, exposing the complexities of bullying. Initially it appears that Digger is the confident child who teases and bullies Doc while also taking money from him.



**LONELY** Sarah Dillon in Digger, Doc, and Dee-Dee

However, the play delves into the deeper issues of Digger's life, exposing that he too is a victim and must adopt the role of tormentor as a survival technique. Dee-Dee is also drawn into this childhood world of corruption, becoming an accessory to robbery when Digger steals from Dee-Dee's mother in order to pay off Scully the bully. It later becomes apparent that Scully is bullied by another group.

The play deals with many pertinent issues relevant to the life of a child, particularly relationships with parents and the

DYLAN VAUGHAN

threat of being banished from home. Both boys fear that they will be sent away: Digger thinks his father will send him away for robbing, while Doc believes he will be shipped off because his parents just don't have time for him. The boy admits that he urinates on his father's BMW, but does not quite know why. As a result, the text avoids over-simplification; nothing is ever black and white, steering clear of encouraging moral judgements. The audience is presented with a complex series of events and left to draw its own conclusions.

The production began promisingly. The audience was presented with a box onstage that begins to take a life of its own with sudden sharp movements, creating an excellent comic effect. It soon became clear that Dee-

Dee, unhappy with her new home, is hiding inside the box in protest. Slowly, she emerges from the box much to the amusement of the audience. However, the spectators notably lost interest in Sarah Dillon's energetic yet ultimately patronising performance of Dee-Dee; her representation of a child resulted in "talking down" to the audience. Alan Walsh as Doc gave the audience a comic depiction, particularly when sucking on his lollipop, although at times, he too descended into a clichéd image of childhood. When Martin McCann first appeared on stage as Digger, he offered a welcome relief in his subtle approach, and seemed to prove

most popular amongst the child audience. Unfortunately, at times his performance lacked lustre and was devoid of energy, particularly during the musical numbers where McCann also appeared to lose his Belfast accent. While it is common for singers to neutralise their accents, McCann, in comparison to the other leads, takes this idea to an extreme. He adopts the patronising mannerisms and nasal tone reminiscent of an American children's TV presenter, not only during songs but also for the spoken elements of these musical numbers. While this approach soon began to grate upon the ear, it also appeared anachronistic in the performance as a whole.

Director Philip Hardy did not manage to even out this inconsistency in acting style amongst the three leads. Nor was their movement in the musical sequences in sync. While Thomas Farrell provided a great performance as Scully, Hardy decided on a somewhat stereotypical portrayal of the bully by allowing him an inner-city Dublin accent.

Despite these elements, the production provided several very humorous moments many of which derived from Robert O'Connor's wonderfully subtle depiction of Mr. Slattery and his cynical attitude toward the children. The actors also performed with excellent comic timing, most notable in a chase sequence involving Scully where he ends up in a bin, and also in the tomfoolery that results in Dee-Dee's mother getting a wet cloth over her face. The song and dance numbers also offer moments of laughter and appeal to both the child and adult spectator. At one point a lyric tells the audience that "poor old teacher's got a bum-boil," allowing the children to have a laugh at the expense of the teacher, while also

offering the teachers in the audience a moment to laugh at themselves.

While the play provides children with many relevant themes for exploration, the inconsistency in acting style and the varying capabilities of the actors results in a production that needed a lot of tightening up in order to create a coherent whole.

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### FIRE FACE: THE CUCHULAIN PLAYS

by W.B. Yeats

nervousystem

The International Bar

1 - 13 Mar 2004; reviewed 13 Mar

BY COLIN MURPHY

AS THE REST OF DUBLIN HUSTLED along the quays for the St. Patrick's Festival fireworks, we crammed into the International Bar's upstairs theatre for *fire face*, a seemingly traditional, but yet in fact more radical, celebration of Irish heritage.

Newcomers on the Dublin scene, the lower-case company nervousystem enjoyed a quiet triumph with this elegant adaptation of Yeats' Cuchulain cycle, condensing *At the Hawk's Well*, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *The Death of Cuchulain* into 80 minutes' theatre. Oft derided as overwrought, ponderous, and mired in dubious Celtic mysticism, this production showed the plays instead to be both enchanting and timely. This was a production to savour, and one that was surely under-served by its quiet run in the International Bar.

First impressions were good: the threadbare lounge upstairs at the International was turned back to front, with the effect of converting it into a mini-auditorium

um, an invigorated space with a fresh aesthetic and energy. And one that ideally suited these plays: Yeats wrote them for an audience of between 50 and 100, and staged some initially in Dublin drawing rooms.

The room was carefully blacked out, and a black drape and a semicircle chalked on the floor at the opening of the production described the playing area. The ensemble was masked and cloaked, and moved with the exquisite care and sensitivity to speech of the Noh theatre which inspired much of Yeats' drama. As I perched on a front row stool, the cold gaze from behind the masks was at times almost inches from my own, and the remoteness of these heroic figures of Irish mythology contrasted sharply with the intimacy of the venue.

This was a conceit which Yeats explicitly described in the framing device used for the final play in this sequence, *The Death of Cuchulain*, which concludes with the entrance of a contemporary, raucous group of street musicians who compare Cuchulain and his exploits to the tragic heroes of Yeats' day, Pearse and Connolly. nervousystem dispensed with this device, content to leave the narrative of Cuchulain speak for itself.

And speak it did, for what was most striking about this production was the clarity of its voice. The company employed the conventions of Noh very much in the service of the words, not merely of aesthetics. And with the sometimes overwrought texts carefully pared down by company writer Jeffrey Gormly, there was a surprising clarity to the narrative and an emotional and political resonance to the tragedy. In *On Baile's Strand* in particular, it was not difficult to find contemporary echoes in the conflict between

the High King, Conchubhar, and his restless warrior, Cuchulain: their argument concerns nothing less than the security of the state.

The four plays chart Cuchulain's life from when he first drank from the Hawk's Well and acquired the strength and skill to become Ireland's greatest warrior. Later, in a fight on Baile's Strand, he unknowingly killed his only son; driven mad, he attempted to fight the sea and appeared to be drowned. Yet his wife, Emer, bargained with the spirits to bring him back from his comatose state, giving up her love for him in the process. Returned to life, he was faced with a combined onslaught from all his former foes (as he has described them, "the men/ Whose fathers, brothers, sons, and friends I have killed"). Mortally wounded, it was the lurking Blind Man who finished him off, carrying off his head for a ransom of 12 pennies. Throughout, this Blind Man, accompanied by the Fool, provided chorus-like commentary that lent a black humour and a grim sense of fate to the action.

This was ensemble playing of a very high standard. Sean Duggan, as the Blind Man (who, with the Fool, is played unmasked) stood out for the lurking menace he brought to his all-seeing character; his scenes with Aiden Condron's Fool made for an engaging double-act whose grim commentary and baser interests provided the everyman amidst the classical tragedy of Cuchulain. Vanessa D'Alton's costumes were careful and elegant and the masks beautifully wrought. Condron also directed, and clearly approached this production with both precise vision and careful process. The result, barring some slight unevenness in the vocal strengths of the performers, was seamless.

This was theatre simply conceived and

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rigorously realised; the result was compelling and enchanting.

*Colin Murphy is a freelance journalist and Ireland correspondent for The Tablet.*

### FIVE KINDS OF SILENCE

by **Shelagh Stephenson**

Calypso Theatre Company

Andrews Lane Theatre, Dublin

2 - 20 Mar 2004; reviewed 11 Mar

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

BRECHT ONCE SAID THAT THE PURPOSE of theatre was to organise the enjoyment of changing reality; a slippery piece of semantics that raises some pointed questions about what we expect from the experience of attending plays. As Calypso's excellent mounting of Shelagh Stephenson's domestic abuse drama *Five Kinds of Silence* died a slow death at the Andrews Lane box office, Dublin was gearing up for the return of Roddy Doyle and Joe O'Byrne's *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* at the Olympia. Marketing alone cannot explain why the latter once again played to packed houses and an extended run while the other slid quietly into obscurity. The plays have the same subject and both have programmes advertising organisations dedicated to helping people to change the reality of their lives. The productions seem to share a social purpose, doubly serving Irish society. But if, as Brecht also argued, the audience is a vital participant in socially and politically effective theatre, is it the pantomime laugh-a-thon drawing the proletarian masses or the bourgeois beard-stroker playing to dwindling houses that has most capably organised the enjoyment?

On the night I attended, the post-show discussion of *Five Kinds of Silence* featured

director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, Rosemary Daly of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, barrister Chris Meehan, and Olive Travers of the Northwestern Health Board. It quickly became obvious that almost anyone in the house could have been on stage with them. The audience seemed to consist primarily of social service professionals. Several described their organisations and began to debate the finer points of ethos and methodology. As useful a forum as this must have been, it seemed that this audience could have had this discussion after *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, or a *Prime Time* documentary, or just about anywhere they were gathered together. Few questions were directed to Ní Chaoimh about what Calypso had achieved; about how they had gone about "organising the enjoyment." I found myself wondering what was the role of the theatre here, and what gave *Five Kinds of Silence* its particular value.

Inspired by a real incident that took place in the UK, Shelagh Stephenson's play began its life as a radio drama in 1996. Adapted to the stage in the year 2000, it has been significantly re-imagined by Calypso. Eschewing the episodic fade-to-black between scenes format used in the original stage production, Ní Chaoimh's version confronts the audience with a harsh visible space and refuses to let them leave. Moggie Douglas' cleverly realised set employs sliding doors and floor grating to extend the field of action beyond the family home of an abusive man, Billy (Garrett Keogh) and his wife (Bernadette McKenna) and two daughters (Úna Kavanagh and Mary Murray), but the audience is no less trapped by theatrical space, and is forced to share their enclosure.

The play begins with murder of the



father, then reconstructs the extenuating circumstances which justify the act. As police, prison, and psychiatric authorities interview the three women, the facts gradually emerge through a haze of emotional disconnection, sociological dysfunction, and psychological trauma. These survivors of abuse are unable to respond through dialogue; instead, they often lapse into internal monologues — a mixture of memory, reflection, and psychological reconstruction representing how they seek to come to terms with their past, present, and future relationships.

The spectre of the dead man constantly haunts the stage. In a series of flashbacks, he too is shown to have a history of abuse, and though this does not justify his behaviour, it frames his world-view in a way which makes the events unsettlingly inevitable. There is a feeling of almost constant dread and oppression

**UNDER SIEGE** Keogh,  
Murray, Kavanagh, and  
McKenna in *Five Kinds  
of Silence*

from the opening scene in which Billy crawls out of the steel grate sniffing and prowling like a dog, and though there is technically a happy ending inasmuch

as the women are not convicted of murder, the sense that the process of rebuilding their broken lives will be long lingers like a bloodstain.

This is a terrifically directed production which makes excellent use of its aesthetic resources. With Stephenson's script as an anchor, Ní Chaoimh creates an onstage world which constantly challenges the audience. The difficult paradoxes of abusive relationships serve the use of space and performance, such as the obvious but no less true scene when one of the daughters says of her tenure in a prison cell that it is the first time in her life that she has ever felt free; and when the girls try to explain that on some level they still love their father. Douglas' set and Eamon Fox's

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lighting are instrumental, but the overall pace and tone are beautifully controlled to achieve and sustain audience engagement. This is a fragmented world, shattered by abuse and emotional confusion, and the audience is required to participate in making sense of it. It may not be Brecht, but it certainly feels like good theatre.

But again, I look around me on 11 March and see sagely nodding faces, and not many. I recall seeing *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* in the Helix: a sea of laughter and applause for an equally socially self-conscious work which yet seemed so much less substantial. Am I a "high culture" snob or has theatre itself reached a point where the medium is incidental to the message? Will those who see *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* ask the same questions of social reality as those who view *Five Kinds of Silence*, and if so why should the latter exist at all if so few go to see it? Will pandering to the punter or preaching to the converted change reality either way? That really makes one stop to contemplate the silence.

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### **LOVERS** by Brian Friel

Island Theatre Company in association with  
Glor Music Centre  
On tour; reviewed on 23 Feb 2004 at the  
Beltable Arts Centre, Limerick  
**BY MARY COLL**

*LOVERS*, WRITTEN BY BRIAN FRIEL IN the late 1960s, consists of two short self-contained dramas, *Winners* and *Losers*. These are linked thematically and are usually played back to back; but otherwise are entirely separate stories, making it possible for each to be regularly per-

formed as an individual one-act play. As the title suggests, both plays are about falling in love, and the difficulties involved in making a relationship work, but from perspectives that are at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum.

Mag and Joe, the central characters of *Winners*, are barely 17, and approaching the end of their final year in school. Mag is pregnant, and therefore they are to be married within weeks. This will put an end to Joe's hopes of a university education, while making Mag's dream of a husband and home of her own come true. In *Losers*, Andy and Hanna are a couple in their mid-40s, he a shy bachelor surprised and excited to find love with Hanna, who lives at home with her invalid mother but also dreams of some kind of escape from the drudgery and routine of her life.

Conventionally regarded as well past the first flush of romance, Friel portrays the characters as still capable of passion and still more than able to dream another life for themselves. It is the variety of conflicting assumptions and presumptions that accompany very different experiences of love that engages Friel's imagination in the plays. However, unlike *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *The Loves of Cass Maguire*, which precede *Lovers*, there is something a little jaded and dated about these one-acts which do not allow them to stand comfortably in the canon of Friel's writing. They have a simplicity of vision and narrative, especially in *Losers*, that makes them feel clichéd and dull; it is difficult to find justification for their enduring popularity.

What lifts Terry Devlin's production above the mundane are the performances of Georgina Miller as Mag and Emmet Kirwan as Joe: each is so sincere and so



utterly engaging that the wider issues of the play's limitations are quickly sidelined.

Ostensibly meeting on a hill outside the village to study together, the young couple twist and turn through the very real adult dilemmas they face with a clarity and honesty that is thoroughly convincing. Miller has such girlish optimism and energy, and Kirwan such boyish charm and innocence — all loose limbs and awkwardness — that we are genuinely touched by the tragedy of their eventual fate, as revealed to us by the dispassionate narrators John Anthony Murphy and Joan Sheehy, watching from near the wings. It was a pity that the performers were not well-served by Dolores Lyne's design and Gerard Meagher's lighting, which did little to enhance either the atmosphere or appearance of the play. Obviously pared down to facilitate regional touring, both

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**WINNERS?** *Miller and Kirwan in Lovers*

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were garish and one-dimensional.

*Losers*, by contrast, is darker, in every respect, and while this is something of a relief after the youthful glare of *Winners*, once again the set does nothing whatsoever for the production. It is little more than a challenging obstacle course of chunky blocks, cluttering the stage like huge lumps of debris, which the cast are forced to negotiate at their peril. Here the plot centres around the impossibility of Andy and Hanna's courtship, while her mother, Mrs. Wilson (Gene Rooney), rules from upstairs with a bell in one hand and a rosary beads in another. Summoned to join in the prayers each evening, their frustrated attempts at grappling and groping on the couch are intended to be amusing while underscored with a sense of fatality and sadness. Murphy's Andy and Sheehy's Hanna catch all of this with

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great subtlety. His face becomes a study of quiet desperation, as hers hardens with bitterness and disappointment; together, like the young lovers of *Winners*, they are both credible and engaging but it is not enough to compensate for the action itself. Weighed down by the baggage of an Ireland that has long since passed, *Losers* groans under the weight of years, and there was nothing about it to justify dragging it out for audiences, including nostalgia.

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### MAC-BETH 7

by Pan Pan Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

14 - 24 Apr 2004; reviewed 15 Apr

BY BELINDA McKEON

IN THE INTERVAL BETWEEN ITS FIRST performance, in 1606, and its first publication, 17 years later, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* became a textual jigsaw; each successive performance brought cuts, alterations and, possibly, interpolations, introducing a tension between the play and its printed version. With this new interpretation of the play, Pan Pan inhabits this breach and reimagines it with stimulating intelligence and creativity. Directed by Gavin Quinn, *MacBeth 7* is a relatively faithful rendering of the text we now have, but one which is innovative in that very fidelity.

Cameras, feeding to several video screens at the side of the stage, are turned on copies of the play, schoolbooks in the ingenious classroom setting, and, as the action unfolds, these texts are individually altered in random ways — scribbled upon, highlighted, marked "NB" — and are replaced, too,

with other "texts": blood, skin, hair, scraps of paper, jumbles of words. There is humour, and a strange pathos, in the delivery of early lines in an intentionally lifeless monotone by a cast clad in school uniforms, but the school setting is no mere stylistic quirk. The effect of seeing the tragedy of *Macbeth*, its terrible dynamic of decision and destiny, of power and helplessness, of trust and hatred, through the heightened senses and feverish energy of adolescence, is thrilling. The production serves, too, as a wry comment on the status of Shakespearian drama in Ireland, resigned as it largely has been to productions which tie in with the school curriculum. Thus Shakespeare is both left to the teenagers and, in that educational priorities preclude experimental approaches or rethinks in any real sense, taken from them.

In visual terms, the production is fresh and adventurous. The use of video screens is most obviously impressive in the final battle scene, where they create a whole forest of attackers, but throughout, the screens play a pivotal role. They lend, at the right moments, layers of complexity to the action — moments at which, in Macbeth's words, "false face must hide what the false heart doth know," when our knowledge of the play might soften our sense of the desperate disarray and confusion in what is happening in the characters' hearts. A soundproofed room to the rear of the stage, its stories revealed to the audience through a glass wall and on one of the video screens, becomes, as the screens roll by, the room of death. Within its muffled environs, the doomed meet their ends in scenes which, through the plate glass, have the



haunting fragility of modern performance art; the dying Lady Macbeth, for example, flailing in silence, blood leaving her swollen body, could be Marina Abramovic.

Except, of course, she is Emma McIvor, who was heavily pregnant at the time of performance, a condition which adds powerful poignancy to her role, drawing forth surprisingly tender resonances in Lady Macbeth's "I have given suck" speech in Act I. But, because actors switch parts within the production with a rationale that is difficult to discern, McIvor is not always the Lady, which seems something of a spurned opportunity. Certainly, she is entrancing as one of the "weird sisters," along with Nicola Sharkey and Katherine O'Malley; meanwhile, Eugene Ginty and Sharkey, in sung

#### **HANG SANGWICHES** *The company of Macbeth 7*

interpretations of the Macbeths, plumb the sombre depths of the tragedy.

But the transitions between players can be overly distracting. Ultimately, the role of Lady Macbeth suffers much more from this splitting than does that of her husband, whose fluctuating moods and minds are negotiated skilfully by Ginty, Andrew Bennett, Ned Dennehy and, in the King's final incarnation, Dylan Tighe. Dennehy and Bennett divide the best realisations of Macbeth between them, summoning different shadows of his madness — Bennett is intense and tortured, Dennehy hollow-eyed and shattered. Tighe's stage presence is more ambiguous; his is the furious, fireball Macbeth, hurtling towards his death without the power to save himself, and Tighe, as the youngest of the four kings, captures well that chemistry

of helplessness and arrogance, of wasted life and deadly pride, though he lacks the solid ownership of the role possessed by his partners. Quinn seems to have a sharp sense of the strange, heightened reality which youthful embodiments of Shakespeare's characters can bring to the tragic stage — a sense which finds its extremes here in his casting of eight-year-old Drew Barnes in a number of roles. It's a move which, absurdly, works; her tiny, hooded form is a chilling Hecate, her smile surreal as she becomes the child-killer of Macduff's brood, and, trailing Lady Macbeth silently around the stage, she seems a ghost, the pure shade of a ruined spirit, the unborn child, or the lost one.

Quinn's is a self-consciously post-modern production, and at times it is clear that the need to perpetuate playfulness, slippage of identity... and all that jazz... has taken precedence over the business of plotting and strong characterisation. The "unashamedly postcolonial" thrust ascribed by Quinn to the interpretation, meanwhile, proves somewhat crude onstage. A better way to explore Irish unease with, or resentment of, England — rather, that is, than simply draping a Union Jack across the stage at the play's tensest point — would be to explore the classroom setting. Such an exploration could dramatise how stunted, unfeeling enunciation of the words of an Englishman, accompanied by bouts of self-mutilation, becomes swept up into a defiant, complex overtaking and retelling, in a new sort of language, of an old story. Sure, that's postcolonial, but there's no need to pigeonhole it; Quinn should have sufficient confi-

dence in his adventurous, dynamic production to let it stand its own ground. The impression, finally, is of a thrilling interaction with a text and its histories; there are moments onstage, such as the opening scene with the see-sawing witches, which suggest an interpretation pointing beyond the text itself, delving, rather, into its overall rhythms, its dizzying, dream-like vacillations. It's a broader approach, a stronger, fresher take on the text, which can only be welcome on an Irish stage.

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*Belinda McKeon writes about the arts for publications including The Irish Times.*

**THE MERCY SEAT by Neil LaBute**  
and

**ASHES TO ASHES by Harold Pinter**

Prime Cut Productions  
The Lyric Theatre, Belfast  
7 – 24 Apr 2004; reviewed 24 Apr  
BY PAUL DEVLIN

PRIME CUT'S PARING OF NEIL LABUTE'S *The Mercy Seat* with Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* at the Lyric Theatre is an interesting marriage. LaBute shares Pinter's distrust of language. Each creates characters whose dialogue, however verbose it may become, is essentially incapable of expressing their inner worlds outwards. But while LaBute's characters still seem to believe in the potential of language — in the possibility of finding the right words to actually say what they feel so as to communicate fully with another human being — Pinter's characters seem to have already reached the darker conclusion that this is an impossibility. Pinter's tensely contained dialogue continually threatens to implode. He



invites his audience to connect obliquely with his characters, to step inside their relentless ambiguity and build a house there. LaBute's characters draw their dialogue from a more obviously emotive source. He asks a more straightforward response from his audience: a recognition and sympathy for the situations his flawed characters face.

*Ashes to Ashes* presents us with Rebecca and Devlin in the lamp-lit drawing room of an unidentified country house. Devlin, a representative example of the insecure men who populate many of Pinter's

**HONEY, I'LL BE  
HOME LATE**  
*McCardie and  
O'Toole in The  
Mercy Seat*

plays, is probing Rebecca for the details of a past relationship she had with an unnamed man. As she drifts in and out of increasingly dream-like anecdotes — tales of asphyxiation and S&M — Rebecca's disjointed narrative implies connections with the Holocaust. Her ex-lover, seemingly a high-ranking fascist, was simultaneously capable of both adoring her and torturing others. Pinter's script seems to raise moral questions about Rebecca's involvement with this man, and about her lover's apparent capacity for acts of both extreme tenderness and sadism. There are, however, no simple answers here. Pinter hints and alludes, providing an imaginative forum through Rebecca's narrative in which audience members' own interpretations of events can gather shape.

Limited by the amount of movement their roles allow, Michelle Fairley and Patrick O'Kane nevertheless achieve a strong physical sense of their characters. O'Kane's

swaggering malice neatly counterpoints Fairley's rigid deportment. O'Kane is very strong as Pinter's brooding and sarcastic academic, at once percolating both with anger and a deep insecurity. Fairley's excellent, extremely theatrical performance weaves in and out of Rebecca's dream-like memories and her more conscious moments to create the impression of a woman who is barely

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holding it together. Sometimes, however, this jars with O'Kane's more naturalistic approach and has the effect of robbing Rebecca and Devlin of the required sexual chemistry, sadistic or otherwise, in the play's closing scene.

In many ways it is easier to describe a play by Pinter that has been poorly directed than one that has been staged with skill: the famous pauses and silences are milked, performances can lean towards the histrionic, or the rhythm of Pinter's dialogue is overplayed. Belfast playwright Owen McCafferty, in his professional debut as a director, is guilty of none of these things. The entire piece is paced confidently and consistently, and the pauses fall into place perfectly. Complimenting McCafferty's even-handed direction, David Craig's elegant set of polished wooden floorboards and intimations of Georgian grandeur created a theatrical space that was both cool enough and large enough to evoke the essential loneliness of, and emotional distance between, Pinter's troubled couple. Craig designed both short plays in this theatrical evening, and uses the interval to strip the stage of its Georgian armchairs and lamps, replacing them with an Italian-chic red sofa and chair, and the hint of a contempo-



**TOUCHING** O'Kane  
and Fairley in  
*Ashes to Ashes*

rary industrial kitchen, though he retains the original triangular composition of the set and its polished floorboards to create the New York loft locale for LaBute's drama.

*The Mercy Seat* takes place on the morning following the September 11th tragedy. A thick film of grey dust covers Abby Prescott's apartment, fallout from the decimated Twin Towers, thus locating it in the immediate vicinity of what is now called Ground Zero. Ben Harcourt, an ineffectual mid-level executive who has been having an affair

CHRIS HILL

with Abby for the past three years, was supposed to have been at a meeting in the World Trade Centre at the time of the terrorist attack, but instead was enjoying some early morning extramarital sex with Abby in her apartment. The play consists of 90 minutes of intense conversation, as the couple pick through the remnants of their relationship, and discuss the implications of Ben's proposal to use the disaster as a means of escaping their past. He wants to fake his own death, leave his wife and two daughters, and start again together somewhere new.

Ben and Abby share the self-absorption, cynicism, and insecurities of many of LaBute's other dramatis personae. His view of human nature and its capacity for solipsism is essentially pessimistic: what he refers to in a recent interview in *The New York Times* as his "anti-Rousseauian logic." Using the events of September 11 as a catalyst for his plot is a typically provocative move from LaBute, but, while there are problems with the play, they do not stem from this choice. Having the play take place in these circumstances intensifies the nature of Ben and Abby's crisis. It reminds us there can be a basic and selfish side to our humanity, a will to self-preservation which casts its shadow even in the light of such monumental events.

But the play fails to fully unite this potent background with its "end-of-the-affair" foreground. Abby and Ben's relationship, we realise early in the play, is over. What we witness is the quintessential break-up talk of two lovers who still care for each other, but who no longer have the heart to carry on. That we come to this understanding

so early in the play has the effect of castrating LaBute's central dramatic conceit: the morality of Ben's dilemma wanes under the weight of our overriding sense that he will, ultimately, take no action.

Jackie Doyle, who directs this production, paces Ben and Abby's long conversation with an instinct for the realism of such exchanges: happy to allow her actors to fall into natural hulls, and carefully raising the more heated moments to a controlled boil. She exploits what is best in LaBute's script: its ability to make you feel like you've been in the thick of the talk, to exhaust you. However, while the construction of LaBute's script may lack the adrenaline rush of a life-changing decision about to be made, Doyle's measured direction doesn't fully generate the nervous energy LaBute seems to hanker after here, and so compounds the fault. Overall, Doyle directs the production admirably, but there are moments where it feels like she is trying to temper the latent volatility implicit in LaBute's drama, when perhaps it was asking to be released.

Brian McCardie, as Ben, brings a quirky integrity to his part that takes a while to tune into, but is ultimately rewarding to watch. McCardie has a strange charm and invites more sympathy for his character than other actors might have. Kate O'Toole's performance is the glue holding this production together. She brilliantly draws out Abby's complex character: her neediness and quiet strength, her tenderness and dry wit.

Taken together, this is a strong and polished production from Prime Cut. Thought-provoking, complex, difficult,

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and, in LaBute's case at least, darkly funny, these are plays that stay with you, troubling you, gnawing at you... and that's exactly their point.

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

### **PAINT IT WHITE** by Dubravko Mithanovi

and

### **THE LOST LETTERS OF A VICTORIAN**

#### **LADY** by Michelle Read

Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin

*Paint it White*: 5 Feb – 5 Mar 2004; reviewed  
27 Feb; *The Lost Letters...*: 11 Mar - 17 Apr,  
reviewed 11 Mar BY MEGAN KENNEDY

SOUP, SANDWICH, AND SOME CRACKING theatre, crumbs brushed away all in an hour. What a delicious idea. Bewley's Café Theatre continues to provide short, sweet entertainment in the working lunch hour for anyone to attend, munch, and soak up some theatre.

The two characters in Dubravko Mithanovi's *Paint it White* put one in mind of some historical precedents: Estragon and Vladimir, Laurel and Hardy. Two men painting a room white. Directed by Laurence Foster, the play takes place in a bare room which The Painter (Micheál O'Grugáin) and his apprentice The Boy (Tom Murphy) must finish painting. Yet they do more talking than painting; the sun lies high in the Croatian sky as they sweat through the day. In some respects, the play gives the sense of paint drying, but always with an overall anticipation of revelations to come. We wait an hour, though, without any revelations.

The Painter, suffering from some sort of bowel affliction, does less painting

than his younger counterpart. But he definitely likes to talk: about football, about sex, about growing old, about the questionable ethics of the younger generation. The Boy, lost in his own thoughts, is concerned more with his mother's illness and the pretty girl in the opposite window. They speak about life, and death, and waiting. They paint a little more. Jokes are cracked, and there are some funny moments, particularly when The Painter forces The Boy to wear hats made of newspaper; The Boy obviously doesn't understand that newspaper hats help painting along.

The characters as written by Mithanovi have much potential to be engaging on stage, yet this is not fully tested by O'Grugáin and Murphy. There is a sense that the actors are not confident in presenting the conversation as mundane and slack, as it seems to be intended. *Paint it White* is most certainly not terrible, yet stronger conviction from the actors and a clearer sense of the absurdity of life which is often referred to in the play, would have benefited the production hugely.

The Bewley's space is informal and comfortable, and it is refreshing to be an arms length away from the actors and feel drawn in by their close conversation. It was equally refreshing to be quickly transported to another place and time by Michelle Read's *The Lost Letters of a Victorian Lady*, which is chock-full of riotously comic happenings.

We are told in programme notes that our heroine, the bright-eyed, upper-class, head-in-the-clouds Edith Lampton (played by Read) is a fictional friend of the author's. This fictional relationship, constructed by letters of correspondence between the author and a delusional friend of hers, is a premise for the play.



(She has obviously lived a long time; it must be the English climate.)

Set in Shropshire at the end of the century, we are taken through a seemingly endless stream of incidents that befall Ms. Lampton, which allow us to encounter numerous characters who are just as zany as she is. All manner of events go over Edith's head; she is chirpy, enthusiastic, accepting — this is the wonderful thing about her.

In one of the plot lines, Ms Lampton obliviously becomes involved in an opium-smuggling scheme whilst trying to bury her brother overseas. She has left her two servants Dorcus (Damien Devaney) and Loxley (Neil Watkins) to their own devices while she takes her brother's coffin to Holland, where the pseudo-priest Kloop (Devaney) has kindly offered to pay the

#### ITS BEST USAGE

*Murphy and O'Gruagán  
in Paint it White*

burial costs. Yet unbeknownst to Edith, opium has been secreted into the coffin by Kloop's drug-smuggling entourage; in

the nick of time, Texan cowboy Maverick (Watkins) slips away with Edith to Ireland. Hidden in wild Wicklow, they evade the drugs police and fall hopelessly in love, Edith mysteriously growing bigger round the middle by the day.

Directed by Jo Mangan, *Lost Letters* is an uproarious production, which barely leaves time for pauses between the peals of laughter it provokes. There are surreal touches in the production and the transition between the many characters compromise admirably for the small space and lack of resources. Devaney and Watkins slide between four characterisations each with agility and humour.

Author-actor Read is superb; one feels



no gap between performer and character. We are left thinking it a very short hour indeed; *Lost Letters* could happily have continued through the afternoon.

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**RASHOMON, by Ivor Benjamin,  
based on the short stories  
of Ryosuke Akutagawa**

Storytellers Theatre Company in association with Cork Opera House  
On tour; reviewed 27 Apr 2004 at Project, Dublin **BY SUSAN CONLEY**

THE AUDIBLE HISS THAT GREETED the following line delivered by the ghost of a murdered Samurai (Malachy McKenna) — “There is honour in the worst of men. There is none in the best of

**MY WORD!** Watkins, Devaney, and Read in *The Lost Letters...*

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women” — was welcome, but ultimately felt absurd. Irish audiences are not demonstrative at the best of times: open laughter is one thing, but the expression of disapproval seems to have been suppressed since those famous riots of 100 years ago. To react to such a provocative statement is not before time: misogyny is no stranger to Irish stages, and yet home-grown dismissive and damaging representations of women generate nary a whimper. What is interesting here is that the audience reacted to a misogynist statement so clearly framed as unfamiliar and exotic.

And yet, this “otherness” isn’t made a meal of, either. Storytellers’ production intelligently indicates “Asian-ness” rather than going for full whiteface makeup and cod Japanese accents. Chisato Yoshimi’s voluminous kimonos are sufficient to set the tone (as well as

GOLMHOGAN

being quite beautiful). The actors speak in their natural accents, and while McKenna's topknot can be perceived as period, overall this isn't an Oriental costume drama, by any means. The production contextualises itself just enough to set a tone that hovers usefully between Irish and "other."

The play itself is a compilation of two stories by Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa — not a staged version of Akira Kurasawa's famous 1951 film (which also took these tales as its jumping-off point). Ivor Benjamin has adapted these stories into a tale of murder and of rape, which contrasts the different versions that the three participants in the drama — the Bandit (Eoin Lynch), the Samurai (McKenna), and the Wife (Emma Colohan) — tell to the court after the apparent murder of the Samarai and the alleged murder of his Wife.

What the staged version — as opposed to the cinematic version — does is take the sole emphasis off the murder and put it squarely on the issue of the Wife's rape. The story is told in flashback as three citizens of the dying city of Kyoto wait beneath the Rashomon gate for the rain to stop. The Priest (Lynch) challenges his listeners — the Servant (McKenna) and the Wigmaker (Colohan) — about the mutability of "truth," and in so doing asks us, the audience, to examine what we would accept as a reasonable explanation for what happened in the grove on that hot summer's day.

As the Bandit would have it, she was "asking for it"; indeed, according to him, she demanded that he fight with and kill her husband, who, bound to a cedar

stump and gagged, was silent witness to her "disgrace." In his version, she is a feisty warrior whose only

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**FEEL THE FORCE,**  
**LUKE** McKenna and  
Lynch in *Rashomon*



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interest is in self-preservation. She, however, tells a tale of a woman pushed to the edge in a situation made worse by her husband's immediate rejection of her upon the Bandit's departure. Knowing that her life is destroyed, she kills her husband, her subsequent suicide attempt comes to nothing, and she flees the scene. Damningly (and providing the occasion for the maligned line) the ghost of the Samurai comes to the court to tell his side of the story: that upon the "disgrace" of his wife, he committed *hari kiri* and died honourably despite the dishonour. The presentation of all three versions, which present completely different, subjective accounts of the story, creates a moral dilemma, one that the audience, like the Wigmaker and the Servant, must solve to their own satisfaction.

The actors fluidly move between their several characterisations; Liam Halligan has very creatively staged what could have just been another dull, primarily direct-address monologue play. This is achieved through his work with his actors and with fight director Paul Burke, resulting in dramatic and convincing fight scenes. Halligan has assembled a strong team whose contributions mesh well with the versatility of the performers, and the theatricality of the piece is lifted to a higher level by Marcus Costello's beautiful lighting design, which is as fluid as the actor's movements across Yoshimi's set; Dennis Clohessy's live musical accompaniment added to the distinctiveness of the evening.

Storytellers here have reached beyond the bounds of American and Western European literature to give us something that, ultimately, is not all that "other"—which is, of course, what makes the piece

so interesting. *Rashomon* provides a window, via the Samurai's risible quote, onto our own culture in such a way as makes us feel safe in reacting to something—an alarmingly misogynist representation of women—that is actually quite workaday in Irish theatres.

### THE REAL THING by Tom Stoppard

Gúna Nua Theatre Company

Andrews Lane Theatre, Dublin

14 Apr – 5 Jun 2004; reviewed 28 Apr

BY PETER CRAWLEY

FOR ALL THE ACHE OF UNCOVERING an adulterous affair, of exposing another's personal politics as mere posture, or of wrestling with the real and pretence in art, the characters in Gúna Nua's production of *The Real Thing* face a more daunting realisation. Try as they might to escape or resist, they are trapped in a Tom Stoppard play.

Such a situation presents enticing opportunities and impounding predicaments: the razzle of speaking Stoppard's witticisms, the dazzle of inhabiting his structure, the fizz of being trapped in a schematic. Gúna Nua, too, have found both its appeal and confinement.

More than in any of his works, perhaps, Stoppard is at the centre of this play from 1982, and more than in any of their productions Gúna Nua are at the periphery. Chiefly this is because the lead character Henry, a playwright celebrated and chastened for his cleverness, so deliberately resembles his author. When the first scene, in a typically bracing Stoppardian gesture, transpires to be a play within the play, we find in its throwaway wit ("The days of digital watches are numbered") and its portrait of a faithless marriage an overture for the play: art imitating art.



Naturally there are self-reflexive clues that Stoppard sheds and we pick up. Chris McHallum's Henry abandons his wife Charlotte (Isult Golden) and their acid repartee ("He's scintillating and she's scintillated"), finding real love, or at least the appearance of it, with another actress, Annie (Morna Regan). Expediently servicing her political cause as script doctor to a loutish would-be playwright, he soon casts himself into the role he prepared earlier: the jealous husband. A neat, satisfying and artificial symmetry, where life, we are told, is about the "messy bits" and "people not having all the answers." But just as he considers love "unliterary," Henry parses messiness, correcting grammar, volunteering rejoinders, and continually finishing people's sentences.

He may approve of Chisato Yoshimi's

**HOUSE OF CARDS** *Regan, Murphy, and McHallem in The Real Thing*

minimalist set, then, which is an uncluttered structure: freestanding doorframes line the playing area while props wait

patiently by the side of the stage for their appearance. Director Paul Meade exalts this indication of the theatre, the frame of artifice, while Henry's typewriter (whether onstage or off) similarly exudes a controlling presence. Meade's cast move with grace when facilitating the scene changes, playfully prefiguring their eventual appearances, and there are few extraneous distractions. Nothing clutters the audience's path to the author.

Nothing, that is, except the slight stumble when it comes to portraying London's "architect classes," where some of the cast work from a slightly crumpled blueprint. David O'Meara, Tadgh Murphy, and Amy Huberman acquit themselves admirably among the sup-

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porting roles, but only Chris McHallem is truly fluent in the tone and texture of this milieu, striking the right balance between gravitas and gossamer where others mistake harsh tones as a shortcut to bourgeois drollness.

McHallem's Henry is at turns acrid then enthusiastic, throwing out lines with boyish glee, chewing over moral positions with a hangdog expression or letting words take flight with a relaxed revelry. It's almost at odds with a play so eager to undercut him. Henry's work, we understand, falls far short of his ideals. His play, *House of Cards*, is a flop; his exhortation to the innocence of words is followed by a recitation of his hackwork screenplay; and though he despises T-shirt philosophy, his own sententious insight — "It's no trick loving somebody at their best. Love is loving them at their worst" — wouldn't look out of place on a fridge magnet.

Some people practically distrust Stoppard — his oft-cited cleverness presumably counting as little more than an intellectual parlour trick. But there is something invigorating about his references, drafting in *Miss Julie*, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, or A Whiter Shade of Pale (Procol Harum's own freely appropriated "ersatz masterpiece") in the service of an idea. There is something intoxicating about his speeches, drafting in a cricket bat, a coffee mug, or a tatty polemical play to serve a point. And there is something terribly attractive about his theatre, subordinating countless theatre companies to serve his words.

And that's just it. Even as I watched the production, I looked forward to reading the play — a tryst with the author. Under Meade's sensitive and unelaborate staging, his audience sneak into the

embrace of someone else. Dignified cuckoldry is a difficult trick, says Henry at one point, and here Gúna Nua seem to have mastered it. The production, then, is a titillating affair: exciting and involving, but a stylistic infidelity. Now that it's over, one looks forward to returning to what attracted us to Gúna Nua in the first place: something fresh, something new, something, perhaps, even better than *The Real Thing*.

### **REVENGE** by Michael Duke

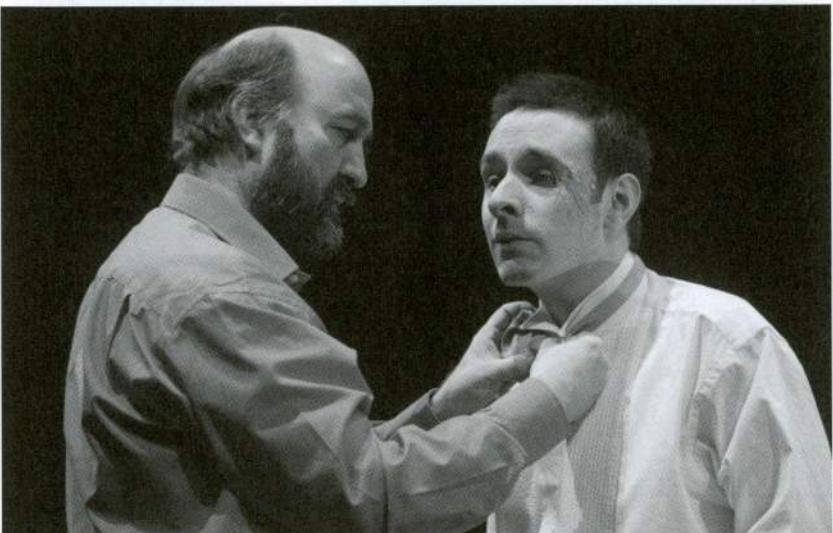
Tinderbox Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at Project Arts Centre, Dublin on 4 May 2004 BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THIS BROAD-STROKED PRODUCTION features a 14-strong cast as well as a chorus made up of members of various amateur groups around Northern Ireland. It is a play of the moment, capturing the current psychological states of ordinary people whose lives have been wrecked by violent acts of terror, and who are now trapped and isolated in their suffering and pain.

The play is set amongst a Northern Irish family, on the eve of the wedding of the Son, who had lost his first fiancée in an explosion in which he also lost his sight. He wants to move his life forward, but his parents effectively wish to trap him at the moment when the bombing had a catastrophic effect on all their lives. Moving on, for them, is a betrayal of those who died. A Chorus of the Dead surround the characters, variously helping out in re-enacting the past, imagining a better past, and offering some good and bad possibilities for the future.

There is no doubt that this is a portrayal of collective post-traumatic stress disorder. Characters take up positions and



make statements, which creates a distancing effect. They talk at rather than to each other, reliving memories, but rarely do they connect physically — a lack of communication which is disturbing. When they do talk nose to nose, however, the tension is electric. Shunted out of their trauma momentarily, they must make a decision to stay trapped in an infernal cycle of revenge, or seek a positive act of escape from the trauma by making a conscious decision not to inflict it on others.

The author Michael Duke is clearly influenced by German expressionism, most likely via the second act of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* and McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme*, which he has directed several times. Characters for the most part are reduced to generic types (Old Woman, Father, Son,

**FATHER AND SON**  
*Ahern and Condron  
in Revenge*

Boy, Grandfather, Bride,  
Bomber, etc.)

The fragile edifice of the post-ceasefire peace is presented as a mirage, because behind the posturing and spin of politicians, the physical and emotional trauma caused by the "bad dream" of the Troubles is a seeping wound. "Ulster is getting quare and comfortable now," recites the First Woman, surely an ironic statement given the trauma that so haunts the lives (and deaths) of the characters onstage. She is joined by the leader of the choragic dead, an Old Woman who "appears" to the living and acts as a direct instrument of revenge.

The production, directed by Anna Newell, is as distancing as the play. The set is an architectural arrangement of steps and flats designed by Stuart Marshall, presumably simple for the exigencies of touring. It is a bleak vista of

## reviews

black, white, and grey into which the actors and chorus take up opera-like positions, reciting their lines against a continuous soundtrack heavily scored with violins. Newell's operatic vision keeps characters separate; for the first 30 minutes or so no actor so much as touches each other. They spit out their anger, but communicate little else.

In the second act the wedding that never was is acted out; photos of the dead are unwrapped as pseudo-greetings cards for the couple. Eerily and troublingly, the character of the Son is parsed — a second actor appears to play him robust and intact pre-explosion. Some preposterous lines creep in, such as the Father asking the young couple to consummate the marriage, with the mother-in-law retorting, "you will not make a sexual exhibition of my daughter." The laughter this provoked was wholly inappropriate in such a sombre scene. The Bomber then arrives at the wedding, haunted by the nightmares that bind him to the parents' traumas. "We are in the same fire," he shouts, in portentous metaphor. And finally the Old Woman picks out the Boy — the Son's younger brother — as the instrument of revenge, but he is pulled back from the brink as the parents come to their senses. The play continues with one final scene as the Son finally goes off to his new Bride, this time with the blessing of his father.

The actors struggle valiantly with the directorial style but never seem comfortable within it. The Son (Michael Condron) is able to transcend the entrapment of characters in fixed positions and achieve a degree of emotional truth, but for many of the others it seemed that perhaps they had not been allowed to discover that truth because of the physical distance

imposed between them. This is a morality tale of ancient Greek dimensions, in an expressionist style and presented as a chorric trauma. Its master metaphor for the current situation is at times unwieldy, and some of it is derivative of other styles and forms from history (I thought the parents resembled the Macbeths in their desires). But it is also hugely ambitious and it might take another production and another style to pull it off successfully.

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### **SHIRLEY VALENTINE by Willy Russell**

The Machine Theatre Company  
On tour; reviewed 10 Feb 2004 at the Civic  
Theatre, Tallaght BY CATRIONA MITCHELL

WHAT IS IT ABOUT *SHIRLEY VALENTINE*, written almost 20 years ago and made into a hit film in 1989, that keeps audiences coming back? To some degree Willy Russell's ear for working-class wit explains the play's lasting popularity, but haven't women moved beyond housewife doldrums? In interview, director Michael Scott says he believes that "it's a great play and really brilliant writing. A timeless piece." He doesn't find the subject even remotely dated. "I think it's absolutely on the point, I think it touched a universal chord and is still touching it."

This production situates the eponymous Liverpudlian housewife in a Dublin context, with former *Glenroe* star Mary McEvoy perfectly cast as the warm and witty Shirley. As anyone familiar with the story will know, Shirley is stuck in a humdrum existence, cooking and cleaning for her husband Joe. Starved of fun, she talks to her kitchen wall for company. "I like a



glass of wine while I'm cooking, don't I, Wall?" Shirley is shabbily dressed in black leggings and a grey windcheater, with no visible make-up. She mimics her family members: a self-indulgent daughter, a son who does "a perfect imitation of his father on a bad day" and Joe, who throws his dinner in her lap. But she feels powerless to change her situation. "You don't start again at 42, do you?"

Shirley's sense of humour is sparkling and alive, and for this we can't help but like her. She tells us stories from her girlhood, peppered with terrific one-liners ("I wore my skirt so high you'd have thought it was a serviette"). She laments the fact that Shirley Valentine used to laugh and knew who she was. "Did something happen or is it just that nothing happened?" Her passion for life has been subsumed by the banal: in getting married, making a

#### **SOLITARY SHIRLEY**

*Mary McAvoy in  
Shirley Valentine*

home and having children, she has become "just another name on the missing persons list."

Designed by Michael McCaffrey, the set in the first half of the play represents Shirley's kitchen, a claustrophobic yellow triangular space replete with fitted cupboards, fridge, toaster, and deep-fryer. Shirley drinks while she talks, although her husband wouldn't approve: "Wine is nothing but a posh way of getting pissed." She peels potatoes, wipes and sets the kitchen table, lassos the dishcloth going "loop the fucking loop," and activates the cooker to produce real egg and chips for Joe (who never appears).

An invitation to Greece from her girlfriend Jane is the catalyst Shirley so urgently needs. The set in the second act is more abstract; sea and sky are implied by a mottled blue backdrop and floor, and

at stage centre stands a small wooden deck with white chairs and a parasol. Shirley has undergone a substantial physical transformation: her hair is pulled back into a bun, she is elegantly dressed and wearing jewellery, and glowing with sexual vitality. The only thing that hasn't changed, it seems, is Shirley's habit of talking to inanimate objects, this time a rock.

In its exploration of female sexuality, *Shirley Valentine* is like a comic "Vagina Monologue." At the start Shirley doesn't think much of bedroom activity: "Sex is like Superquinn: a lot of pushing and shoving and you still come out with very little at the end." However, a Greek taverna owner, whom she nicknames Christopher Columbus, helps her find her sexual identity. The clitoris was always there, she says, but undiscovered, "like penicillin." "He kissed my stretch marks you know. He said they were lovely because they were a part of me. The marks of life... Aren't men full of shit?"

But the play is thankfully free from male-bashing. Shirley says her husband is not a bad man; he is as much a victim of the system as she is. "We don't do what we want. We do what we have to do and pretend it's what we want... Most of us die long before we're dead." Shirley's story, then, is as much about living passionately and refusing to settle into dreary middle age, as it is about gender politics. In Greece, her hopes and dreams are re-awoken. "Living such a little life was a crime against God because I didn't live it fully. It had all gone unused," she says. "I'm not going back to being Saint Joan of the fitted units." Instead she decides to "seize the day."

There are few plays that offer good roles for women in their 40s. Here,

McEvoy is alone on stage for two hours, and with her faultless delivery and energy, proves nothing short of a tour de force. She had a substantial emotional impact on the audience: my mother was blowing her nose during the interval muttering "she is exactly where I was," and more than half the audience gave a standing ovation. Admittedly they were almost all female and over the age of 50.

This play urges us to believe in our dreams. It is no intellectual fodder, but it is enthusiastic and life-affirming, and kept from being too sappy by acerbic one-liners. Cynical when I went in, even I left the theatre misty-eyed and determined to see my dreams brought vividly to life.

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### TADGH STRAY WANDERED IN

by Michael Collins

Fishamble Theatre Company  
Project Cube, Dublin

22 Mar - 10 Apr 2004; reviewed 24 Mar

BY BETH NEWHALL

IF IRISH THEATRE HAS A REPUTATION for conventional design, then the production elements of *Tadgh Stray Wandered In*, Fishamble's new one-man show written by Michael Collins and directed by Jim Culleton, go a long way to countering such perceptions. Sabine Dargent's set consists of a stationary bicycle center stage that powers a large, metal, clock-work contraption stage right. Said contraption in turn operates a projector which focuses relevant images on a screen stage left. Inspired by the moving sculpture of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, the set achieves both ruggedness and whimsy, and fascinates without dominating the



staging. In fact, the beauty of the design lies in its integration with the play's narrative operation. As Tadgh Stray relates the recent events of his life, retroactively unfolding the plot, he pedals the bike to change the photos on the screen. Tadgh controls the story, and the set allows him to control the visuals that complement that story. The set functions as a metaphor on another level as well — just as Tadgh's actions in the past precipitate his condition in the present, like dominoes of cause and effect, so his pedaling of the bike sets in motion the gears of the machine that run the projector that provides the photographs. Refusing to treat the set as simply a backdrop, Dargent has produced a wonderful design that amplifies themes of the text.

Lights and music likewise subtly inform the play as a whole. The sound design, a dilapidated suggestion of circus music by Vincent Doherty and Ivan Birthistle, breaks down and dissolves into

#### **NAVAN TO PARIS**

*Eamonn Owens in  
Tadgh Stray...*

chaos or sirens depending on the action or Tadgh's state of mind, aurally reproducing the protagonist's turmoil. Even more impressive,

the main accordion motif, simultaneously kooky and melancholy, somehow manages to evoke the play's two disparate locations, Navan and Paris. Mark Galione's effective lighting — I especially liked the green hues as Tadgh reacted to too much bad wine — works with the music to capture the play's overarching mood of distortion and whimsy. In their strangeness, set, lights and sound combine to underscore the subjectivity of Tadgh's revelations, reflecting both his naïveté and the fracturing of that naïveté as Tadgh's situation becomes increasingly desperate.

And Tadgh Stray is certainly both desperate and naïve — he skips his Leaving Cert to chase his love to Paris. He is also disillusioned, as his pursuit leads finally to a pair of wet trousers and a criminal

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record. Above all, however, Tadgh is a storyteller, and it is here that both actor and script did not live up to the play's incredible design. Even if Tadgh lacks self-confidence and social adeptness — the memory of his accidental "pig orgasm" when a girl touches his ear plagues him throughout his adventures — the performer playing Tadgh must evince these traits without succumbing to them. In a solo performance, the actor must have the presence and assurance to own the stage, whatever the character he's playing. In his stage debut, Eamonn Owens (of *Butcher Boy* fame) as Tadgh did not quite make it. He was good in a role that requires greatness.

While he manages Tadgh's self-deprecating humor well, Owens' awkward physicality and the choppy cadence of his delivery (several times I panicked as his pauses felt like frantic searches for the next line) prevented complete surrender to the story — for Tadgh as well as the audience. Ultimately, some of these flaws would have been alleviated if Owens were simply better-versed in the art of storytelling. When the relevant details of the most recent few months of a person's life involve as much mishap as Tadgh Stray's, that's a lot of information for an audience to retain and process. To be fair, Collins' script, which occasionally doubles back and unnecessarily withholds information, could use some tweaking and would pose a challenge to any actor. Owens also needed a director to help him identify and flag significant pieces of information for the audience. While Culleton deserves credit for uniting the play's design elements in a cohesive whole, he did not provide Owens with the necessary guidance to give the story itself that same coherence — or at least it was not manifest in the

performance. As a result, key opportunities for character development (Tadgh's mum recently died, his father puts tremendous pressure on him to succeed at school, etc.) were lost almost entirely as Owens gave such admissions no more weight than his later descriptions of drinking wine from a saucepan. Tadgh may pedal the bike that changes the scenery, but Owens just did not seem to have control of the show.

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*Beth Newhall is studying for an M.Phil in Drama at Trinity College, Dublin, and is its administrator.*

### **TAKE ME AWAY by Gerald Murphy**

13 Feb - 13 Mar 2004; reviewed 4 Mar

### **WORDS OF ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

**by Ioanna Anderson**

20 Feb - 13 Mar 2004; reviewed 9 Mar

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

Reviews BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THESE TWO PLAYS IN REPERTORY FROM writers in the early stages of their careers are the fruits of Rough Magic's SEEDS project, which has been nurturing new writing talent for the past three years. The plays have been workshopped and mentored by established practitioners and brought forward to full-scale stage production. A version of *Take Me Away*, in addition, was broadcast by RTÉ Radio. The two reveal radically different approaches to theatre. One is very suited to radio (hence its broadcast before the stage production), and the other heavily influenced by television. One is dramaturgically taut, the other loose and ambling. One is distinctly urban and working class, the other has a rural setting, though peopled by the economically



successful and the literati. Both provide snapshots of a family's life at a time of crisis. Neither one, thankfully, uses its respective families as metaphors for something greater. These plays are about relationships, the secrets and lies that underpin them, and which in the course of the plays are unravelled.

*Take Me Away* is set in contemporary Dublin, in a new apartment owned by Bren, a security guard. The setting (by Alan Farquaharson) is spartan, less an index to Bren's lack of money and more of his obsessive-compulsive attempt to control his life. When the play begins, Bren is wearing his uniform, neatly pressed, and is avidly fixing his gaze on a computer screen, while a white toilet roll rests on the arm of the settee. The toilet roll would not be significant, were it not for the lack of any other prop. Successively he is interrupted by his two brothers at neatly timed

**HEY BRO** Hanley,  
Kelly, and Ward in  
*Take Me Away*

10-minute intervals; they have been summoned by their father, who has led them to believe that their mother is in hospital and that the news is bad. When father Eddie finally turns up, though, he leads them on a tortuous mental journey to the truth: their mother doesn't have cancer, but has left Eddie, who has brought his sons together to help him persuade their mother to return home. But the situation leads them all to expose their secrets, their feelings towards one another, and to scratch away at the surface of their relationships. In the space of 90 minutes the whole family breaks down. The writing is clearly orchestrated and the revelations carefully charted. It is very much an author's exercise in control, and this is matched by some finely drafted performances.

Joe Hanley plays Bren as a caged animal. He is fit, paces around his apart-

## reviews

ment, always in control. His shaved head and uniform do not indicate a hard man at all, but a man much more sinister. His self-image is a cover. Aidan Kelly as Andy, on the other hand, gives a much freer physical performance. He is the joker of the family, the one who pushes and probes with his words and his body. He invades the space entirely, riling Bren with his devil-may-care attitudes and postures, and often impulsive actions. Barry Ward as Kev languidly slouches in his velveteen jacket and floppy locks. When Eddie arrives, he is a catalyst for the family's implosion, though he is trying to unite them. He orders them about, and very much like Andy, does not respect Bren's space. The characters, thus, are as much physically drawn as they are written.

Once all the characters are assembled, though, it is difficult to see where the play can go physically; we must settle down to listen to how the author deconstructs the family's secrets — how he shifts the tales of both past and present kaleidoscopically. The stories are refracted every five minutes, so that we are unsure at any moment what the truth is. The play is directed at a cracking pace by Lynne Parker; at its end we return to the opening image of Bren settling down in front of his computer with a white toilet roll. Suddenly we recall an earlier accusation of him being obsessed with child pornography; it becomes material in front of our eyes. Action, we concur, fixes possible spoken truths.

Similarly, not much happens on stage in *Words of Advice for Young People*; all the interesting drama seems to have happened before the play begins. Henry Golden, author of a celebrated children's book series, *Colin the Rabbit* has died, prompting the assemblage of his two

daughters and their intimates. The action is set in the garden of the Golden household in Co. Leitrim, with its collection of comical gnomes and less-than-funny siblings. What makes the death of Henry Golden awkward for the assembled family is that he disappeared five years previously, and his body has only just been found. This temporal distance also is distancing for spectators, as the onstage characters are almost dispassionate about their father. There is no clear suffering, just some occasional torturing of each other by raking up misdemeanours from the past. Nora (Gina Moxley) is attempting to turn the family home into a B&B. Her abusive ex-husband Danny has returned to give her support, and has curiously found God in the intervening period: no drama there, just a little friction. It is Nora's actress sister Clara, however, played edgily by Cathy White, who provides a rare opportunity for the audience to connect with the characters, when she finally cracks at the closure that the discovery of her father's body provides. This sets the assembled family alive for the first time and shocks them from their comfortable self-loathing, out of which their oldest friend Rob (played by Andrew Bennett) attempts to steer them.

The main action is interrupted by scenes between the local undertaker, Jack (Frank Laverty), and his dead wife Ruby (Sinead Murphy); she has recently died, and Jack, still grieving, imagines her walking among the living. The potential power of such images is blunted, however, by the fact that Jack is not a central character in the drama. No one on stage knew or is connected to Ruby, apart from him. What if it had been Henry Golden who came back to haunt the characters?



Indeed, throughout the play we are led to believe that such a thing might happen: several times preparations are made to listen to a tape of Henry's voice. But when we finally hear the tape, at the end, we just hear him reading a story of Colin the Rabbit going to bed after a long and adventurous day. The tape reveals nothing. The tape, like the ghost of Ruby, creates a mood and tone, but moves us on not a jot.

Both plays could almost be said to be exercises in style. Anderson's is a tone poem of fractured relations in the aftermath of a discovery of a body, and not after a death. And therein lies her dramaturgical strategy. Her play is a process that takes time, which comes to no major revelations, and seeks no conclusion. At times I wished for a stand to be taken, for something to resolve, or at

#### **BEYOND WORDS** *Moxley, Murphy, and Lavery in Words of Advice...*

least for director Philip Howard to stop indulging the play's looseness. Murphy's play, on the other hand, is so tightly constructed that one marvels at that tightness. But 30 minutes into the play, action gives way to the author's storytelling prowess and shifts it more into the realm of radio drama. At times I longed for the play's structure to be allowed to unravel, even momentarily.

Thus Rough Magic gives us two different experiences of dramaturgical construction, each one frustrating at times for being either too tight or too loose. But it was in the directing that those differences became translucent with the production of Anderson's play suffering from a perambulatory approach, while the production of *Take Me Away* drove me on to the point of forgetting just how much control the author exerts.

# reviews

## THE THIEF, created by Zoë Seaton,

**Paul McEaney and Paul Boyd**

Big Telly Theatre Company

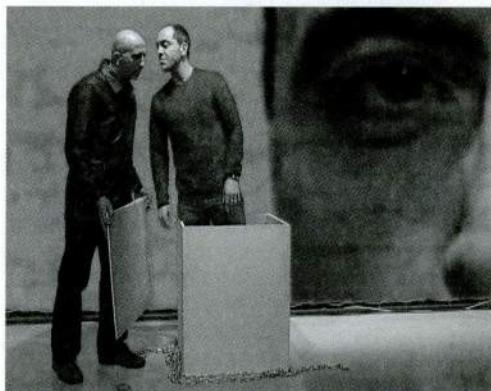
On tour; reviewed at the Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge on 26 Mar 2004

BY FINTAN WALSH

*THE THIEF* CHARTS THE AMBITIONS OF Vince who, inspired by his idol Houdini, hungers to "do something more wonderful" with his life. Co-written and directed by Zoë Seaton, the play opens as the protagonist records his aspirations on a Krapp-like machine, against the imposing backdrop of a television and projection screen. His impotence is accentuated by this formidable set design; his frustration subsequently compounded by an inability to interact with the virtual images. Just as the audience, like Vince, is increasingly seduced by (and lost to) technical wizardry and celebrity saturation, the protagonist discovers that he can communicate with these virtual realities, and like his hero, escape from his humdrum life. This revelation heralds a series of transgressions as Vince manipulates the boundaries of reality and illusion.

Big Telly's protean production is thematically bound by the illusionist Houdini. During the show, Vince sporadically watches a documentary about the escapist, fictionally made by the actor James Nesbitt, of *Cold Feet* fame. Motivated by Houdini's feats and ability to overcome his fears, Vince is compelled to surmount his own limitations. From the stage he speaks with a constellation of Northern Irish

celebrities, from Julian Simmons to Sinead Quinn to the aforementioned Nesbitt. Vince soon realises that he exerts influence over their thoughts and actions, contrary to his ineffectual everyday life. His powers climax when he enters the virtual domain and moves objects between the two realms. This is most impressively represented when he walks behind the central projection screen, only to appear on an episode of *Kelly*, where the host is interviewing Nesbitt. Vince takes the opportunity to challenge the actor on his documentary and proposes to perform an escape himself. When he leaves the *Kelly* set, only to reappear on stage, the audience



## LARGER THAN LIFE

*O'Reilly and Nesbitt*  
in *The Thief*

witnesses him realise this endeavour.

While spectators are generously teased along this logistical labyrinth,

where reality, fiction and representation are confused, we are most at odds during the final episode. Having emerged from the chat show fracas, Vince continues to distort notions of reality by directly addressing the audience, appealing for assistance in orchestrating his show.

LESLEY DOYLE

Suddenly, what began as a relatively conventional theatrical encounter extends to the realm of a magic show with Vince seeking assistance in E.S.P. experiments and, finally, an underwater escape. While this furling development textures the production with an air of disunity, it does succeed in implicating the audience in the perceptual confusion. During this segment, the spectator wonders if the figure onstage is Vince or the actor Michael O'Reilly; is this enactment rehearsed or an improvisation; are Vince/Michael's stunts as uncensored as claimed? The announced presence of the Order of Malta, ready to administer First Aid if his stunt fails, eventually clears up this ambiguity. Perhaps the greatest remaining illusion of all is generated vis-à-vis the audience member. By the end of the performance, the viewer is still not sure if s/he has been inadvertently consumed by the camera — swallowed up in Vince's side-show spectacle — and radiated across cyberspace.

The protagonist's desires in *The Thief* are directly mirrored, and indeed facilitated by the technical innovations of the show. As Vince presses the borders of possibility, so do Big Telly. The use of multimedia is precise and engaging, the celebrity showcase an ingratiating conceit. The downside of this, however, is that the production treads a line between innovation and excess, a danger exacerbated by a single onstage performer and, when reviewed, the small Riverbank space. This imbalance bleeds into awkward pacing, with each independent scenario establishing a new rhythm. A similar strain marked Michael O'Reilly's performance. When the UTV reporter Frank Mitchell reproaches Vince for interrupting him with "The people at home don't

know that you're there," the audience listens in sympathy. Of course, the initial frailty of his performance may be excused for reflecting the banality of everyday living in contrast to media spectacle. When Vince (apparently) overcomes the difficulties of his virtual excursion, O'Reilly's performance becomes more compelling.

*The Thief* raises many questions about the relationship between reality, fiction and representation, at a time when society is obsessed with reality television shows and the accessibility of celebrity status. Like Vince, the audience is carried through these different layers, often unknowingly, in a move which is both disconcerting and exciting. Though Big Telly offers more questions than answers, I left the theatre assured that the crime of the title's suggestion pertained less to the performance content and more to missing this ambitious piece.

#### TODD!

by Conor Mitchell and Karl Wallace

Kabosh Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 30 Mar 2004 at the Space  
@ the Helix, Dublin

BY BELINDA McKEON

IT WAS ALL DOWNHILL FOR PIE-MAKERS in London's Fleet Street after 1825, apparently. That's when the taste bud was invented, and when punters started turning their noses up at the simple nourishment offered by the likes of Mrs Lovett: cat pie, dog pastry, faeces souffle...

Take the stomach-flip induced by that last, lovely image, add crude Cockney banter in the form of slightly Lloyd-Webber-esque musical fare; think urchins, villains and desperate plights, and top it off with the bloody glint of a barbershop glint — you're getting a feel for *Todd!* A

## reviews

parodic melodrama of the squalid side of Victoriania, the show is at its best when it remembers the nature of parody; moments when it lapses into thinking itself a touching tale of poverty and snatched childhood sit ill within its bawdy, boisterous underskirts.

*Todd*, the programme tells us, is based on the well-known legend of the demon barber of Fleet Street, which has been often dramatised, most famously by Stephen Sondheim in his hit 1970s musical. This version was conceived by Conor Mitchell and Karl Wallace, with Mitchell writing the book, lyrics, and music and Wallace directing; their goal here, they say, was to hone the story down to its strongest parts and tighten a sprawling tale into something vital and heart-stopping. They are only partly successful in this.

The action begins with a lively musical number, alerting us to the gory developments ahead; they'll involve the barber of the title, we're informed, as the chorus, in a rhyming scheme as questionable as the contents of Mrs Lovett's larder, tell's him to "take another life... and your razor." All in due course, but first we must meet Tobias (Jon Trenchard), the hapless waif whose mother (Diane O'Keefe, in the strongest performance of the show) has decided that the only way to survive in London is to put him on the game, where she has served her time. But hunger forces them into the pie-shop of Mrs. Lovett (Allison Harding), to be treated to a rousing ditty on tasty tabbies. It transpires that the barber upstairs (*gasp!* Yes, *him!*) is seeking another apprentice (*gad!* What became of the last one?), so Tobias, dispatched to the task, beds down on the grimy floor, and spends a good half-hour looking fearful and



**WHAT'S EATING HER?** Harding in *Todd!*

underfed as he waits for his morning encounter with Todd. In case we hadn't noticed his sorry predicament, it's underlined for us by a sickly ballad which makes us long for the return of his mother's coarse cacophony. There is a fine onstage accompaniment, however, by the performers themselves on piano, accordion, flute and cello.

At this stage — almost an hour in — the much-hyped Sweeney himself has still not materialised. Can he really be so awful as they say? Not on the evidence of his first meeting with his new apprentice; confronted with nothing more than a brusque master who expects hard graft (Sean Kearns, a booming-voiced Todd), Tobias' terror is woefully unjustified, as is the grave "Welcome to London" interlude (hasn't he lived there all his life?).

LESLEY DOYLE

Bloodshed is still only suggested by the deep red of the costumes, and decisive action seems a long way off.

When it comes, it's certainly juicy — a customer who knows too much about Todd's past dies by his blade which hastens, in a scene of high camp, a murderous pact with Mrs. Lovett, who sees a fresh supply of tasty meat for her pie business. That action has a pleasing twist in its tail, but it, too, is dragged out to an insufferable length by an endless stream of irritating side-songs. This is not to denigrate the quality of the performances; the actors' strong solo deliveries — I mention solo only, because the acoustics of the small Helix Space are such that the lyrics of a song with more than one singer become indecipherable — or the energetic choreography of their interaction. And, at times, when it's not trying too hard to pull the heart-strings, *Todd!* actually manages, through humour, to draw the viewer into a London of hard knocks, of hunger, of suspicion, of children unloved as a matter of course, of people who can be murdered and never missed, that is surprisingly convincing. It suffers, however, from a reluctance to take the sharp blade of its central character to its own indulgences.

**TRUE WEST** by Sam Shepard

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

5 Mar - 3 Apr, 2004

Reviewed 5 Mar BY SUSAN CONLEY

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE: in an effort to prove to his feckless and dangerous brother Lee (Declan Conlon) that he's got a wild streak a mile wide, goody goody Austin (Luke Griffin) gets loaded, goes out, and steals well over ten toasters. One of the requirements of Sam Shepard's play is that all these toasters actually make

toast. On opening night, Griffin popped the bread down, and the boys continued a stand-up row downstage centre... when one of the upstage toasters began to smoke... and smoke some more... until it burst into flame. In the dicey, rocky, anything-can-happen fictional world that Shepard routinely creates, this kind of explosion wouldn't be out of the ordinary. But in the live theatre, this kind of unscripted, totally live, give-the-director-a-heart-attack kind of action can't but have a radical effect on everyone in the room. Here, this moment lifted what had been a good production of a so-so play into a realm that vitally engaged the viewer; up to then, the age and the mechanics of the play had been showing unfavourably.

Though Shepard's reputation is still fiery, it appears that, 20 years on, we're just left with the smoke: the much-staged, successful playwright creates heightened worlds which we enter and experience with ease, yet once the show comes down and the lights come up, one wonders what it is we've really seen, what it is we've really experienced, what it is we've really entered into. In the persons of Lee and Austin, we are clearly entering the breach between the two brothers and are asked to inhabit the liminal no man's land between opposing landscapes and personalities.

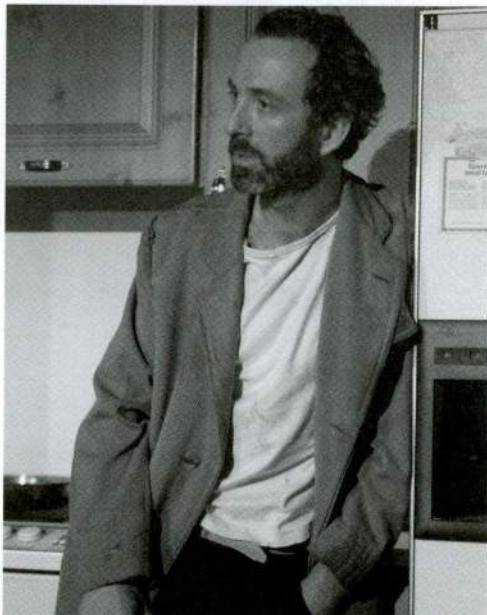
Lee is the "bad" brother, with his missing incisors, cheap, dusty shoes, filthy clothing, and terrifying facial hair. He leans seemingly innocently against his mom's full-sized fridge, yet bristles with menace as he pounds the beers. Austin, in his pressed shirt and clean jeans, is an earnest screenwriter, trying to do his research while his renegade sibling lurks in the kitchen. This kind of binary is so simplistic as to be laughable, yet because Shepard goes for the laughs and writes

such wonderful dialogue — the kind that starts and stutters and repeats, repeats, repeats, so frustratingly like real life — that we can't fail to be interested.

Neither can we fail to be alarmed and dismayed when Shepard decides to allow Lee to successfully charm Big Hollywood Producer Saul (Philip Judge) into optioning his idea for a film set in — wait for it — that liminal no man's land between landscapes, in this case, between city and desert, at the expense of his brother's own work. We can't fail to alternately cheer and dread Austin's transformation from bleating nice guy to drunken desperado, can't help but enjoy Lee's struggle to write his story, when he sneered so openly at his brother's seemingly easy life.

The play is transparently Shepard's investigation of the conflicting sides of his own personality — the iconoclastic outsider reared in the West versus the creative, arty golden boy — and that's interesting, insofar as it goes. We definitely get some insight into fraternal competition, and Lee especially is a wonderfully rendered character. But after the mess, and the shouting, and the brawling (and that burning toaster), the work leaves behind a vast emptiness that has less to do with the symbolism of the play than to do with feeling that big ideas had been flirted with, but haven't gone all the way.

Director Jimmy Fay excels with loud, messy, latently violent texts, and his cast was, for the most part, strong. Griffin got off to a slow start, perhaps hampered by



### DESERT HOTIE

*Declan Conlon  
in True West*

the one-track shining goodness of Austin and a wandering American accent. Conlon, by contrast, was thoroughly in Lee's skin

from the get-go, with the first sight of his bare ankle in those nasty shoes utterly disturbing and repulsive — every inch of him deep in Lee's transgressiveness. Judge as Saul plays only the surface notes, metaphorically chomping away at cigar without really conveying power, while Carol Moore as Mom, a throwaway role that requires her to return in the midst of filial chaos and then leave again, is extremely centred and believeable. Ferdia Murphy's set was perfection, right down to the Wonder Bread bag, and made an indelible impression despite the fact that the play, ultimately, felt wanting.

CHRIS HILL



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