

irishtheatre

VOLUME THREE, NUMBER FIFTEEN SUMMER 2003 €6

MAGAZINE



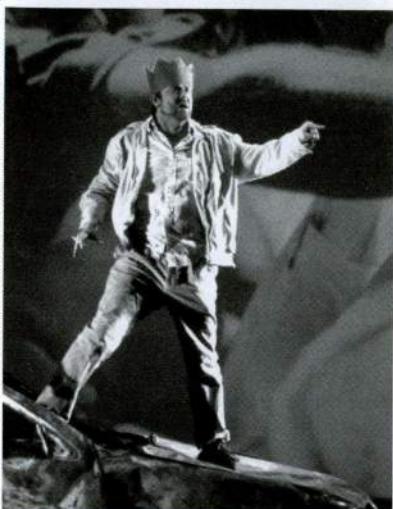
THE
IRISH
TIMES



IRISH
THEATRE
AWARDS

*An Act
of
Recognition*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GERRY BARNES; GARRY HYNES (PHOTO: GERAIN TAN); ANGELA (PHOTO: ROS KAVANAGH); TO KILL A DEAD MAN (PHOTO: EDEL EGAN)



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MAGAZINE

VOLUME THREE,
ISSUE FIFTEEN
SUMMER 2003

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New Channels

WHEN WE SAID, IN THE LAST issue, that *itm* was bouncing back from funding setbacks to more, and more varied, activities, we didn't fully anticipate the expansion that would characterise the most recent months of our working life.

April saw the launch of the first *itm online newsletter*, an e-mail update on the magazine's ongoing editorial activity that includes a breaking review of a major production. The next newsletter will be published in June and will include a review of Marie Jones' *The Blind Fiddler* at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. E-mail subscribe@irishtheatremagazine.com if you're not yet a subscriber and want to be!

In May we co-hosted, along with the City Arts Centre's Civil Arts Inquiry, an industry meeting about the current state of theatre touring in Ireland. Belinda McKeon's report appears on page 24 of this issue, and full transcripts of the day's events can be accessed by logging onto irishtheatremagazine.com and cityartscentre.ie.

Engaging metaphors of globalisation and ecology, O'Kelly argues that there is currently a destructive division between large- and small-scale touring, and that cross-fertilisation is necessary to keep the industry in good health.

There you'll also find an article by theatre artist Donal O'Kelly, which he wrote in response to his participation in the meeting. Engaging metaphors of globalisation and ecology, O'Kelly argues that there is currently a significant and destructive division between large- and small-scale touring, and that cross-fertilisation is necessary to keep the industry in good health. Passionately and innovatively argued, it's well worth a read, and a clear indication that there's a lot more to say on the subject of touring.

In October we will expand our annual international theatre critics' forum into a full week of critical events on and around the subject of Irish theatre criticism. Save the dates 6-11

October and watch this space!

Finally, with the next issue of *itm* we will enjoy the participation of our first-ever guest editor, Helen Meany. You can reach us on the usual channels during these months, and editorial ideas and feedback can also be e-mailed to Helen at helenmeany@hotmail.com. 

Is the Bell Tolling?

THE BELTABLE ARTS CENTRE IN LIMERICK WAS IN significant flux as *itm* went to press, following the announcement that director Liz Culloty is to leave the organisation in July. Culloty's tenure has coincided with a most difficult time for the Belltable, following skyrocketing rents to a commercial landlord, swollen insurance premiums, reported internal frictions, infrastructural concerns for the

premises, and the scrutiny of local arts organisations and Limerick city councillors on the venue's programming policy.

"It's probably at its most vulnerable," says critic, broadcaster, and former Belltable director Mary Coll, "because a director has left at a time when it seems to me that there are grave doubts about what will happen. Will the building that the Belltable currently operates in continue to be its home? Does this actually spell the demise of the Belltable?"

Board chair John Horgan, however, refutes any rumours that the organisa-



LIZ CULLOTY

tion's days are numbered. "There is no question of the Belltable going out of existence. It is more than a theatre — we have many other programmes including education, outreach, and visual arts, and we run a very successful art cinema club." Pointing out that there are several relatively new theatre venues now functioning in the city, Horgan suggests that the Belltable's theatre function might now be reduced. "Certain aspects of theatre are well looked after now in Limerick. One option is not to run our theatre space full-time."

Culloty also hints at a radically different set-up for the 21-year-old organisation. "It may not be a one-building scenario at all in five years' time. It's likely to be a number of buildings operating perhaps under the auspices of the City Council, for instance, in the way that municipal authorities are now very influential or important in the operation of arts centres around the country. A single-sited arts centre is something that I think would be a thing of the past, perhaps, and we're moving towards a multi-sited approach in Limerick."

Others, however, would query the viability of other theatre spaces in Limerick City; for example the Limerick Institute of Technology's new Millennium Theatre, "is a lecture theatre with a stage stuck on at the end of it," says Richie Ryan, chairman of the LMK Arts Group, a watchdog organi-

sation with local drama group interests. It is also clear that the current Belltable space is far from ideal; in Culloty's words, "there is the need for significant investment into the premises to bring it up to any kind of modern standards. Those are decisions that the board of directors would have to make in the coming weeks."

Horgan says that the board will seek a new permanent director, but not

"There is no question of the Belltable going out of business," says the organisation's board chairman John Horgan.

"... certain aspects of theatre are well looked after in Limerick. One option is not to run our theatre space full-time."

immediately; they "have someone in mind" to recruit as temporary director while the board considers its options over a period of several months. Among the concerns that the board and new director will have to face is an over-50% reduction in staff levels over the past three years — a lack of human resources that Limerick playwright Mike Finn points out is probably reducing the venue's appeal to visiting theatre companies.

In her new position as programme manager of arts venues for the Arts Council, Culloty will work with venues around the country. "The job is described as managing the grant relationship between the Arts Council and its venue-based clients," says Culloty. As such she will become the principal Government funding liaison to the venue she is leaving, and given its current concerns, it seems clear that the Belltable will become a volatile part of her portfolio.

The No-Name Gang

THE IRISH TIMES PROSAICALLY CALLS THEM "SIGNATORIES to a letter." The Gate Theatre's artistic director Michael Colgan facetiously proposes "the G-8" as a label. "We're just a bunch of concerned parents," offers Gerry Godley, chief executive of the Improvised Music Company. But despite

the lack of a catchy acronym, the agenda of this group of nine leading arts executives appears cohesive and focussed, following two letters to the editor of *The Irish Times* and one meeting with the Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism.

On January 30th of this year, a letter appeared in *The Irish Times* decrying Government cuts to arts funding. "There is no logic in a cut of €4 million in arts funding by Government," it said. "There is even less logic in the variety of decisions subsequently made by the Arts Council." Eight signatures represented the heads of various arts organisations from varying disciplines, who have since been joined by Irish Film Centre director Mark Mulqueen (see panel).

"The group is reactive," says Godley. "It's a very disparate, *ad hoc* group of

people within the sector that came together to respond to a specific situation. It will remain that way for the foreseeable future, until other situations arise." According to Godley the changing role of the Arts Council, from advocacy body to developmental agency, has left "a political vacuum" in the arts. "The emergence of a group like us... is the attempt to fill that vacuum."

As an unofficial organisation with a pan-discipline agenda (though it is by no means an all-inclusive group), this motley crew are quite different from Theatre Forum or ATA, two lobbying bodies to emerge or develop in the wake of a newly politicised situation for the arts. A second letter to *The Irish Times* acquired a sharper focus, urging Minister John O'Donoghue "to appoint an all-new

Members of the Lobbying Group

MICHAEL COLGAN, director,
Gate Theatre



COLGAN

JOHN CRUMLISH, festival
manager, Galway Arts Festival

GERRY GODLEY, chief executive,
Improvised Music Company



GODLEY

GARRY HYNES, artistic director,
Druid Theatre Company

JEROME HYNES, chief executive,
Wexford Festival Opera

JOHN KELLY, chief executive
officer, Irish Chamber Orchestra

FERGUS LINEHAN, director,
Dublin Theatre Festival

MARK MULQUEEN, director,
Irish Film Centre

MARTIN MURPHY, artistic director,
TEAM Theatre Company

Council which avoids the traditional charge of political or geographical influences on appointments, and which enjoys the confidence of the arts community, the Government and the public."

Colgan says the group exists to bring about change. "I don't think there's a huge amount of confidence in this Arts Council, frankly," he says. "Not just from the Gate, but the people I speak to. We want to be confident in the Arts Council... What we're saying to the Minister is that we would prefer expertise [as criteria for appointment to the Council], rather than having the right geographical spread or gender spread or political spread."

Godley considers that in the past, appointments to the Arts Council have been a neutral issue. "But I feel that this time around there's a lot more riding on it. The sector has made it very clear that they will be scrutinising these appointments. It's not neutral. This is win or lose."

As long as the Arts Council remains the main arm of Government funding to the arts, and until local authorities or other agencies offer significant further sources of revenue, the group perceives a need to create a free and frank discourse where arts organisations have a say in decisions that will affect their future. "The most

important thing that this group can do," says Godley, "is assert the validity of people within the sector articulating their views in a candid and forthright fashion, in an environment that isn't fearful of the repercussions."

Perhaps it wasn't a good sign, then, that the group's letters provoked a letter of censure from Patrick Murphy, chairperson of the Arts Council, sent privately to the chairperson of each organisation represented. "I think the arts are weakened by the spectacle of their self-styled leaders and support agency bickering in public," wrote Murphy.

This response, which Godley describes as "misguided" and Colgan as "extraordinary," seems to support the notion of what many refer to as a "climate of fear" which has hitherto kept arts organisations silent in matters of

what's news

Arts Council policy. Godley understands that the Arts Council may have taken such a public airing of criticism personally, but "it's that lack of objectivity that we need to address." Colgan says, "I think [the existence of Murphy's letter] would give us encouragement to stay together."

Whether or not the group has a long-term future, however, is unclear. While both Godley and Colgan were heartened by their meeting with the Minister, neither will be drawn on ongoing plans for the loose collective following the appointment of a new Arts Council. After that, there seems some chance that the group will dissolve without ever acquiring a name.

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

At Project, the Gaiety School of Acting Graduation Showcase features two new plays, *Elysian Juniors* by Ken Harmon and *To Be Confirmed* by Alex Johnston, running 17-21 Jun. Liz Roche's new work, *Bread and Circus*, for Rex Levitates runs at Project from 24-28 Jun, before Gúna Nua and One Productions present Paul Meade's new play, *Skin Deep*, from 17 Jul-2 Aug. Michelle Read's *The Other Side* follows from 13-30 Aug in the Cube for ReadCo, while the Corn Exchange presents Maria Irene Fornes' *Mud* from 27 Aug-20 Sep. Muse Productions present *About the Days* in collaboration with *The Stinging Fly* magazine at the Cube on 9 Aug...

Tom MacIntyre's *The Gallant John-Joe* with Tom Hickey has returned to the Focus Theatre through 21 Jun... Dream Maker Entertainments present *Dance of Desire* at the Ambassador Theatre until 2 Oct... Big Telly's production of Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* is slated to



SAINT OSCAR

tour above and below the border in the autumn... Marie Jones' *The Blind Fiddler* continues at the Lyric Theatre until 5 Jul, directed by Ian McElhinney...

The Abbey sees out the summer with its revival of Ben Barnes' production of *The Plough and the Stars* (through 12 Jul) and Patrick Mason's production of *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith (23 Jul-6 Sep). At the Peacock, Hilary Fannin's *Doldrum Bay* continues until 21 Jun, followed by Frank McGuinness' adaptation of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (3 Jul-16 Aug)... The Kilkenny Arts Festival/Fiach MacConghail production of *The Book of Evidence* continues at the Gate until 28 Jun. Next up is Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* directed by Alan Stanford from 4 Jul through the end of Sep... Tall Tales' production of Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar*, in a new one-man



THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE

version adapted and performed by Séamus Moran, opens in the Civic's Loose End (9–21 Jun) and tours nationally until 26 Jul. Also at the Civic, Island Theatre Company's *The Quiet Moment* plays from 23–28 Jun, Sense Theatre Company presents Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (23 Jun–5 Jul), and Natural Shocks Theatre Company revive Donnachada O'Briain's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (17 Jul–16 Aug). The Machine/Liam Rellis Productions staging of J.B. Keane's *The Field* plays at the Civic from 25 Aug–6 Sep and the Keegan Theatre stages Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee from 8–13 Sep... The Pavilion Theatre also hosts Tall Tales' *Saint Oscar* (2–5 Jul), followed by Pittsburgh Irish and Classical

Theatre's production of G.B. Shaw's *Major Barbara* from 29 Jul–16 Aug... Next at Bewley's Café Theatre, Peter McKenna's *Missing Football* runs from 16 Jun–12 Jul. Michael James Ford's adaptations of two Oscar Wilde short stories, *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose*, follow, performing on alternating days from 14 Jul–15 Aug...

The Machine/Rellis Field plays the Gaiety from 30 Jun–26 Jul, followed by the Gaiety's own production of *Auntie and Me* by Morris Panych (29 Jul–6 Sep). *Stones in his Pockets* will subsequently play at the Gaiety from 15–27 Sep... Dubblejoint's production of *A Cold House* by Brian Campbell and Laurence McKeown runs from 3–14 Jun at Amharclann na Carraige

what's news

in Belfast and tours until 29 Jun... X-Collective Theatre Company revive their debut production *Alien Nation* by Roderick Stewart in Garter Lane Theatre (26-28 Jun)... *Run For Your Wife* by Ray Cooney continues at the Olympia until 28 Jun... The Saigon Water Puppet Theatre sail into the Helix from 22-27 Jul...

Asylum Productions' staging of Enda Walsh's *bedbound* plays at the Granary until 28 Jun, followed by the Granary's own production of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, an adaptation of a Charlotte Perkins Gilman novella (30 Jun-5 Jul). Stray Dogs Productions then presents Rynagh O'Grady's *Keep Coming Back* (15-19 Jul), with further dates at the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray (6-7 Aug). Also at the Mermaid, Prom Productions present *Misery*, adapted from the Stephen King novel by Simon Moore (1 Sep)... RTE Radio 1's annual live Shakespeare broadcast this year will be *Romeo and Juliet*, read

in Dublin's Meeting House Square on 3 Aug... Lane Productions' tour of *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose concludes in Drafocht (17-21 Jun), while their presentation of Marie Jones' *A Night in November* continues in a limited run at Liberty Hall Theatre. Meanwhile, *Triple Espresso* returns to Andrews Lane Theatre for a limited run from 10 Jun... The Crypt hosts Avalon Theatre Company's production of *Me and Mamie O'Rourke* by Mary Agnes Donoghue (16-21 Jun); Chameleon Theatre Company's staging of *Boy's Life* by Howard Korder (23 Jun-12 Jul); and Neil Watkins' new play *The Look of Love* for Gentle Giant Theatre Company (14 Jul-9 Aug). Terrible Beauty Theatre Company's production of Frank McGuinness' *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* follows from 11-23 Aug.

The Canaries by Bernard Farrell continues in the Town Hall Theatre, Galway until 29 Jun. This year's Galway Arts Festival will include a one-week outdoor run of Macnas' *The Mysteries* from 15 Jul, and B*spoke's world premiere of Tom Murphy's *The Drunkard* at the Town Hall Theatre (16-22 Jul), with further dates at the Everyman Palace, Cork (25 Jul-2 Aug) and the Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin (5-23 Aug). (An excerpt from *The Drunkard* appears on pages 38-40 of this issue). Barabas...the company's production of *Hurl* by Charlie O'Neill, a multi-ethnic "hurling yarn," premieres at the Galway Arts Festival in the Black Box Theatre (12-17 Jul) and will also play at the Tivoli as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival from 6-11 Oct... On 27 Jun, Yoshiko Chiuma performs a final solo piece for Daghdha Dance Company for the Dance History Scholars' International Conference in the University of Limerick, before departing



CHRIS MORRISON



BARDS IN THE YARD

as artistic director from the company... Theatre highlights of the Kilkenny Arts Festival, which runs from 8-17 Aug. include the Small State Theatre of Lithuania's production of *Masquerade* and an extensive Young People's Programme, involving theatre productions from Spain, Belgium and France... The Junction Festival 7.03 takes place in venues around Clonmel from 5-11 Jul. The programme will include theatre from the U.K., U.S.A. and Ireland...

In Sligo, Blue Raincoat Theatre Company will host "Cairde," an eight-week-long festival of workshops, performances, exhibitions and seminars, as well as lunchtime performances of Blue Raincoat productions, throughout Jun, Jul, and Aug... Quare Hawks, with support from Peace and Reconciliation funds, will tour *Winter Came Down* by

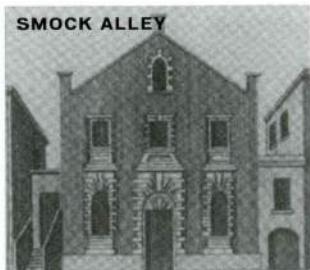
Michael McCudden from 18-27 Sep beginning at the Ramor, Cavan (until 19 Sep) and performing single dates in border county venues... Corcadorka are set to stage a site-specific production of Ger Bourke's new play *Snap* in September...

The National Festival of Youth Theatres 2003, hosted by the National Association of Youth Drama, includes an outdoor festival at Dublin Castle called "Bards in the Yard" on 18-19 Jul, involving over 100 young people from 10 youth theatre groups... The Skehana Summer School takes place in Aug as part of the Arts Council's Critical Voices 2 programme, led by the Australian actor, director, and academic John O'Hare... Calipo Theatre Co has moved. Their new address is Barlow House, Narrow West Street, Drogheda, Co. Louth. And their virtual home is at www.calipo.ie.

Save Smock Alley!

THE FUTURE OF THE PREMISES ON DUBLIN'S WEST ESSEX Street officially known as SS Michael and John's Church and Schools is still very much in the balance. The planning regulations for the building, which has been owned since 1991 by Temple Bar Properties (TBP), state that it must be used for primarily cultural purposes, and, as *itm* readers will recall (issue 11), it was put to tender well over a year ago. What is less well known

is that the tender is still open, having been extended by TBP when they did not receive what executive consultant John Quillinan calls a "sustainable proposal" for the building's use by its 31 Mar 2002 deadline. The tender closes on 3 Oct of this year, and in the meantime the building is being used as an ecology information centre, and will for the second year house a number of performance spaces for the Dublin Fringe Festival. So what will — what *should* — the build-



ing become? Theatre historian **CHRIS MORASH** here offers his view:

With this premises up for tender, we, as a society, are faced with a very real decision: do we really value our theatrical heritage, or do we just like to talk about it?

Most of us will know the building. One facade faces on to Dublin's West Essex Street, in the quieter West End of Temple Bar; the other faces on to the South Quays, an elegant little intrusion

into the monumental skyline created by the Civic Offices. Anyone charged with the care of small children or tourists will remember it, briefly, as the home of Dublin's Viking Adventure.

The simple fact is that this building is one of the most historically important surviving theatre buildings in Europe. When it first opened, on 18 October 1662, Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre was part of the wave of theatre-building that accompanied the Restoration of Charles II, and which included Lincoln's Inn Fields (June, 1661) and Drury Lane (May, 1663) in London. However, unlike Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was converted from a tennis court, Smock Alley was built from the ground up as a theatre. More importantly, unlike Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was torn down in the 19th century, or Drury Lane, which was rebuilt so many times that nothing of the original building remains, the Smock Alley building is substantially as it was when it was first erected in 1662, with the exception of a small addition to the south facade, added in 1735. In short, in Smock Alley we have a more or less intact 17th-century theatre — making it older than any surviving major theatre building in England, for instance, and older than all but a handful of European theatres.

When the Smock Alley Theatre opened in 1662, it was part of a vibrant theatrical world. The Irish playwright George Farquhar first acted on its stage, and made a triumphant return to the theatre in 1705. It was here that the legendary actress Peg Woffington achieved fame, often acting opposite David Garrick, who first played Hamlet on the Smock Alley stage. Throughout the middle decades of the 18th century, Smock Alley became a focus of Dublin

cultural life, enduring a number of important political riots. However, while the London theatre world grew, and old theatres were demolished to make way for ever bigger structures, Dublin's population made the smaller theatre viable — and so it remained as it was, until it closed in 1789. Similarly, when it was later converted into the Church of SS Michael and John, all that was required was to pull out the stage and galleries (traces of which still exist). The basic structure remained intact.

This history gives us a unique opportunity. In its day, Smock Alley was a superb acting space, with a large forestage that created a dynamic intimacy between actors and audience. The obvious decision here is to return the building to its original function, as a theatre. The link with the adjoining building, built to facilitate its use as a Viking Adventure Centre, would be of help here, in that it would give access to facilities not considered essential by 17th-century audiences (such as toilets and lobby space). It would be possible to imagine, for instance, a rejuvenated Smock Alley Theatre that would mix a Restoration and 18th-century repertoire (which is both large and stage-worthy), with innovative contemporary explorations of an older theatrical space. Alternatively, the building could serve as the theatre museum for which so many visitors to Dublin look in vain. In either case, the building's connection with the theatre must be retained; to obliterate that invigorating cultural memory would be an act of vandalism.

Chris Morash is author of A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000, winner of the Theatre Book Prize, 2003. He is director of Media Studies at NUI Maynooth.

sounding board

Director **THOMAS CONWAY** responds to the editors' call, in the last issue of *itm*, for the Arts Council to publish agreed-on artistic criteria for their grant giving.

THE ANALYSIS AMONG ARTISTS IS pretty unanimous: current funding structures are weighted to convenience the Government and empower the Arts Council. Robert Ballagh (*The Irish Times*, 11 Apr 2003) warns that the government's "hands off approach" allows it to make indiscriminate cuts to the sector. The solution is more dialogue, but is it more involvement from the government, as Ballagh advocates?

Similarly, *itm* (vol. 3, issue 14) decries the inscrutability of recent Arts Council decisions. But is *itm* correct in calling for the Arts Council to publish "performance indicators"? Here *itm* refers to a report by arts consultant François Matarasso, who cites five potential evaluative criteria towards such "indicators": technique, originality, ambition, connection, and personal response. Such criteria place the accent squarely on the work. Here, this would see the Arts Council engage in a dialogue on the work it funds and not take cover in structural concerns.

But one question *only* needs to be asked of "performance indicators": is there a danger they become a prescription for the art that gets made? Something that meets Matarasso's five criteria might look like *Riverdance* — is this satisfying? And does it mean work like Gerard Mannix Flynn's *James X*, with its spare one-man testimo-

ny, gets relegated to Division Two when competing for the same funds? Surely a funding structure should be weighted to support those artists reaching towards a form where the unpalatable is broached. In an environment pollinated with "performance indicators," won't it be producers who command the field?

It's as much as we can say about an artwork that it issues from personal compulsion. It is precisely those works that issue from an inner determination and compromise least with external criteria which lay greatest claim to our respect. They show us to ourselves, whether we have the stomach for what they show or not.

We must think of values as distinct from "performance indicators," and know those values as aspirational outposts in unknown territories, not

finishing posts in a marked-out track. We must ask the Arts Council to commit funds by reference to values, and the government to commit to a threshold of funding below which it won't dare go without consultation with...

Ah.

Given the trickle-down diktats (Minister to Council, Arts Policy Officer to Council staff, staff in "partnership" with artists) all but in place, it's too late. Here goes, in any case, a plea for informed non-interference based on love for the arts, whatever it is they do.



THOMAS CONWAY



Ireland's Winning Hand

In the second of a four-part series of articles
asking "What is Irish theatre about?",
Scottish critic **JOYCE McMILLAN**
offers a view from abroad.

GRIPPING

*Aidan Kelly in
Howie the Rookie*

Irish
theatre-makers
still seem,
by international
standards, to
come from
an enviably
fluent and
accomplished
tradition of
public
storytelling
through
performance.

If there's one thing that can be guaranteed about an outsider's view of Irish theatre — or indeed of any national theatre scene — it's that it will not focus on the events, issues, problems or dilemmas that seem most urgent to those directly involved. The distance between Scotland and Ireland is small, both geographically and in every other way. But the echoes of the current funding debate in Dublin float across the narrow sea only as sounds of distant thunder.

What I see, from this side of the water, is something more like the shape of a decade's achievement in Irish theatre, mediated through the Dublin and Edinburgh festivals, through the great theatrical fleshmarket of London's West End and the touring shows it spawns, and through the decisions of various Scottish theatre companies about the plays they perform, and the touring productions they invite. It's an imperfect picture, but one that at least throws up some interesting questions about where theatre stands in the very early days of the 21st century, and what Irish theatre-makers now bring to that wider cultural scene. Understanding and developing that relationship with the wider world, in the most creative way possible, seems to be part of what Irish theatre is about in 2003.

To state the obvious first, then, Irish theatre-makers still seem, by international standards, to come from an enviably fluent and accomplished tradition of public storytelling through performance. To look at straightforward new Irish plays of the last five years — two that come to mind are Morna Regan's *Midden* and David Parnell and Paul Meade's *Scenes from a Watercooler* — is to come across writers who, whatever one makes of their material, show a capacity to structure dramatic stories and present them through action that playwrights in other cultures often struggle for decades to match. Why this should be so is mysterious. But however tedious the consequences may sometimes be in terms of a continuing dominance of naturalistic or pseudo-naturalistic performance styles, or the temptation to a structurally-driven triteness of thought or feeling, it's a rare skill in 21st-century world theatre and one that should be treasured, elaborated and built upon, rather than discarded.

Beyond that, the continuing energy of the storytelling impulse



in Irish culture also gives Irish writers and performers immediate access to one of the main growth areas of contemporary theatre, the solo or monologue-based show. The reasons why solo shows are increasingly popular are obvious, and not purely economic; in an age of canned entertainment, solo performance immediately and clearly reaffirms the direct human link between performer and audience that is theatre's unique selling point. And it would be a serious mistake for Irish theatremakers to underrate the significance, or the creative potential, of the tremendous resource of direct storytelling skill they seem to have between their hands. The monologue writing of — to give only a few examples — Conor McPherson in *The Good Thief* and *The Weir*, of Mark O'Rowe in *Howie the Rookie*, and of course of Samuel Beckett, whose prose work lends itself so brilliantly to public performance, has been the basis of some of the finest and most gripping theatre I have seen in the last 20 years and this, too, is possibly a taken-for-granted element of Irish theatre life that needs consideration, elaboration, and continuing conscious development.

Secondly, Irish theatre holds a trump card in the shape of its

**WELL-
STRUCTURED**
*Pauline Hutton,
Kathy Downes,
and Ruth Hegarty
in Midden*

It's almost painful for a Scottish critic to write about how Ireland seizes on, enjoys, expands, and plays with the potential of our common language, where Scottish culture still struggles with a sense of the English language as a series of traps.

relationship with the English language, rapidly emerging as the global lingua franca. It's almost painful for a Scottish critic to write about how Ireland seizes on, enjoys, expands, and plays with the potential of our common language, where Scottish culture still struggles with a sense of the English language as a series of traps designed — as George Bernard Shaw so memorably noted — to make us betray our class or geographical origins, and to enable others to pass judgment on us without mercy. This is not only a Scottish problem; it is an issue of class and power that affects all parts of the United Kingdom. One positive consequence of this problem with language has been to generate a Scottish theatre culture which is fiercely interested in, and loyal to, the non-linguistic elements of theatre, open to international influences mediated through visual and aural design, movement, gesture, and light.

But to reflect on the tongue-tied or language-conflicted quality of theatre from the non-metropolitan parts of the UK is only to emphasise the tremendous achievement of Irish theatre, and Irish culture generally, in not sharing that sense of intimidation. Instead, this seems to be a culture which has prided itself on evolving forms of English which are more flexible, more vivid, more capacious, more erudite, more energetic and simply more enjoyable than the English of England itself. Whether that exuberant tradition of popular eloquence will survive the growing divisions of Irish society, and the emergence of Dublin-based political and media elites whose "ownership" of modern Irish speech will tend to alienate and silence those who feel socially excluded is another question. But for the moment, it can be seen as a vital golden thread running through the Irish writing of the last century, from James Joyce and J.M. Synge at one end, to Enda Walsh at the other, a unique, oblique and immensely creative relationship with the language that is shaping the 21st-century world.

Then thirdly, Irish theatre has a tradition of engagement with the life of the nation, of reflecting it and rebelling against it, that is entwined in Ireland's history, and seems to be completely taken for granted. In that sense, the most obvious answer to the question of what Irish theatre is about is that it is mainly about Ireland, or at any rate has been until now. Nor is there anything unusual about that preoccupation. Theatre was essentially born as an artform to articulate the concerns, dilemmas and shared experiences of political communities; in the 19th and 20th centuries, nations were the key political communities we inhabited, and all small emergent European nations — even Scotland, in the 1940s and again in the 1980s — either felt that they had to have a national theatre, or tended to create a theatre culture strongly



concerned with issues of national identity and self-definition.

In the 20th century, Irish theatre fulfilled that role with some brilliance, particularly in the years around the founding of the state, and then again after the 1960s, when successive generations of writers began to reflect the breakneck pace of change in an Ireland suddenly hurtling towards modernity and post-modernity. The subject of Northern Ireland seems to have gone in and out of fashion as far as Dublin is concerned but there has been a steady stream of drama from Northern Ireland about the painful inheritance of political division and violent conflict in the province and that has been matched, from time to time, by significant moments of recognition in Ireland as a whole, most notably the Dublin opening, in 1986, of Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*.

And although some 20th-century Irish plays have endured better than others, there are two points worth noting about the intensity of the relationship between the theatrical and the political life of the nation. The first is that this is not something that can be taken for granted in other parts of the English-speaking

RESONANT

*Olwen Fouéré,
Jennifer O'Dea,
and Anna Healy
in The Wake*

The West End and Broadway traditions, still immensely influential in the cultural life of Britain and America, tend to see theatre as a form of glamorous entertainment, largely devoid of wider meaning or indeed any meaning at all.

world. The West End and Broadway traditions, still immensely influential in the cultural life of Britain and America, tend to see theatre as a form of glamorous entertainment, largely devoid of wider meaning or indeed of any meaning at all. In England, the idea of theatre as an arena of debate about "the state of the nation" is still often treated as an eccentric Roundhead notion, a conspiracy by a bunch of sober-sided *Guardian* types to rob a Cavalier nation of its fun. And in Scotland, an earnest academic asked me only last week — after hearing me hold forth on what recent Scottish drama could tell us about sectarian issues in Scotland — whether I really expected people to take theatre seriously as a place where such ideas might emerge, since "that's not the Scottish tradition, is it, to get ideas through fiction?"

There is something deep here, about the "splitting" which took place in both England and Scotland, at the time of Reformation, between "serious" (male) matters of religion, politics and philosophy, and frivolous if not downright depraved (female) stuff like fiction, entertainment, play-acting, visual beauty, and aesthetics and without the sheer commitment to serious theatrical and visual expression brought back into Scotland by the huge Irish Catholic immigration of the 19th and 20th centuries — and by the smaller but highly influential Italian and Jewish groups who followed — Scottish theatre today would be a far poorer thing, and would probably barely exist in its post-modern form.

Then finally, it should be recognised that the intense interaction between theatre and political life in Ireland does not necessarily rob the work of wider resonances; on the contrary, as the Quebecois writer Michel Tremblay famously observed. Certainly there are contemporary Irish plays that seem to struggle too hard to address specifics of modern Irish life at national level; Marina Carr's *Ariel*, at last year's Dublin Theatre Festival, struck me as one of those, a play torn between an immediate, almost journalistic need to satirise aspects of contemporary Irish politics and a much deeper and wider set of themes to do with the failure of faith and the resurgence — behind our overt materialism — of ugly forms of fetishistic paganism.

But by and large, the themes identified and explored in Irish theatre during the 1990s carry huge cultural resonances across the western world, and for one powerful and specific reason: that the sheer pace of change in Irish society over the last 40 years, combined with Ireland's continuing capacity to tell the fierce personal stories generated by those changes, has created a body of work that captures the shift from traditional/peasant life, through modernity and into post-modernity, as powerfully as any theatrical canon on earth. A play like Tom Murphy's *The Wake*, first seen in Dublin in 1998, captures the loss of conviviali-

ty and the shift towards blank-eyed materialism with unforgettable force and sadness. Work like Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* or Semper Fi's elegant little *Ladies and Gents*, seen in Dublin last year, have plenty to say about the traditional misogyny, hypocrisy, and homophobia of Ireland's official religious and political culture; and as the runaway international success of Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* shows, that rebellion against the power of traditional Catholicism and its values has resonance across Europe and the Americas.

And above all, from the moment when Dermot Bolger's *The*

Lament for Arthur Cleary first appeared on the scene, Irish writers have been at the forefront of the exploration of the collapse of faith in civil authority, and the emergence of a "new gangsterism" at the highest and lowest levels of society that has been such a marked feature of the post-Cold War world. Images of an underclass of poor, brutalised people living in a world driven by drugs and prostitution, by the gangs who trade in them, and by savage crime-related violence — and of the way that world is mirrored in establishment power-structures corrupted and captured by a series of wealthy Mr. Bigs — may be easy to generate out of the street life of North Dublin. But they reflect a near-universal experience in the big cities of the west; and Irish writers like Bolger, McPherson, and O'Rowe have handled them with a tremendous sense of the tragic, and of the deep mythical resonances of the dilemmas their characters face, which gives their work a backbeat of mature humanity sadly lacking in the teenage sensationalism of much British and continental work on the same subject.

What the pace of change in 20th-century Irish society has done,

EILEEN HERAGHTY. PHOTO COURTESY 7:84 THEATRE COMPANY SCOTLAND



PIONEERING

Fiona Bell and Ian Cairns in the 7:84 production of *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*

IRELAND'S WINNING HAND

The kind of writing that comes out of Ireland but successfully addresses a much wider audience often seems to miss the mark in Ireland itself, perhaps because of some residual resistance to the power of the London theatre scene.

in other words, is to shape contemporary Irish culture — and to some extent all "Celtic" cultures, in the age of the Celtic boom — into a unique arena for exploring, within a community still bound together by a strong, egalitarian sense of mutual recognition, some of the biggest tensions now facing global culture: between tradition and modernity, between subsistence farming and post-industrial affluence, between mobility and community, between religious faith and rampant materialism, between old patriarchies and new forms of female liberation, and above all — in our emerging global order — between the wealthy and powerful of the earth, and the poor and utterly powerless, both groups still strongly represented in Irish society. Marie Jones' 1999 play *Stones in his Pockets*, for example, may not be a particularly radical example of recent Irish drama. But in the fluency and outward simplicity of its two-handed staging, the confidence with which it reworks the familiar theme of a Hollywood film crew landing in a small rural Irish community, and the passion with which it explores the disastrous, ruthless, yet often disguised gulf between the power and might of modern Hollywood in "Celtic-heritage" mode, and the reality of life for a drug-dazed boy facing a life of unemployment in the same "picturesque" setting, makes it the kind of West End hit that no other theatre culture could have produced, at least not with the same high entertainment value, and underlying political punch.

So is there a downside to this tremendous hand of trump cards that Irish theatre seems to hold, on the edge of the 21st century? Just this: that as nations become less significant as political units, and we move into a world in which new media and faster communications create different networks of kinship and organisation across much larger distances, Irish theatre inevitably faces a huge crisis of identity, a deep question about who the audience now is, and how it should be addressed. The kind of writing that was created simply for and about Ireland, and in so doing unconsciously tapped into much wider human themes, is no longer possible; the kind of writing that specifically attacks perceived shortcomings in Irish society, as compared with others, is often brittle and shortlived, although it can serve a powerful purpose in the moment; the kind of writing that comes out of Ireland but successfully addresses a much wider audience often seems to miss the mark in Ireland itself, perhaps because of some residual resistance to the power of the London theatre scene, and to Irish writers who have been successful there. No outside observer can even begin to chart the creative routes out of this impasse that Irish theatre artists will discover; we can be sure only that the best of them will surprise us.

I hope, though, that I have said enough to suggest at least two

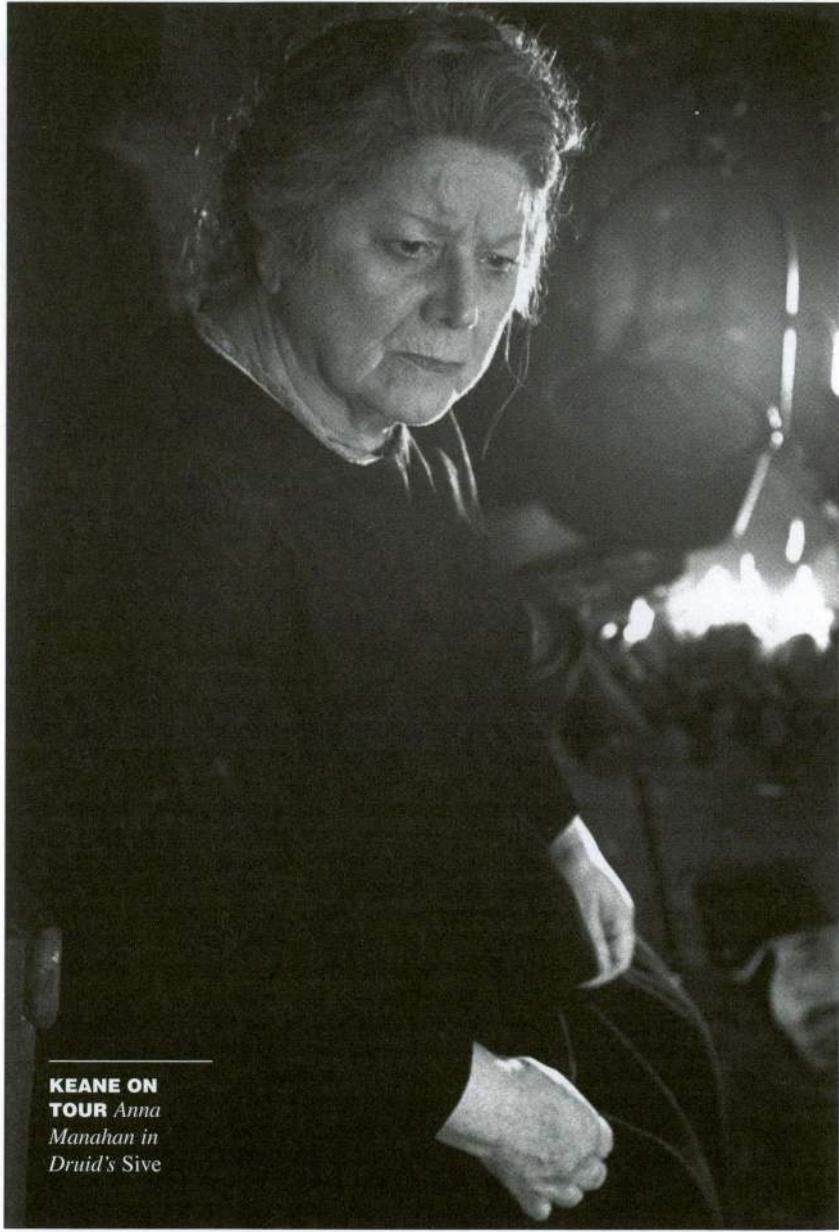


or three thoughts. First, that it might be a dead end for Irish theatre to expend too much energy revisiting a 20th-century notion of the avant-garde — wordless theatre, non-narrative theatre, heavily stylised theatre — that is now almost 100 years old; my guess is that the creative cutting-edge of world theatre now lies elsewhere. Secondly, that there is still plenty to be said for trying to open up deeper channels of theatrical communication around these mainly English-speaking islands which do not necessarily pass through London, and can provide alternative arenas, free of that particular cultural baggage, for the widening of horizons without a loss of linguistic complexity. And finally, that although these may be stressful times for Irish theatre, experience in the U.K. over the past two decades suggests that the impulse to make theatre is too strong to be crushed even by the worst excesses of bureaucratic managerialism, or the most profound and unsettling social change; and if that is true on this side of the water, then there can be no doubt that it will also prove true in Ireland. 

SMARTER THAN

THEY LOOK

*Sean Campion
and Conleth Hill
in Stones in his
Pockets*



Ivan Kyng

**KEANE ON
TOUR** Anna
Manahan in
Druid's Sive

Talking Touring

IN A TIME WHEN CERTAIN WORDS — CUTBACKS, cancellation, crisis — are never far from the lips of anyone involved in Irish theatre, Colm Ó Briain's keynote address at last month's event on theatre touring was a wake-up call for the industry. "The buck stops here," he announced, to the large audience of managers, artistic directors, performers, and writers. Not with the Arts Council. Not with the Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism. Here, in the City Arts Centre, where those who believed in theatre were gathered.

On 19 May, *itm* and City Arts Centre co-hosted an industry meeting about theatre touring in Ireland. With the current economic downturn and recent Arts Council cutbacks limiting production, does the sector have a crisis on its hands? **BELINDA McKEON** reports on the day's proceedings.

Not that the opening address shied away from those factors which are largely held responsible for the current depressed state of theatre touring in this country. He spoke eloquently of the frustrated creativity of playwrights and producers "demanding to be expressed, to be released into the system." The Arts Council came in for some criticism, as did the decision of the Government a year ago to spread arts and culture over four departments. And, in his hands, the history of Irish theatre on tour morphed into a comprehensive history of Irish state policy on Irish theatre on tour. Ó Briain chronicled a journey, an expansion, a steadily growing commitment, on the part of the State, to getting Irish theatre onto many Irish stages: from the establishment, by the 1971 Government, of the Irish Theatre Company and the Irish National Ballet, two dedicated touring companies; through the development, in the 1980s and early 1990s, of specific funding to tour; up to the first and second Arts Plans, when venues, productions, and audience-building opportunities multiplied and touring enjoyed a healthier state than ever before.

Without resorting to the language of blame and frustration which has, understandably, shaped much recent debate on Irish theatre, Ó Briain's speech subtly framed the deterioration and disappointment which characterises the current state of theatre touring in this country. The progress of the past two decades having been traced, those things lacking in his assessment spoke louder than any direct criticism: the lack of a mature policy on touring theatre productions, of variegated programmes, of well-travelled circuits, and of sturdy relationships between venues and companies countrywide. At this stage, we're all well-versed in the grim reality — a dearth of productions, despite a deluge of venues; a funding drought; and a diet of tried-and-tested theatre on a patchy touring circuit. A largely anachronistic Arts Plan, a significantly ostracised Arts Council, and a considerably alienated theatre community. A National Theatre which no longer brings productions beyond Abbey Street; a struggle for smaller companies to survive, let alone take a show on the road. Tours are fewer and fewer, yet venues, having had their own subsidies slashed, need the rentals from touring productions to stay open. It's not a pleasant time to be in Irish theatre.

But that's where we are, Ó Briain's speech reminded the audience, and that's where the buck stops. Right here in Irish

IN-HOUSE

The Town Hall
production of A
Doll's House



theatre. The onus fell inward, he stressed; theatre professionals had a responsibility to engage with one another. Now his history lesson took on a different meaning. Having seemed so much an illumination of what had gone wrong, it was also a reminder of what had gone right, and often in the face of significant opposition; it forbade defeatism. Listen to what, in the 1980s, one policymaker had offered as a solution to Dublin's virtual monopoly on theatre production during the '80s: "Put them on the trains. Give them train tickets to Dublin so that they can come to the Abbey and the Gate." Or to one arts administrator's view in the same decade: "Cows are for the country, culture is for the city." Yet the Galway company Druid thrived, and built up solid relationships with venues across Ireland. Amateur and voluntary theatre groups pushed for recognition, for structure, for funding — and got it, in the form of Arts Council grants, the cultural development incentive scheme, and the ACCESS scheme. When they did, there was criticism that the widespread touring of productions was a privitisation of culture; there was criticism that new writing — 48 new plays by Irish writers in 1994 — was being excessively promoted. Pay was scant — Equity minimums were the exception, Ó Briain remembered, rather than the rule — and venues shoddy. Still, a theatre community emerged, and conversed, and consolidated. Now it is endangered. Ó Briain's address suggested that the threat from outside could be matched by an equally serious threat within.

And, as the debate between panellists and audience members developed, the source of that threat became apparent. With each of the four panels comprising a mix of venue managers and general managers or artistic directors, certain tensions recurred, certain differences persisted. There is something amiss, it became clear, in the relationship between venues and production companies. Raising his hand in the audience at the first opportunity, Upstate Theatre Company's



MIKE DISKIN

A dream scenario would be that someone, maybe the Arts Council, would say that by 15 September 2003, all production companies will have decided what they are doing in 2004.

TALKING TOURING

Declan Gorman expressed the hope that the context provided by Ó Briain would ensure that the day's discussion would not take the "depressing" path of so many before — that participants would look beyond the "stereotypes" of the overburdened venue manager and the irresponsible production company. Ironically, however — and especially ironically given that he is a company manager — Gorman actually reinforced those stereotypes in the very language with which he sought to dismiss them. When he spoke of "hard working and very often visionary and excellent venue managers" being accused by production companies of under-promoting their shows, he did so with a conviction, even a passion, backed up by his later comments on the venue manager as a centrifugal, creative force. In all stereotypes, after all, there is an element of truth; despite himself, Gorman conveyed the sense that, in the relationship between venues and companies, there lay an acute strain which could not be ushered away by any amount of contextualising.

Because, in fact, those "stereotypes" had already been presented quite convincingly; despite the presence, on the first panel, of independent theatre artist Donal O'Kelly and Druid's

STILL ANGRY

The long-lived

Lane Productions
staging of Twelve
Angry Men



TOM LAWLER

Words of Wisdom

Keynote
speaker

COLM Ó BRAIN

offered these pointers about theatre and touring at the conclusion of his address.

aging venues from using their grants for their own productions whether co-productions or not.

- ANY SYSTEM THAT OPERATES has to have diversity at its core. Special projects in order to maintain diversity in the sector should be a priority for funding.
- THERE HAS TO BE BETTER PLANNING: venues must plan in advance, and companies have to plan in advance.
- THE MULTI-ANNUAL FUNDING APPROACH is absolutely necessary if we are going to have a viable touring system.
- CO-PRODUCTIONS are also something that have to play a greater part, and I have concerns that the Arts Council has been discour-
- THE COUNCIL ALSO HAS TO ASK ITSELF whether it can support companies which are only willing or able to perform in one venue. There has to be some weighting given to companies who will find other venues as part of the return on the investment in their production.
- THERE IS AN OBLIGATION on the Theatre Forum to quantify an optimum and a minimum level of support for touring and to develop a rationale for touring and the structures underpinning it.
- PUBLICITY IS AT THE CORE of a successful touring strategy. The Arts Council should work with RTÉ towards a collaboration similar to that with Aer Lingus for Art Flights. Together they should develop a radio advertising scheme to supplement — but not replace — the "RTÉ Supporting the Arts" campaign.
- DO YOUR HOMEWORK. When the sector organised to abolish the VAT on theatre tickets, they were successful, but what they got was an exemption, not a zero rating. Thus the problem was not solved because the sector was unclear in what it was requesting. If the sector is unclear the official response is likely to be equally unclear.
- ONE "MACRO" ISSUE: The advances of the past decade have largely been the result of the influence of a dedicated Government department. That department has been dismantled, and those concerns have been spread across four departments. This will have damaging effects on the whole cultural sector, and obviously, by implication, it will also damage touring.



Ó BRAIN

Garry Hynes, the discussion seemed weighted, at this stage, in favour of venues. Part of the context provided in Ó Briain's address had been the extent to which venues were losing out at the hands of some production companies; he spoke of "inequalities in the system" whereby subsidised companies often charged venues more to host their productions than did unsubsidised companies. And he had stressed the role of the venue manager as "absolutely primary and significant"; that person's vision, he had said, was the shaping force of touring, and engagement between venues and companies had to aim at allowing this vision to succeed. While Hynes spoke of how the end of Arts Council touring grants had meant that Druid's relationships with smaller venues had "withered on the vine," her co-panelist Gerry Barnes, of Cork Opera House, pointed out how production companies were prone, once a show became very successful (he was not talking specifically about Druid's own successes but about *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Disco Pigs*) to neglect smaller venues, even local venues, in favour of international markets.

The next panel was a laid-back mix: Donal Shiels from Second Age Theatre Company; Breda Cashe of Lane Productions; Project Arts Centre's Wille White; and Louise Donlon, from the Dunamaise Arts Centre in Portlaoise. But even here, as they came to chart what chair Fiach MacConghail called "the murky waters" of the venue-company relationship, tension was palpable, and once again the venues emerged as the more seriously wronged party. Cashe, director of a commercial company, spoke of its success in developing co-marketing strategies with venue managers, but admitted that she would only tour to venues which could give guarantees. White

promptly argued the impossibility, for a venue, of giving guarantees in today's economic climate, and spoke of the necessity, in his case, of doing deals with companies on the rental rates of the Project's space. Shiels criticised Irish venues' lack of far-seeing technical and marketing support for visiting compa-

TEAMWORK
The Peacock/
Galway Arts
Festival
production of
The Drawer Boy



ANGUS MACMAHON

nies; putting posters around town is not enough. But Donlon commented that companies demanded too much singular focus on their show from venues which had to plan for the get-in, often as soon as the next day, of another show, which might be completely different in genre and target audience from the first.

And then a hand went up in the audience, and Mike Diskin from Galway's Town Hall Theatre ensured that the tension was no longer quietly spoken, but blatant and striking. "What do you want from us?" he asked the production companies in the room. Such companies, he accused, were not making the effort to alert venues to their activities so that venues could slot their shows into the year's schedule. Commercial productions aside, the work of 90% of companies in Ireland remained a mystery to him, Diskin complained, so that he felt more comfortable describing his work as "filling the schedule" rather than as creatively programming from a choice of productions.

But matters evened out in the afternoon, which saw Diskin out of the audience and onto the third panel, along with Yew Tree's John Breen; Polly O'Loughlin from the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire; and Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy from Storytellers Theatre Company. After a quick, predictable dismissal of the relevance of the Arts Council, Diskin got around to the question which Gerry Barnes had raised briefly earlier in the day: is the Abbey Theatre holding touring as a hostage until the Arts Council restores its touring grant? While that earmarked grant no longer exists, the Abbey's revenue grant remains a sum beyond the wildest dreams of many smaller companies who had managed to pull together tours, despite cuts in their own funding. When Peacock director Ali Curran spoke up from the audience, sparks began to fly. Curran testified to the National Theatre's current attempts to create some kind of "sustained, quality relationship with other companies," but was cut off by Diskin: "Are you going to tour or not?... Why are you talking to

GERAINT LEWIS



GARRY HYNES

We need to reimagine how we organise access to theatre in this country.

I don't think it's
an issue of going
back to the past,
however
successful the
past may be.

TALKING TOURING

[Abbey artistic director] Ben Barnes?... Why aren't you talking to venues?... How many years do we have to wait?" A more placid critic was Donlon, who turned around in the audience to tell Curran that venues were eager for "the Abbey brand," and conversations with the Abbey seemed consistently unavailable. Curran put up a good fight, but surrounded by managers and performers from smaller, still touring companies, her argument that Abbey touring was impossible roused little sympathy.

Yet Diskin's outburst, too, fell on somewhat unsympathetic ears, given that it was grounded in an unwillingness to countenance the concept of co-production between venues and companies as a way forward for theatre touring. Beside Diskin, Breen had been speaking passionately about the merits of co-production — his new play *Charlie* is an example, jointly produced by Yew Tree, An Grianan, and the Cork Opera House. Co-production, he argued, was a chance for a company to expand its creativity, and for a venue to secure a desirable show. His positivity was mirrored from the audience by Gerry Barnes, and supported, indeed, by Ó Briain's speech, which had urged the Arts Council to encourage co-production in its future funding decisions. But Diskin remained unconvinced. To him, companies asking for co-productions were simply companies asking for money. It was an intolerant stance which brought the venue-company conflict full circle; now both sides seemed locked in a stalemate of stubborn demand.

From the audience, Gorman lamented that discussion had lapsed into animosity once again. And certainly, much was obscured by its intrusion. That vital third party in the triangulated interchange that is theatre — the audience — was only briefly mentioned in the day's discussions, despite the fact that Ó Briain had the rights of audiences, and the need for audience development, firmly in his sights when he spoke of the venue manager's vision and the need for dialogue with production companies. He had signalled, too, the intricate social and demographic considerations which have to be taken into account when planning a tour to any given venue. This is an issue of crucial importance; it should, in fact, be the primary sub-

SMALL-SCALE

The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella





ject of conversation between venue managers and production companies. The distance of a theatre from a town, the nature of the clientele, the staff, the owners, the location, the history of the building, the existence of other arts organisations in the area: many factors combine to decide whether a particular production will work in a particular venue, and serious attention to detail is demanded from both sides.

Regrettably, this question was not given any serious treatment in the course of debate, which focussed rather on what venues and companies owed one another. Some speakers touched on it, certainly; Project's White commented that, while his venue could not provide companies with guarantees, he felt it should be able to provide them with an audience. Shiels, in his criticism of the marketing strategies of Irish venues, alluded to more "aggressive" approaches in the UK, such as cut-price tickets for early-week performances, which aimed at attracting the largest possible audience into theatres. Enid Reid-Whyte, drama advisor to the Arts Council, called on venue managers and production companies alike to familiarise themselves with their audiences — to identify their "repeat offenders" and establish a relationship with them. Donlon emerged as the exemplar in this, admitting to knowing her audience base so well that she can nearly predict, from production to production, which people will be in her auditorium.

**TOURING CAN
BE TIRING**
*Stewart Roche in
the Purple Heart
production of
Love and
Understanding*

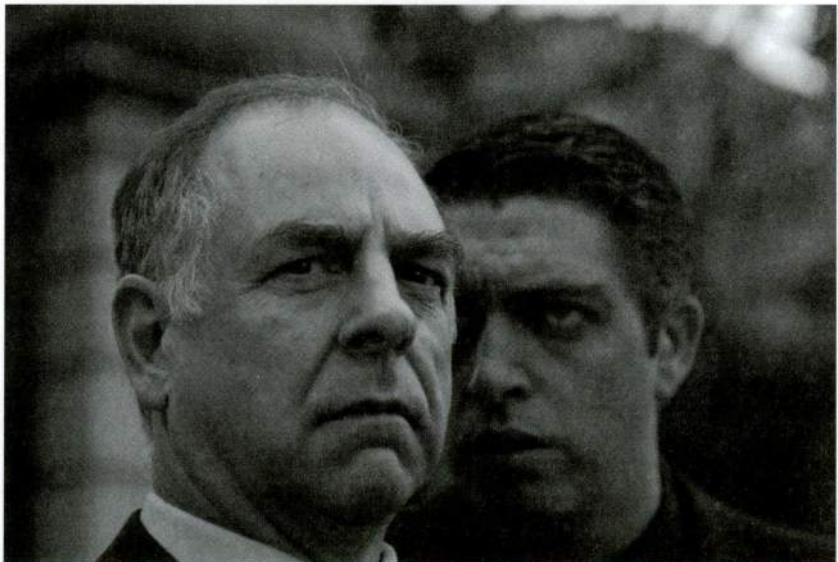
But in-depth discussion of strategies to enable managers of larger venues to achieve such a relationship with their catchment area, or to include production companies in the intricate business of targeting and securing particular audiences, let alone developing new ones, failed to materialise. There was a sense, as a familiar opposition played itself out once again, that this would be a debate for another day.

Ideas emerged around other problems: the day was not without energy and clarity. Alongside the great hope that co-production will help enable the recovery of theatre touring, there were suggestions for collaboration and communication on a smaller scale. Much of these suggestions issued from an optimistic final panel, consisting of Garter Lane Theatre's Caroline Senior; Marie-Louise O'Donnell, programmer of the Space at the Helix; Stewart Roche of Purple Heart Theatre Company; and Brian Desmond from Be Your Own Banana, and chaired by Mary Coll. Desmond's quirky recollections of his company's experience touring *The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Youngfella* to non-traditional rural venues in Munster provided a late injection of surreal humour into the proceedings.

The New Theatre's Ronan Wilmot and Purple Heart's Roche both regretted the failure of John O'Brien's Irish Touring Company, which had briefly offered a service to smaller companies by booking national tours for their productions. The

**A WORD IN
YOUR EAR**

*Karl Shiels and
Garrett Keogh in
Charlie*



PAUL McCARTHY

urgent need for a replacement was made very clear. From the audience, Báirbre Ní Chaoimh of Calypso Productions suggested that stage managers and production managers comprise a hidden resource, enjoying intricate knowledge of venues, personnel and local audiences; by consulting these individuals, smaller companies could access the type of information which is crucial before taking to the road. The catch, of course, as Ní Chaoimh pointed out, is that such a service cannot go unpaid; but with the entire theatre community experiencing the same pangs of economic difficulty, White's policy of dealing may set a fair example. Meanwhile, Conor Nolan of Waterford City Council reminded smaller companies of another resource — local arts officers, who can help with marketing, administration and even, in the shape of FÁS CE schemes (now sadly dwindling in the arts), support with the technical side of productions.

Inevitably, during the course of the event, there were calls on the Arts Council and the Government: to rebuild Multi-Annual Funding relationships and extend them to venues, to reward production companies willing to build relationships with more than one venue, to prioritise co-production, to resuscitate and protect touring, to recognise its value in terms of access, in terms of education, and in terms of cultural tourism. But the day was more memorable for the challenge which the theatre community posed to itself: the challenge to research, to communicate, to collaborate. To formulate new questions, new demands, and to do so clearly, not simply to be understood by funding bodies, but by one another. Other discussions must follow, and it is with the participants in this valuable event that the responsibility for these discussions lies. Touring, it is clear, is more complicated than piling into a van and hitting the road. What this day achieved was a mapping of the terrain still to be travelled.



Belinda McKeon writes about theatre and culture for publications including The Irish Times.

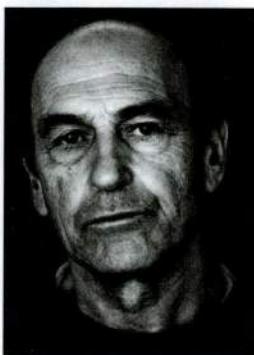


GERRY BARNES

**It is an anomaly
that the Arts
Council has
capped
the number of
producing houses it
will support. This
ignores the
tradition in Britain
and Europe of
successful regional
houses.**

Dark Night of the Soul

TOM MURPHY offers an excerpt from his new play *The Drunkard*, which is having its world premiere this July in a B*speek Theatre Company production at the Galway Arts Festival, with further dates in Cork and Dublin.



JANE BRENNAN, CO-ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF B*SPOKE,

WRITES: *The Drunkard* is a melodrama after the 19th-century play of the same title by W.H. Smith and A Gentleman. Why melodrama? The form offers the opportunity for acting on the grand scale. The 19th century, the age of melodrama, celebrated the leading actors, who were consummate performers – “stars”. B*speek would like to offer today’s actors the opportunity to explore that bravura style – likewise our director, composer, and designers. Melodramas were plays for the stage and not the page, but in this day and age, and considering the sensitive subject of *The Drunkard*, the writer’s role cannot be so relegated. Hence, Tom Murphy.

The following extract illustrates how Tom has made melodrama his own. At this point in the play, young Edward Kilcullen, the hero, is in the final throes of alcoholism.

SCENE 5: A stable/an outhouse. It is dark but nearing dawn. EDWARD is on the floor, delirious. He is without coat, hat, shoes; what he wears are torn and dirty. He is in “the jigs.” At first, perhaps, he is quiet; staring eyes; slowly pulling up his knees and pulling back his bare feet, to protect them from something. His innocent horror. It is as if a tide of something is coming towards him. He thinks he has escaped, that this “tide” is moving past him, but — “Ah!” — something on his arm which he flicks off. But — “Ah!” — another on his

thigh. Another and another, in his hair, his mouth — “Ah!” “Thuuuh!”... An infestation of creepie-crawlies has come for him. They are on his hands, around and in between his fingers. And he cannot yet bring himself to roar. They are making low-pitched sounds — like bees that have invaded his skull; they pant like dogs needing water... They are all over him. Now, a growing roar:

EDWARD OoooOOOO...! Mam-aaaAAA! MamaaaAAA! Send them

PAUL McCARTHY

away, send them away, stop them, stop them...!

(*The tide recedes — made up of crawling FLOOZIES and LOAFERS — as available — but FLOOZIES in particular, perhaps.*)

What hideous place is this, where am I?... Is it hell?... Dream?... Does dream occur after one is dead?... Is it night?... Morn? Coming morn, coming night?... I wanted day but, if it come, what shall I do with light? How to hide my face away from... from me?... If it be night, how to bear again the unleashed terrors of Dark's enhancing powers?... Ah! Dawn spreads a rosy hue over nighttime's troubled skies: the stars at last released from their ticking spasms. Ah me! It is morn.

(*Now, again, he tries to make himself smaller, to hide, protect himself. This time it is an invasion of snakes. He whimpers:*)

No... No... Off... Off me... Away... Get away... Take them away... Off! Off! (He appears to be hurtling them away, but one snake is persistent.) Noooooo! Take it off me! Take it — MamaaaaAAA — get it off me! Mama, it tightens — how it coils — Tightens!... Dash, dash, dash you to a pulp against the wall! (SNAKES — FIGURES — retiring.) I breathe again. (FIGURES returning. [This time, upright, standing, or nearly so.]

Noooooo! I am awake — Mama, Papa, tell them! Dreams — you are dreams — you are shockingly bad dreams! Will you return upon me when my eyes — See! — are gaping wide? (Pleads:) Please you, leave? Please? (FIGURES draw back, panting-humming-laughing quietly.) I should not be so stricken were I in these hands to hold a glass... Nor so fearful, despairing, astonished, or ashamed... Ashamed? (He shakes his head, "No," wearily. A figure

enters, a MAN. [He will, later, turn out to be real.] EDWARD watches him, at first suspiciously.)

MAN Who left the door open? Where is the horse? Where in blazes is my horse?

EDWARD I say you there!

MAN Who's there?!

EDWARD Yes, you there, Landlord Tubbs from our village, pour us a drink!

MAN Who's there, I say!

EDWARD It is I, Young Edward Kilcullen!

MAN (Assuming a new voice.) Ah, the scape-gallows, Kilcullen!

FIGURES Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! (Coming forward)

EDWARD Scape-gallows — Ha, ha, ha! — Good old Tubbs, ever fond of a jest — You and I have long been friends — Don't draw back! Pour us another and be quick about it!

FLOOZIE 1 And the devil's to pay!

FIGURES Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

EDWARD But it is I, Edward Kilcullen, a respected worthy!

LOAVER 1 You were that once, Teddy!

FLOOZIE 1 And so was Lucifer!

FIGURES Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

EDWARD Fetch him here! — Tubbs, Tubbs, I am ill, faint, my brain I think's on fire — Give me a drink!

MAN Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!

EDWARD Think how I was when I first entered your shop! Make amends!

FLOOZIE 2 Make amends for what, Lord Teddy Temperance?

EDWARD Prudence! Assist me —

FLOOZIE 1 You had your senses —

FLOOZIE 2 Did he invite you in? —

LOAVER 1 You walked in the man's door —

MAN Did I invite you in? —

FIGURES Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...!

play excerpt

EDWARD (*Angrily, bitterly; overlapping them*) HA, HA, HA, HA! Does hell send cards of invitation forth to its fires of torment? Curse you, Tubbs — Curse you all! If it had not been for you and your infernal shops I had been still a man! (*He lies back, whimpering. Lights up on RENCELAW.*)

RENCELAW The foul shops — Dens! — where pockets are plundered, where death and disease is dealt in tumblers — with little thought from the noxious purveyors than to count the profits of the till — from whence goes forth the blast of ruin on our land, stealing and withering the beauty and intelligence of our youth — Youth! Our promise, pride, joy, our hope, turned into a generation of animals! — the waves of that direful sickness extending, leaving none unaffected, wounding to futility the loving relatives, filling the mothers', sisters', brothers' hearts with anguish, the widows' with grief, orphans cursed, blighting ambition and all that is glorious in man and casting him from his high estate. (*Fade on RENCELAW.*)

EDWARD And making of him such as I? (*He chuckles, bitterly?* MAN enters, as before.) MAN Where, in nature, can my horse have gone?

EDWARD (*Quietly*) Here is your horse. MAN Who's there? ... Who's there, I say! EDWARD You common poisoner! It is I, Young Edward Kilcullen. (*He springs on MAN and takes him by the throat.*)

MAN Murder! Murder!

EDWARD I have a claim on you now, a deadly claim —

MAN Release — release me —

EDWARD So, a drink, one drink, a single glass —

MAN Let go your hold —

EDWARD Or I shall have your last breath!

MAN Help! I am choking! Police! Arrrrrgh!

WILLIAM (*Without*) Holloo! Holloo! (*Rushing in:*) What goes here?

(*He pulls EDWARD off MAN. EDWARD falls back exhausted. MAN rushes off, calling:*) MAN Police! Police!...

WILLIAM (*Shocked*) Edward? Mary and Joseph, young master, friend, can this be you?

EDWARD Shhhh! Hush, she sleeps.

WILLIAM Edward, don't you know who I am?

EDWARD Shhh! Do not disturb her sweet slumber.

WILLIAM (*Frightened*) Ned, dear soul, come to your senses. Get you up off the floor: That's all you have to do.

EDWARD Angels guard thee. And you, my darling child.

WILLIAM He's near gone from us. I must venture for assistance. (*He hurries out.*)

EDWARD (*Looks about*) All is quiet? (*A FIGURE darts in and out of the shadows, ratlike: MCCINTY. He clutches the deeds to the cottage, gloatingly, and he is gone.*)

He has thought all along to outwit me. That I should leave you homeless, my beloved! I kiss these hands that were once mine. And yours, my child. Heaven bless you. And one last time let me kiss her lips while she sleeps, for awake she would spurn me did she know it ... Yes, all's quiet now. (*He produces a phial.*) It's a sin to steal — liquor. Is't a sin to purloin lasting sleep with the universal antidote that — quenches — earthly cares? (*He is about to drink the poison...*)

...The play continues.



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entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes coming and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre



DEBORAH AYDON



JENNY TRAYNOR



DONAL SHIELS

In August, **DEBORAH AYDON** will depart after four years as executive producer of Rough Magic Theatre Company to become executive director of the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse. Her position at Rough Magic has been advertised... **BEA KELLEHER** has been named the new executive producer of the Dublin Fringe Festival. Previously line producer of the Gaiety pantomime *Sleeping Beauty* and festival manager of the Anna Livia Opera Festival, she replaces **SCOTT WATSON**... **JENNY TRAYNOR** has departed Project to become general manager of CoisCéim Dance Theatre. She has been replaced by **NIAMH O'DONNELL**, who moves within Project from her position as artistic programme coordinator, which she has held since 2000.

TRAYNOR: ROS KAVANAGH

JOHN O'KANE, previously chief executive of Music Network, is the new Arts Programme director for the Arts Council. **LIZ CULLOTY**, previously director of the Belltable Arts Centre, has been appointed as programme manager for arts venues with the Arts Council. Her position at Belltable will be advertised (see news story, page 4). **CLAIRE DOYLE** has been appointed the Arts Council's programme manager for resource and service companies. Previously, she worked at Poetry Ireland and at the Ark. **FINOLA CRONIN** has been appointed to the new position of dance specialist with the Arts Council. A choreographer and dancer, she has worked with Pina Bausch, is resident choreographer at the UCD Drama Studies Centre, and until recently was chairperson of APDI.

entrances & exits

The role of arts programme manager for production companies at the Arts Council will be readvertised shortly.

DONAL SHIELS, general manager of Second Age Theatre Company, has been appointed festival manager of the forthcoming festival of Chinese culture in Ireland. **KATE BOWE PR** will be handling publicity for the Festival...

EILEEN SHERIDAN is the new administrator of Tall Tales Theatre Company, filling the role vacated by **RITA GRAY**... **EILIS MULLAN** has retired as national director of the National Association for Youth Drama. **ANNA GALLIGAN** will

act as the organisation's director while a new appointment is pending.

Theatre Forum has advertised for a chief executive, in the meantime appointing **AILEEN CONNOR** as temporary general manager and **MARIA FLEMING** as temporary administrator. Connor has previously worked as general manager at the Gaiety Theatre, and Fleming was formerly administrator with Calypso.

SITUATIONS VACANT: The Triskel Arts Centre has advertised for a new general manager and technical officer. These are both new positions.



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book reviews

SPIKED! CHURCH-STATE INTRIGUE AND THE ROSE TATTOO

by Gerard Whelan, with Carolyn Swift
New Island, Dublin: 2002

REVIEWED BY BRIAN FALLON

AFTER A LAPSE OF NEARLY HALF A century, this controversy of a past era has come back strongly into public notice, with numerous newspaper articles, a TV programme, and general media highlighting. I am old enough to remember it quite well — I was then a cub journalist with *The Irish Times*, and I happened to live within a few hundred yards of the diminutive Pike Theatre in Herbert Lane, the epicentre of it all. I also knew many or most of the personalities involved, though none of them closely. In some ways, the entire incident was a storm in a coffee-cup, but its rather tame, anti-climactic ending left various loose ends and unanswered questions, which this book attempts to resolve. Essentially, it seems to have been a case of the small Pike versus some very Big Fish.

Tennessee Williams' play *The Rose Tattoo* was running at the theatre in May 1957, when a policeman attended it in plain clothes — apparently acting on official orders — and decided on his own authority that it was obscene. The passage he particularly objected to was one in which a contraceptive is dropped on the stage — though none actually was in this case, since the action was merely mimed or suggested. Largely as the result of a report he wrote, a uniformed inspector arrived a few days later and warned Alan Simpson, who ran the Pike along with his wife Carolyn Swift, that if certain passages were not removed from the performance, both of them faced

prosecution. And, in fact Simpson did eventually appear in court, because *The Rose Tattoo* was neither dropped nor altered. He had to spend a night in the Bridewell before that: and since by profession he was an officer in the Irish Army, he risked disgrace and dismissal.

There were certain oddities about the whole affair. In the first place, the play was available in book form, while Irish stage censorship could be surprisingly lenient at times. Secondly, it was widely believed that the prime mover was that unassailable *éminence grise* Dr. Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin, but this book shows fairly conclusively that it was not. And thirdly, the affair occurred at a time when successive governments, obviously embarrassed by the bad smell which Irish censorship was creating abroad, were already trying rather stealthily to draw its sting. Why, then, this reactionary lapse into the past?

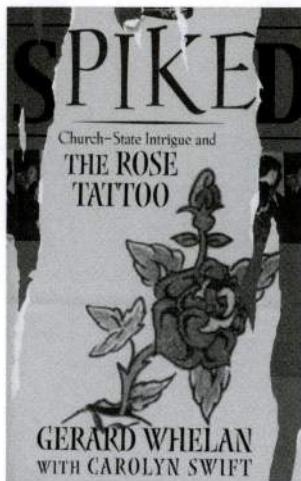
The later '50s were rather a strange interlude in Irish history, a period of transition and subterranean change. The Old Guard, both in politics and the Church, was ageing and beginning to fade, while on the other side, leftist politics and sexual permissiveness gathered little impetus until well into the Sixties. The result was an odd vacuum in which various power and pressure groups contended on various levels, both above and below board. And in this case, the main contestants appear to have been the Church and the Civil Service, two entrenched institutions attempting to outsmart one another. Another big player was that odd (and generally philistine) institution, the Knights of Columbanus, a right-wing body sometimes seen as an ultra-Catholic counter to the Freemasons.

book reviews

The dust was stirred up initially by an egregious ass named Joseph J. Cooney, one of those lay censors who periodically have been the scourge of Irish culture. Convinced that "immoral" plays were infiltrating the Dublin stage, he wrote to those in power and the matter gradually snowballed until it became a *cause célèbre*, widely covered in the foreign press as well as in the national papers. The vocal liberals made the most of it, predictably, while the malodorous zealots of censorship once again saw victory within their reach. And abroad, it was widely regarded as yet another example of ingrained Irish bigotry and philistinism.

In the end, of course, Simpson got off; the case against him quite plainly had no real substance and was dismissed without him even going for trial. As a result, both the amateur and official censors were dealt a salutary blow, the Gardai had egg all over their uniforms, the Department of Justice (under Oscar Traynor) suffered some loss of face, and the Government lost no time in burying the whole affair insofar as it could decently do so. In any case, the IRA Border raids and other contemporary happenings were of far greater importance, in its eyes, than the alleged immorality of a play in some fringe Dublin theatre.

Gerard Whelan's research has obvi-



ously been intensive, and it has led him to the thesis — not fully proven, however — that the State was afraid McQuaid was about to move against *The Rose Tattoo* and for reasons of its own decided to pre-empt him. This is, of course, a much-simplified version of his argument, since the whole affair was as rife with intrigue and oddities as a Mafia business congress. Personalities of the era take offstage

bows in turn, including Brendan Behan (who was prominent in a small but highly vocal demonstration outside the Pike, when the police faced a potential shower of empty bottles), the shrewd republican solicitor Con Lehane (who comes out of it well), "Christo" Gore-Grimes, the campaigner for civil liberties, and certain senior civil servants who combined power with facelessness. Anna Manahan, who was the lead actress in the Pike production, is now one of the senior and most respected figures of Irish theatre, and Kate Binchy, another member of the cast, has gone through a long and distinguished career with the BBC.

A pity, then, that the book itself is ill-organised and rather amateurishly written, with a wealth of material, much of which is presented in almost undigested form. For instance, the various Civil Service intrigues are documented with a quite exhaustive, and exhausting, amount of detail which ends by obscuring the overall picture rather than clarify-

ing it. The narrative itself often jerks to-and-fro and good, crisp editing is noticeably lacking, with the result that the book is anything from 60 to 80 pages longer than it need have been. And finally, the picture of '50s Ireland has, on occasion, a mingling of intellectual naïveté and uncritical stereotyping. McQuaid himself, for instance, is fashionably demonised into an odd mixture of Torquemada and Machiavelli: he was certainly a zealot, even a bigot in today's terms, but he was a man with a social conscience who was also capable of private acts of charity (it was largely thanks to him that Patrick Kavanagh obtained lecturing work in UCD.) An author-journalist such as Hugh Leonard might have handled this material with the right touch and style — not neglecting, either, the undertones of black farce inseparable from the *Rose Tattoo* affair from start to finish.

To that earnest woman Carolyn Swift, however, it can hardly have seemed a farce. Her husband had been dragged through the mire of bad publicity, they both suffered rebuffs and coldness from people they knew, the tiny Pike (which had given the first performance of Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and brought *Waiting for Godot* to Ireland) was more or less bankrupted by legal and other costs. Even their marriage foundered a few years later and Simpson moved to London, where he married again. For the cynical Dublin wits it was, of course, a field day, as it was for that perennial, unpaid Greek chorus, the letter-writers to *The Irish Times*. But for those in the front line, including the cast which courageously stuck with the play to the end of its scheduled run, it can have been no fun at all. Some of them, it could

almost be said, carried a *Rose Tattoo* on their backs right to the grave.

Brian Fallon is a former literary editor of *The Irish Times* and the author of *An Age of Innocence, a survey of Irish culture during the years 1930-1960*.

THE THEATRE OF FRANK MCGUINNESS:

STAGES OF MUTABILITY,

edited by Helen Lojek

Carysfort Press, Dublin: 2002

REVIEWED BY KENNETH NALLY

All too often, studies of Irish playwrights have been restricted to textual criticism that resists the distinctions between page and stage. The approach of this new collection of essays is therefore to be applauded, for it explores the theatre of Frank McGuinness by interspersing contributions from academics with commentary by theatre professionals. Illustrating the benefit of going beyond literary theory in the analysis and appreciation of theatre, it positions considerations of light, sound and space alongside the usual academic chestnuts, in an accessible series of essays that will interest the general reader and specialist alike.

Editor Helen Lojek has chosen a loosely chronological structure for the book. In the opening essay, Brian Cliff examines McGuinness' exploration of communal definitions in *Borderlands*, a play produced in 1984 in conjunction with theatre-in-education company TEAM. Though this is a welcome contribution on an often-neglected play, readers may wish for elaboration on the essay's interesting consideration of how this play prefigures much of McGuinness' later drama.

book reviews

One delight of this book is the dialogue between contributions. For instance, Kathleen Heininge's look at the possibilities of language in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* intersects with some of director Sarah Pia Anderson's reflections on the rhythm of voices in many McGuinness plays. Anderson's account of her staging of *Carthaginians* at Dublin's Peacock Theatre will interest many, as should director Timothy D. Connor's discussion of the play's production at the University of Michigan. These accounts are complemented by Anne F. Kelly-O'Reilly's reading of the play as a contemporary passion narrative.

In *Innocence*, McGuinness' Caravaggio personifies a tension between creativity and destruction, between innocence and damnation. Eamonn Jordan's essay considers these tensions, exploring the visual and thematic influences on the Gate Theatre's 1986 production of the play. Jordan develops the tensions within the play to provocatively argue for "the depriving" of innocence. Asking if innocence is "the greatest stroke that ideology and religion can pull" he points to corruption within institutions such as the Catholic Church to challenge the idea that innocence and damnation are binary opposites.

A concern with self-dramatisation is also the focus of Joan Fitzpatrick Deane's article, which, like Helen Lojek's piece on



Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, reprints an already available journal article. Among the best work on McGuinness, these articles will be of benefit to the more general readership at which this book aims. While this is also the case with the re-printing of a section on *Baglady* from Margo Gayle Backus' *The Gothic Family Romance*, the reasons behind the

inclusion of Bernice Schrank's work on *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* are less obvious. An abridged version of an article considering treatments of World War I by O'Casey, Shaw, and McGuinness, it suffers from its displacement. The original article drew its strength from the contrasts between these three diverse responses; extracted from such dialogue, Schrank's analysis brings little new to understandings of *Sons of Ulster*.

Stages of Mutability concludes with a treatment of *Mutabilitie*, the importance of which is being belatedly established. Christopher Murray's well-crafted essay is a significant contribution to our understanding of that play, which details how *Mutabilitie* sees "change as positive, sees Irish-English relations as capable of renaissance." Michael Caven of Theatreworks also speaks illuminatingly about directing this play — though one doubts whether even McGuinness would agree with his statement that everyone who left the Samuel Beckett Theatre at his production's interval did so "because the play had such a powerful

impact on them that they had to resist it."

Disappointingly, McGuinness' most recent play *Gates of Gold* features only in the chronology and footnotes. Though this volume "situates itself in the rich domain before conclusion" some assessment would not have been amiss — perhaps as part of an interview with director and serial McGuinness collaborator, Patrick Mason? One laments also the continuing absence of any work on McGuinness' well-regarded adaptations. However, although we may quibble with aspects of the book's analysis and contents, this should not detract from this study, which, priced at little more than the script of a single play, provides some novel and arrest-

ing insights. *Stages of Mutability* claims to present a series of minority reports that juxtapose "discrete voices, different points of view, wide-ranging philosophies and varied methodologies." It does not disappoint, providing these effectively, while also managing to chart the organic development of McGuinness work. Perhaps most refreshingly, in those contributions that deal with specific productions, it also reflects the fact that interpretations of one of Ireland's most theatrical playwrights are conveyed through performances as well as literary criticism. 

Kenneth Nally teaches in the Department of English at NUI Galway, where he is completing a PhD.

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ALL MY SONS by Arthur Miller

The Abbey Theatre

14 Feb—29 Mar 2003; reviewed 15 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF TWO "ringers" brought in from the States, and of Joe Dowling, an Irish director who is currently the artistic director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the National Theatre's production of Arthur Miller's 1947 classic betrayed little knowledge of the people who inhabit the text, much less of the American psyche. While the cast that ran on and off the stage comprised some of Ireland's more accomplished young actors, they appeared utterly lost in a production that was dead at its core.

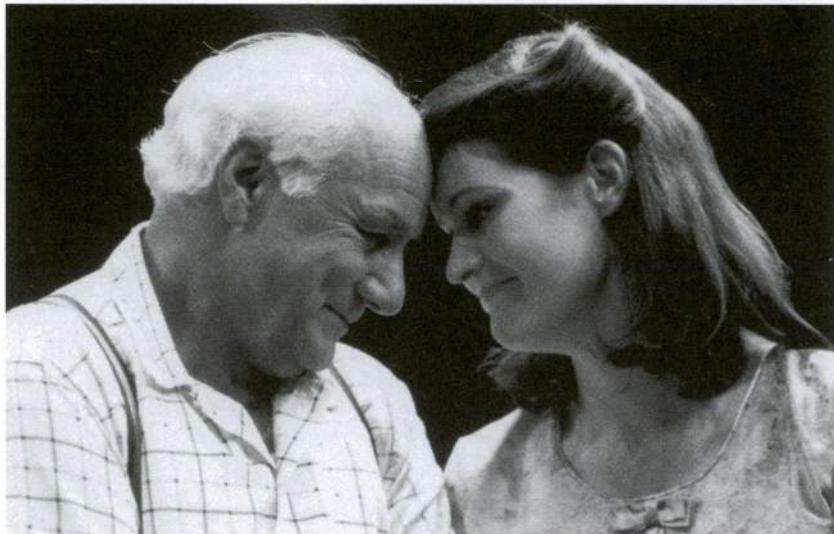
"Inhabit" is the key word here, and even those ringers — Peter Michael Goetz and Helen Carey — varied in their success in embodying Joe and Kate Keller. With *All My Sons*, Miller has written a play in which the personal, moral, and political collide; has crafted a microcosm in which the destruction of one American family stands for the spiritual and psychological ruin of an entire nation; has elegantly and with intense scrutiny created a literal and figurative backyard that is so ordinary, so quotidian that it forces us to imagine beyond the boundaries of his fictional world and ponder similar real-life dramas that unfold in real time, perhaps with less symbolic tragedy, but no less universal pain. Goetz chose to play Joe without a gradual disintegration into fear, an arguable choice; while he came across as believable and accomplished, Goetz seemed to be playing Keller minus the awareness that he was covering up for a huge

crime. There was a lack of, if not actual menace, then the threat of menace — a lack of the germ of misconduct that Keller must surely carry.

In contrast, Carey was perfection in the role of Kate, whose sacrifice is tortuously revealed to us in all its hysteria, anger, pride, misguidedness, and nobility as she effortlessly represented the swirling tornado of Kate's confusion and grief in a truthfully human way.

Both Goetz and Carey put paid to the endless complaints about the Abbey's acoustics; both were in flawless control of their voices in a way that the Irish actors were not. They projected without effort to the back of the room, and in so doing, invested their performances with a reality that the rest of the cast could not even begin to approach. Goetz and Carey dwelt at ease in the play, and by extension, the room — some may put this down to their nationality, but isn't it an actor's job to research his or her character? Isn't it a director's job to clarify and make coherent the world of the play for cast and crew?

If so, then, plain and simple, the Irish members of the cast didn't do their jobs, and neither did the director. Dowling lost more moments than he captured, and pivotal scenes in Act One were quite carelessly thrown away. Chris (an almost inaudible Declan Conlon) and Anne (a bizarrely coltish Justine Mitchell) professed their potentially divisive and explosive love for each other flat on their arses around the picnic table. Chris' gut-wrenching monologue expressing his deep guilt about being alive was played by Conlon in a casual crouch on the Astroturf; the deeply threatening undercurrent that should have pulsed as the play's heart was a flatline.



The politics of the play were entirely absent, a cowardly choice given the times we live in. These politics ask us to look at the motives behind Joe Keller's underhanded, dishonest, and desperate bid to retain, for his last remaining son, some small part of the "American Dream." It asks us to look at the impotence of the "American Male" in the face of moral responsibility to the world at large. That Conlon failed to embody in Chris the returned soldier's open-mindedness and reluctant maturity thoroughly compromised, yet again, the heart of the play.

Miller makes it look easy, but it absolutely is not. Just because the play is set in middle America doesn't make it a superficial cakewalk; just because it's set in the late '40s doesn't make it a nostalgic costume drama. The costumes and makeup gave the show a

AMERICAN DREAM
Goetz and Mitchell
in *All My Sons*

Hollywood aura, as if we were deep in the heart of *Pleasantville* or *L.A. Confidential*. Bright colours and impeccable, scarlet red

lipstick seem to have been asked to carry the load of artifice. John Lee Beatty's massive and complex set was superbly wrought, but it too seemed to be asked to carry far too much of the burden of interpretation. The sweeping back garden, the large, looming house — it's a dull and stereotypical idea of American space and wealth, and by using such signifiers, the production showed its lack of imagination and indeed, its utter lack of inquiry.

All My Sons deserved much, much better, and the real tragedy is that it didn't get the outing that it merited.

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

**ANTIGONE by Sophocles,
in a new version by Conall Morrison**
Storytellers Theatre Company in association
with Cork Opera House
On tour; reviewed on 8 Mar 2003 at Project
Arts Centre, Dublin BY MATTHEW CAUSEY

THE PHILOSOPHER HEGEL WROTE of Sophocles' *Antigone* that "the collision of equally justified powers is a subject valid for every epoch." The struggle of two legitimate but opposing positions is part of what makes *Antigone* a tragedy, for no matter what choice is made, someone and something vital will be lost. Storytellers Theatre Company's recent touring production of the play, adapted and directed by Conall Morrison, challenges that understanding of the original work, offering a production that stands not as an ethical dilemma of equal rights, but instead as a work of fierce moral outrage. This performance takes sides and offers the story of *Antigone* as an allegory of the current Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

The play, first staged in 441 BC, follows the struggle of Oedipus' daughter, Antigone, who wishes to properly bury her traitorous brother in defiance of her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes. Morrison's adaptation is lean, serviceable, and remains relatively true to the original. The performance is presented in an open environment that suggests a landscape of the ruins of urban warfare. A large screen backs the playing area on which a series of projections is shown: photographs of Israeli incursions into Palestinian areas with a few images of the Shoah and Israeli casualties at the hands of suicide bombers. There is no point in which the audience is not required to look upon the violent results of the trou-

bles on the West Bank, and there is no doubt which side of the conflict Morrison finds worthy of support; the point is repetitively forced with projection after projection. The audience is led, through the visual insistence of the projections, to allegorize Creon as Ariel Sharon and Antigone as something of a suicide bomber. Any production of *Antigone* that takes a blatant moral position for either Antigone or Creon will have depleted the play of its tragic dimensions of the sacrifice necessary when two equally right positions collide.

Morrison's direction complicates the action and allegory further by layering character dialects which can be read as reflective of the troubles in Northern Ireland. Antigone (Pauline Hutton) has a heavy Derry accent and Creon (Robert O'Mahoney) uses an English stage dialect. Creon's militaristic costume suggests yet another allusion of fascism. The production doesn't seem to know where to point its moral outrage, and thus points it in all directions, thereby weakening its power. Further, the record of Holocaust reception and inaction in the Republic is a deeply shameful history, so that the use of Holocaust imagery as an imagistic backdrop on the Irish stage without seriously attending to the metaphorical use of that image seems careless.

What in Sophocles' *Antigone* exists as an impassioned ethical debate between the sustainability of state power at the expense of individual sovereignty is here diffused into a strident morality that identifies right and wrong in black and white terms. What this production seems to be unable to do is to attempt to understand both sides of the problem, which is at the heart of Sophocles' tragedy.



The actors are a gifted ensemble, with many doubling as impressive musicians. The acting style is extreme, which at times works, but is often off-putting. The Chorus (Simon O'Gorman) is distilled in Morrison's adaptation from a community of Thebans to a mad and raving individual who delivers the choral odes while pummeling a burned-out shell of a car with a baseball bat or showering himself and the stage in wine. Thus, the complex debates and metaphysical reflection offered by the choral odes are read as rageful rants against man's inhumanity to man. O'Mahoney as Creon and Hutton as Antigone attack their scenes with a ferocity that eventually distances the audience from emotional involvement or political critique. The music, composed by Conor Linehan, is

FREEDOM FIGHTER?
Pauline Hutton in the title role of Antigone

marvellous. It is the score that perhaps most successfully captures and channels the fury of the direction into performance.

The music sets an appropriate tone of horror and anguish, which is at times deafening in its intensity, causing some in the audience to recoil with ears covered. I happened to find those moments thrilling.

Morrison is a skilled director who has been able to realise his concept with a vengeance. His *Antigone* is a deeply felt, angry work, which flings its passion violently at the audience. But, much of what makes the tragedy consuming is lost along the way. Sophocles' *Antigone* argues that world is not a melodrama, as there are always two sides to every story. Morrison's *Antigone* chooses to turn tragedy into propaganda. Such work serves not to deter the belligerents

or assist the suffering, but acts as a sermon for the converted.

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THE CHAIRS by Eugène Ionesco,

adapted by Owen McCafferty

Northern Bank Building, Belfast

24 Mar–5 Apr 2003; reviewed 4 Apr

BY PAUL DEVLIN

RESISTING THE TEMPTATION TO OVERLOAD Eugene Ionesco's text of *The Chairs* with specifically Northern Irish references, Belfast playwright Owen McCafferty's new version of Ionesco's tragic farce seems to hint at a peculiar applicability of the play's central theme to the Northern Irish "situation," but never overstates the case.

Set in the island-home of an Old Man and Old Woman, *The Chairs* dramatises an evening in this old married couple's eccentric life as they hastily prepare for a lecture during which the Old Man's "message" — the "life system" he has been trying to formulate for years — will be delivered by a professional orator to an assembly of honoured guests. Ionesco's drama is a powerful theatrical expression of the difficulty of communication, the terrifying banality of language, and a lament for the victory of humankind's intellect over our deeper and more primal emotional responses. In McCafferty's version of *The Chairs* this metaphysical anguish remains, but his characters speak a recognisably Northern Irish dialect and they talk about the Titanic and Belfast — a "city of lights" that "fell into ruins" and is now only remembered in the song "My Lagan Love."

It's difficult to know for sure what

McCafferty intends here, but this may well be the point. His analogy seems tangential rather than direct. His local allusions do open up a space for comparison: the North's exacting attempts to formulate a language that can move beyond semantics and historical cliché, for example. But McCafferty's version of *The Chairs* succeeds so well precisely because it doesn't insist on the analogy. It's a bigger play than that. And a better play. McCafferty's drama, like Ionesco's, drives beyond the demonstrative and the intellectual to a more experiential form. It makes you *feel* the difficulty of communication rather than *think* it: it's a kind of empirical theatre.

Mixing naturalism with slapstick, mime with music hall, tragedy with farce, and more, Jimmy Fay's direction of Carol Scanlon and Sean Kearns manages to juxtapose a seemingly infinite number of acting styles in a fluid and energetic way. Fay paces the arc of McCafferty's script perfectly. An almost completely static opening, punctuated with moments of odd physicality (such as the Old Man sitting on the Old Woman's lap like a big baby), quietly establishes the comically tragic nature of this odd couple's existence but also denies the perception of what is presented as straight-forward realism. This calculated inertia gives way to an ever-increasing physical momentum, as the old couple greet guest after invisible guest, building to the play's brilliantly realised, frenzied climax.

Scanlon and Kearns are equally superb. Kearns' lumbering armadillo of an Old Man neatly contrasts with Scanlon's impish portrayal of the Old Woman. Scanlon plays more to the audience than Kearns, who often operates in a more naturalistic mode than



Scanlon. The effect of this introverted/extroverted opposition is both entertaining and, through Scanlon's performance, somehow manages to implicate the audience in a drama that can often feel deliberately impenetrable. Both actors confidently negotiate the linguistic gymnastics that McCafferty's script demands and their strength of commitment in the latter half of the play, when their characters interact with an growing number of invisible guests, paradoxically makes the absence of any other physical character on stage all the more pronounced. As each chair is deliberately arranged, the absurdly

MONKEY BUSINESS
Scanlon and Kearns in
(and on) *The Chairs*

tragic realisation begins to loom that when the Old Man's message finally comes — if it comes — it will literally be delivered to a room full of nobodies.

With a strikingly clean-lined, almost architectural, set design from Stewart Marshall and a beautifully subtle lighting design by James McFetridge, it's slick, challenging, and entertaining work like this that continues to make Tinderbox the North's most interesting theatre company.

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

CRABBED YOUTH AND AGE

by Lennox Robinson

Bewley's Cafe Theatre

13 Mar–19 Apr 2003; reviewed 14 Mar

BY LOUIS LENTIN

"WON'T YOU BUY MY PRETTY flowers?"... No, Mrs Swan, not a hope! Your three marriageable daughters each possess most of the graces required of young ladies in the 1920s and they and their gathered suitors can sing this apt Edwardian ballad to their hearts' content without realising the satire — but don't you see that the girls must be left to stand on their own two feet? Enough of your interfering charm and beguiling manner: let them take care of themselves and stop hogging the limelight! I know you don't realise (or do you?), it's you the young men really are attracted to; your wit, your charm, your conversation that make them look forward to Sunday evenings at the Swans, but really, Mrs Swan, do take a back seat and give your cygnets a chance to get a word in if you really wish them to develop and flee the nest!

Lennox Robinson's plays are beautifully constructed: witty, always observant, and often satirical. *Crabbed Youth and Age* is no exception, and well worth reviving. Here, Robinson resists the temptation to satirise his group of innocents — he presents them in a very human situation. It's the manners of the society and time that provide the satire.

The play has a simple plot that, handled well, provides opportunities for observation, wit, and laughter. And Michael James Ford handles it more than well. His direction of this production for Bewley's Cafe Theatre is finely in tune with the play. He moves it along, varying



SWANNING AROUND

*The company of
Crabbed Youth and Age*

pace and humour with some beautifully observant touches.

His neat, unobtrusive direction and sense of style coupled with the playing of a fine cast keeps the whole piece bubbling along. Gene Rooney takes every advantage as Minnie. It is she who has the guts to rally her two sisters to face up to Mama and make her realise that matters can't proceed like this. The young men are supposed to be visiting to pay suit to them and not to her and with Susie Lamb and Katharine Fulham as her sisters, Eileen and Dolly, you couldn't want for a more pleasant trio of young ladies. Their sweetly correct playing suggests that whilst Minnie may have her flowering moment, Eileen and Dolly seem doomed to remain wilting violets — such a pity! Mama gets the message, announces she has a headache and will retire for the night.

That will never do! The young men can't possibly do without her. The inevitable Medical Student rushes off for the infallible pill. Mama takes her medicine and is easily persuaded to forsake her bed for the more convenient sofa. But not for long, a few minutes later up

KELLY CAMPBELL

she jumps as good as new and matters resume as before. I guess you can't keep a good woman down!

The three young suitors, Frank Bourke, Dermot Magennis, and Richie Hayes, each give individually finely varied and stylish performances that could have easily — but didn't — go beyond the bounds of expected behaviour. Emilia Simcox's set for the difficult stage was of the manor born as were Catriona Ní Murchú's costumes.

As for Geraldine Plunkett's inimitable Mrs. Swan: while not wishing to detract from the attractions of a charming and flowing performance, I wondered what Mrs. Swan might be like if we perceived that just from time to time in her heart of hearts she really knew what she was doing, yet just couldn't resist it. After all, she's only human. Robinson may be satirising the situation, but surely she must bear some of the barbs.

In *Crabbed Youth and Age* Robinson presents a small taste of a post-independent Irish bourgeois society that, in adopting English manners so easily, had become as English as the English themselves. On the surface the plot is simple and obvious. But in a play where manner is all, the more you recognize, the greater the enjoyment. Whilst it was good to have a full house, a bowl of soup, a Bewley's bun, and Lennox Robinson, the largely tourist audience missed most of the nuances and thereby the laughs, making it tough on the cast. I, for one, enjoyed every minute. Let's have more revivals of plays of this quality. Bewley's is just the place.

Louis Lenten is a former theatre director and currently a television producer-director.

THE DAY I SWAPPED MY DAD

FOR 2 GOLDFISH,

adapted by Jocelyn Clarke

from the book written by Neil Gaiman

and illustrated by Dave McKean

The Ark

15 Mar–17 Apr 2003; Reviewed 22 Mar

BY PETER CRAWLEY

WHAT IS A FATHER WORTH THESE DAYS? The question winds through *The Day I Swapped My Dad for 2 Goldfish* like a thematic curlicue. Once upon a time my dad could beat up your dad. Now, though, we can negotiate his value through straight-up barter. He wasn't very exciting, carps Simon Jewell's first swapper Nathan, already having dispensed with the tiresome thing. He just read his paper. "But he's our Dad," insists Matthew Dunphy's bright-eyed protagonist. "That's what he does!"

Jocelyn Clarke's adaptation of both Neil Gaiman's quirky tale and illustrator Dave McKean's distinctive aesthetic strikes a tone somewhere between *Alice in Wonderland*, Warner Bros., Animaniacs, and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. Eric Fraad's direction combines them all in a whirling, multi-role-playing, multimedia-flooded production that communicates fluently to a young audience while speaking volumes about contemporary childhood. Once the wheezy chatter on an antique wireless subsides, tucking news fragments of "bilateral relationships" and "the threat of war" safely away from childhood concerns, Matthew Dunphy explains his thought processes to the audience. Which of his possessions could he possibly swap for his friend Nathan's two goldfish? If the play's title tips the early surprise, there's still



enough energy and intelligence in its design and performance to make this one of the most entertaining (and occasionally provocative) productions on the stage for any age group.

Dutifully commanded by Mom (Niamh Linehan) to recover Dad, Dunphy's frenetic first-person Me and Orla Fitzgerald's petulant My Little Sister engage in sibling spats that even spill outside the narrative ("I'm telling the story," struggles Dunphy). But retrieving Steve Blount's unflappable Dad is no easy task. Nose deep in his starched *International Herald Tribune*, Dad scuttles obliviously down a tunnel of transactions, changing hands more frequently than a scuffed Euro coin. The picaresque journey makes of the children commercial archaeologists, hacking through a history of exchanges: an

HALF THE BARGAIN

*Matthew Dunphy in
The Day I Swapped...*

electric guitar, a gorilla mask, a real-live bunny rabbit. Obviously Dad's worth has fluctuated wildly during the day's trading.

Intriguingly, the social status of the swappers and the role of their parents rise and fall like the peaks and dips of a line graph. Emma Moohan, as Nathan's (apparently single) Mother, sports hair curlers, a dressing gown and faltering etiquette. Further down the line, the conspicuously moneyed Blinky (Jewell again) seems to be protected only by a surrogate butler (Blount again); and the trail ends in the lap of aristocracy — even monarchy — as a patrician family entertain the Queen of Melanesia (Linehan again). Curiouser and curioser, you might think, particularly as the refined and madcap antics that fill Bruno Schwengel's sloping spaces directly recall *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland, just as Liz Roche's fluid choreography recalls Clarke's own *Alice* adaptations for Blue Raincoat.

Mischiefous and secure in its delightfully skewed world, this is a great children's story. So is *Animal Farm*, or *Alice* for that matter. The vibrancy of the action is endlessly appealing, but beneath it there is a whole level of significance as meticulous as it is submerged. Between the distractions of twirling goldfish and wrinkle-nosed bunny wabbits, it's unlikely the five-to-10-year-olds have much time to consider the sober theories of Marx and Engels. But the logic behind the play's surreal exchanges surely has a cunning impact: this interchange of people and things distills commodity fetishism into one neat comic premise, while Fraad's manic postmodern aesthetic provides a buzzing assimilation of multimedia and playful globalisation.

The narrative flits from the stage to the screen and bounces between live breakdancing, projected facades and recorded performances. Wannabe popstar Vashti (Ailish Symons) dresses and struts like Avril Lavigne, but her music video portrays her as a manufactured Pop Idol, while her song, "Gorilla Face," has frivulous electronicist Max Tundra recycling a recent single. Later, a video projection follows the children out of the theatre, through Temple Bar and past Big Ben, round the leaning tower of Pisa, and back by the pyramids of Giza, as another screen traces their journey, Indiana Jones style, via a tangle of dotted lines on a non-descript map. It's a wonderfully dislocated fable without ever becoming disorienting. Muddled accents and props suggest we are in America, but reappear-

ing as a rural Garda, the ever-fabulous Blount still seems well within his jurisdiction. For the actors and the audience there is never time to rest. Cartoonishly wired, engagingly weird, and reassuringly arch (gloriously, for all the heart-crossing motifs, no lessons are learned by the play's end) this is theatre taking on every other children's entertainment form — and winning.

Peter Crawley writes on theatre and music for publications including *The Irish Times* and is news editor of this magazine.

THE DESERT OF LOVE by François Mauriac, adapted by Sam Young

Tangent Theatre Company

THEatre Space at Henry Place

19 Feb-8 Mar 2003; reviewed 19 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

THE INFLUENCES OF CINEMA ON THE theatre are pervasive and largely unwelcome. Episodic scenes that require excessive movement of furniture and difficult changes for the actors are a bane of the existence of live storytelling. The fluidity of theatrical expression is desperately compromised when stage pictures are fragmented, when the natural rhythm of theatre — slower than film or TV — is disrupted, when endless shifting of bits and pieces interferes with the flow of dialogue, action and reaction.

Or, put simply, when most of the action is taking place in the dark, you know you're in trouble.

You knew you were in trouble with Tangent Theatre Company's adaptation of François Mauriac's 1925 novel *The Desert of Love* fairly early on. The programme note reveals that Mauriac was heavily influenced by the cinema,



structuring his novel to move between past and present; Sam Young's adaptation remained faithful to the needs of this construct and thus the wide but shallow playing area of THEatre Space was divided into four areas, three of them running cheek by jowl on the same visual plane. Two short bars were set on the extreme left and right of the upstage (representing one café), and flanked a long dining room table. This left the downstage area empty, perplexing until even more furniture was carted in to comprise the drawing room of Madame Maria Morland (Una Kavanagh). Perhaps the most astonishing set change occurred when a large yellow fabric dropped from the ceiling: with square holes cut out of it, it "became" a tram, used only once in the run of the show, which required the actors to

PUCKER UP
*Heap and
Kavanagh in The
Desert of Love*

rather awkwardly climb up onto the dining room table in order to "ride" in it.

This awkwardness was to colour the rest of the telling of Mauriac's tale of a father and son locked in passive combat over the affections of the young and depressed Madame Maria. Husbandless and sonless, this lovely young woman quickly becomes the focus of gossip in a small town in Normandy, living as she is under the roof of local scion Victor Larouselle (Mal Whyte and an impressive hairpiece). Doctor Paul Montegáni (an excellent David Heap) pines for her with dignity and struggles with his conscience; son Raymond — in his young incarnation played by Duncan Keegan and in his older form by Jason Nelson — struggles to keep his "pipe" in his trousers. His aspirations are far from lofty, and he wants only to physically

dominate Maria. Young's unwieldy translation cut between the laborious "courtship" on the part of both young Montegáni and elder Montegáni, set in 1910, and the present (set in 1925), in which an aged Maria, unhappily married to Larouselle, ends up once more in the company of *père et fils* Montegáni. The utter contrivance of it all strained credulity to the breaking point, and frankly, there was no good will to extend to the father and son reunion and reconciliation that was ostensibly the entire point of the show.

The actions throughout the production stank of casual misogyny. In the play's opening set piece, Raymond approaches several women, and, after querying them as to their identity and their desire for sex, throws each to the ground. Lovely. And it only got worse. A mimed rape scene was the apex of the display of hatred towards women; and Kavanagh was required, not once, but twice, to strip down to her knickers onstage. It's bad enough having to sit through dismissive and damaging representations of women in modern texts; to be subjected to archaic representations of such is almost beyond bearing. One must wonder what Young's point was in resurrecting such a chestnut — the allusions to the influences of the cinema could be read to mean that this thoroughly modern medium might invest the work with some contemporary relevance. Young may also have been attracted to the timeless theme of the difficulties inherent in the father/son relationship; unfortunately, this relationship, as set down by Mauriac, is creakily embedded in the subjugation and mistreatment of a woman.

Righteous indignation aside, it was

difficult to stump up any real interest in the goings-on of this bourgeois family in their bourgeois town. The play's themes were standard, its sentiments uninspiring, its execution clumsy. Stylistic impulses warred with one another, as conventional *mise-en-scène* did battle with more experimental forms of movement and dance. Poorly recorded voiceovers were broadcast almost inaudibly, and the lighting erred on the side of "atmospheric."

On an upbeat note, the entire cast — all 14 of them — deserve kudos for hanging in there, with several of the company achieving committed and natural performances: Heap, Whyte, and Kavanagh somehow managed to hold on to their integrity throughout, with Keegan handing in a fine performance as the tortured teen, as did Carol Brophy as a stroppy maidservant.

THE ECCENTRICITIES OF A NIGHTINGALE by Tennessee Williams

Gate Theatre, Dublin
20 Mar-10 May 2003; reviewed 25 Mar
BY BELINDA MCKEON

WHEN, IN 1940, HIS PLAY *THE Battle of Angels* met with such a hostile reception that the producers sent notes of apology to patrons, Tennessee Williams was dejected. In a newspaper article, he quoted a poem of his own to make clear how deeply he believed in the play, rooted as it was in his struggle to show that passion and purity were "things that differ but in name." This struggle drove many subsequent works; and nowhere is it more evident than in the transformation of his 1945 play *Summer and Smoke* into its 1951 version, *The Eccentricities of a*

Nightingale, which did not receive a production until almost 15 years later.

Now the Gate has resurrected this little-known piece by Williams, and for this it is to be commended; the canonical works aside, there is still so much to discover about this complicated, contradictory playwright. And under Dominic Cooke's direction, the Gate production does much to express the complexity and maturity with which Williams strove to infuse the basic plot of *Summer and Smoke*. Retained were the setting — a town in Mississippi called Glorious Hill — and the central characters: Alma Winemiller, the daughter of a church minister and his increasingly insane wife, and John Buchanan, a young doctor and the lifelong neighbour with whom Alma was infatuated. But banished, Williams hoped, was the crude binary opposition of body and soul, of John's decadence and Alma's piety, which had structured the earlier play. Commenting on the process of change, Williams wrote that he had aimed at a purification of the play to its essentials of "humour, poetry, and passion."

Cooke's *Eccentricities* deftly manages this distillation, granting to the central characters the fullness and complexity which had been denied them in the earlier play. In its language and its atmos-



SONGBIRD Lia Williams in The Eccentricities of a Nightingale

phere, the production mingles the dream-like and the definite, the uncertain and the inevitable, the possible and the mundane, extracting, from the tedium of Glorious Hill, that intensity, that lyricism, so fundamental to Williams' voice. Here, too, with refreshing effect, is the humour which the playwright valued so highly throughout his career; the opening night audience seemed surprised at the frequency and warmth of its own laughter.

But most crucial to the success of this production is the charming, intelligent, and utterly engaging performance of Lia

TOM LAWLER

Williams. That Alma's name, in *Summer and Smoke*, was "Spanish for soul" only added to the heavy-handed moralism of the earlier play, but this actor has soul — sharp, gutsy, full-bodied soul — and she breathes it into her character with unforgettable results. Williams intuits the depths of Alma — the longing beneath her hysterical symptoms, the artistic impulse behind her eccentricity, the troubling layers of guilt and love which comprise her relationship with her parents, and the pragmatism and honesty which guide her need for John.

The other performers cannot but remain, to some extent, in Williams' shadow. Risteárd Cooper is a suitably wry and wary John, yet as an actor, he seems as hesitant and unsure of his role as his character is intended to be. Cooke certainly took a risk in making the adoration of Mrs. Buchanan for her boy so cringe-inducingly Oedipal, but, in fact, restraint would here have been an unnecessarily cautious option, and the play is the better for Barbara Brennan's sultry, smothering mother-vision, complete with back-rubs, beddy-byes, and baying appeals for John to take care of all those duties which his father can no longer perform. Meanwhile, it is in the scenes of marital struggle and shame behind the closed doors of the rectory that Susan Fitzgerald, as Alma's demented mother, and John Kavanagh, who otherwise seems oddly subdued in the role of Reverend Winemiller, are at their best.

Christopher Oram's design is an insightful corrective to the dully symmetrical structure of *Summer and Smoke*. Locating the action between permutations of portable screens, which always retain the potential to realise other rooms, other corners of the imagination, and yet

which are moved between scenes by other actors, pointing to the ways in which figures in the background do much to construct, and to complicate, individuals' situations, he gives shape to that conflict between choice and control which is at the core of the play. This is a conflict brought movingly, and unnervingly, to life in the final scene, where a chattering, shabby, uninhibited Alma propositions a travelling salesman and goes with him to a rented hotel room for casual sex. Tragedy or triumph, fallen woman or free spirit? No binary code survives to clarify the situation, as the gap between passion and purity closes over. Ultimately, it is to one Williams as much as the other that the credit for this complex, unpredictable play must go.

Belinda McKeon writes for publications including The Irish Times.

THE FIELD by John B. Keane

The Machine/Liam Relis Arts

On tour; reviewed at the Concert Hall,
University of Limerick, on 24 Mar

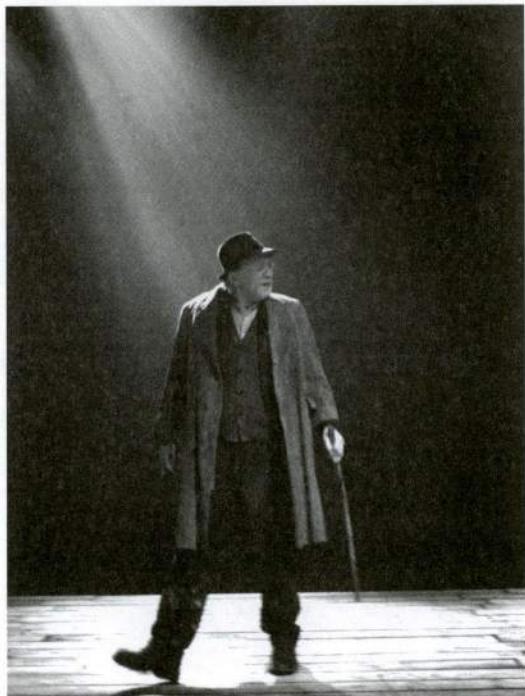
2003 BY MARY COLL

IRISH AUDIENCES ARE MORE THAN A little familiar with *The Field*, John B. Keane's searing attack on greed, violence, and corruption in a small rural Irish town in the early 1960s. Set in Keane's native Kerry, it tells the story of a local farmer, Bull McCabe, who has rented a field for years from a local widow, Mrs. Butler, and who then considers himself entitled to purchase it from her at a price he regards as fair when she eventually decides to sell it on the open market. What results is a remarkable insight into the mind of rural Ireland, its savagery and its brutality, and the values by which

it operates both inside the family unit and outside, in society itself.

For decades *The Field* was one of the most performed plays on the amateur drama circuit, and in 1991 was made into a high-profile film starring Richard Harris and John Hurt. One of the best-known plays in the country, it has even become one of the Leaving Certificate English curriculum texts. It is against this background and in this context that the Machine, in association with Liam Rellis Arts, has staged this current production, with a 22-venue tour over a staggering nine-month period with a cast led by former *Glenroe* stars Mick Lally and Mary McEvoy and a supporting video clearly, if somewhat cynically, targeting the schools market.

Director Michael Scott's reading of the text, however, is literal and conventional, not lifting it beyond any previous production we may have seen, nor attempting to find a context for understanding its continuing relevance for a 21st-century Irish audience. The dull and pedantic production excessively relies on clips, projected onto a kind of gauze screen that drapes in front of the set at the start of each scene. These consist of segments of archival film material from rural Ireland in the 1960s — farmers on their way to the market and religious processions — followed by similarly project-



THE BULL Mick Lally in Michael Scott's production of *The Field*

ed date and time lines to set almost all the scenes, as if context needs to be continually hammered home to the audience without a shred of subtlety. This also anchors the play far too firmly in the past, distancing the audience from the events taking place and preventing the work from flowing freely outside the constraints of time as a drama whose relevance remains strong and speaks true to a contemporary audience. While the production is not exclusively aimed at schools and teachers, it is clear that the demands of the curriculum have taken precedence over others on this occasion and not in a manner that best serves any

audience, schools or otherwise, or indeed Keane's extraordinary work itself.

Lally's Bull McCabe is full of anger and bluster, but lacks the believable rage and menace necessary to create the aura of fear central to an understanding of the play. Much of the time he uses gesture to convey a range of emotions, while many of his accompanying lines are barely audible. The opposite can be said of McEvoy, whose initial shrill delivery was quite difficult to endure, but who gradually settled into the role of Mamie Flanagan, the bitter and oppressed wife of the local publican and auctioneer. In fairness to both actors, they have succeeded in leaving behind the guise of their former television incarnations as rural husband and wife, but their presences are far from this production's most noteworthy aspect. Scenes are regularly stolen by Brendan Conroy, offering a finely wrought and assured performance as Bird O'Donnell, the local informant and sidekick to the Bull. Michael Patric also offers a wonderfully understated performance as William Dee, the returned emigrant who tries to buy the infamous field over the head of the Bull, and ends up losing his life in the process.

In the year immediately after Keane's death, we are more aware than ever of his legacy to Irish theatre. This legacy must be brought to new audiences in exciting ways while still remaining true to the core messages of the writing. It is not enough to merely produce a John B. Keane play by taking the script from A to Z and attempting to physically take the audience to every destination in between through the unimaginative and poorly executed use of non-theatrical media. More is required both in terms of imagination, creativity, and insight, and when

these are absent, no amount of special effects or other distractions can hide the vacuum left behind.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based poet, critic, and broadcaster.

THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

by Federico García Lorca.

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

14 Apr-17 May 2003; reviewed 14 Apr

BY HELEN MEANY

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET, WATCHING *The House of Bernarda Alba*, that this was the poet and playwright's last work, written in the months before his arrest and murder in 1936, in the early weeks of the Spanish Civil War. The finality of that act tempts us to read the play as a culmination, whereas in many ways it was a new departure for Lorca. In his depiction of the household of the newly widowed matriarch, Bernarda Alba, and her five unmarried daughters, the austerity of the style and the swift starkness of the tragic action distinguish it from its immediate forerunners *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. The folkloric and symbolic motifs of the earlier plays are banished, along with any egregiously poetic elements. The Abbey's commission of a new translation by Sebastian Barry was therefore an intriguing choice: how would this most lyrical of Irish playwrights filter the bare simplicity of Lorca's diction?

From the opening scene in which two browbeaten servants let off steam about Bernarda, Barry's script is infused with vivid saltiness and an easy Irish colloquialism that stops well short of Synge-song. A sense of domestic naturalism is created, which Martin Drury's direction and Francis O'Connor's elegant, white-

washed interior emphasise. When Bernarda and her daughters process onto the stage in a sombre black phalanx and a flutter of fans, the first exchanges have more than a hint of farce. The outburst from Bernarda's crazy old mother (Joan O'Hara) — "I want a man" — seems a comic summary of the entire play.

The casting of Rosaleen Linehan as the monstrous Bernarda creates a further cross-current. A brutally authoritarian figure who will break her daughters' spirits rather than allow them to marry beneath their status or taste any of life's joys, Bernarda is a creation of almost unrelieved malevolence, on whom Linehan's marvellous comic gifts and vital responsiveness might well have been wasted. What becomes clear is that if there is any chink of sympathy in Bernarda's character, Linehan will find it. The effect lulls us into security: it seems impossible to believe that this Bernarda could really be as ruthless as she seems.

The emphasis on comic naturalism is a risky interpretation but one that has considerable psychological validity for what is, on one level, a study of authoritarianism. If her daughters and servants don't yet recognise the absolute nature of Bernarda's will to power, how can the audience? The instinct to find the absurd aspects of tyranny, to mock the self-delusion of dictators is a survival mechanism which is also an indication of hope. It is vividly illustrated by the Maid (Emma



MOMMIE DEAREST

Linehan in The House of Bernarda Alba

Colohan) and Bernarda's old retainer Poncia (Ruth McCabe) in their alternation between obeisance and defiance.

Rather than the conflict between mother and daughters, it is the scenes between Poncia and Bernarda that are at the heart of this production, highlighting intractable class division and interdependence as well as the sexual, social and political sclerosis that form the backdrop to the enclosed world of the household. McCabe and Linehan are engaged in a superbly ambivalent duet, goading, coaxing, baiting each other in a sequence of exchanges that subtly shifts emotional register.

TOM LAWLER

The production's strength is this kind of delicate observation; what it doesn't encompass is the play's tilt towards utter desolation and cruelty in the final act — and this is an enormous loss. As if they had to move from *The Three Sisters* to *Medea*, there seems to be too much decorum and light satire in the sisters' characterisation for them to be able to rise to the passion and desperation of their situation. Isabel Claffey doesn't quite convey the white heat of the youngest sister Adela's sexual passion for Pepe, the fiancée of her eldest sister Angustias (Olwen Fouéré). Only Andrea Irvine captures the heartbreaking frustration of these women, in a stunning performance as the miserable Martirio, wracked with self-loathing and morbid jealousy of Adela's seduction by Pepe.

When, at the end of Act Two, a village woman is hounded to her death in the street outside for giving birth out of wedlock, Bernarda screams her approval, shouting, "Kill her!" as her daughters look on, horrified. What should be a shocking moment and an indication of what's to come has little impact; we can't take it seriously.

At the opening night at the Abbey, the audience laughed.

While the strength of this reading of the play is its identification of Lorca as an undoubted influence on the blackly comic tone of such Irish playwrights as John B. Keane, Marina Carr, and Martin McDonagh, it fails to do justice to the dark violence, the hopelessness and the inevitable tragic momentum of Lorca's vision.

Helen Meany is a freelance journalist and editor. This review originally appeared in the Irish theatre magazine online newsletter.

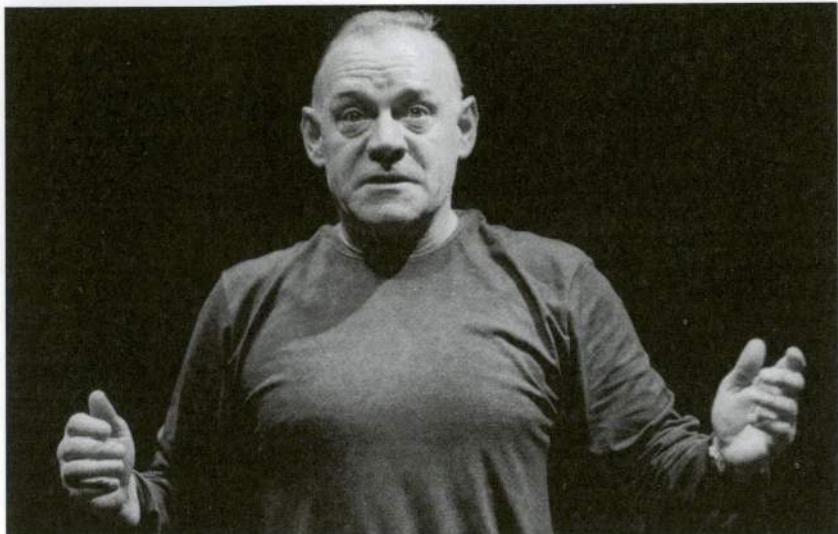
JAMES X by Gerard Mannix Flynn

Far Cry Productions
Project Arts Centre, Dublin
16-29 Mar 2003; reviewed 20 Mar

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

IN THIS PLAY'S FIRST INCARNATION which ran at the Temple Bar Music Centre alongside (but outside) last year's Dublin Fringe Festival, the only programme notes came in the form of a photocopied sheaf of official documents. These papers, from all manner of state agencies and government departments, related to the psychiatric reports and successive convictions and incarcerations of a child known as James X. It made harrowing reading, not so much in respect of what it contained, but in respect of the knowledge that these documents were obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. For what is revealed is a catalogue of a whole generation of assumptions, prejudices, ignorance, twisted morality... and let's face it, state-sanctioned abuse. The child known as James X was Flynn himself, and yet in all media interviews he denied that the play is autobiographical, preferring instead to see it as embracing the abuse meted out to so many other children as well. The result is that Flynn does not seek personal salvation through it but uses it to open up and perhaps heal a wound which has fissured the whole of our society.

This time around, Flynn has made a number of significant changes both to the script and the whole production, hiring a director (Pam Brighton) as well as an unobtrusive design team (lighting by Bernard Griffin and set by Geri Hall). The result is a slicker and more coherently dramatic piece of raw theatre which opens wounds and touches nerves. It



also serves as a damning indictment of a society which could commit atrocities on children based on social and class prejudice, and then throw them into young offenders' centres or industrial schools where, unregulated, boys such as James fell victim to emotional, mental, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.

James X is not a monologue as such, but a monodrama: Flynn embodies a host of characters James meets from birth to the present moment as we meet him first standing in the waiting room of Dublin's High Court, a transitory space of pre-judgment. As a boy, James X waited to be judged. As a man he is awaiting the State to be judged guilty. But before he goes in, he regales us with his story, in at times a poetic flight of fancy, or Joycean stream of consciousness. We follow him through his early years growing up in a large family at

THE X FILES
*Mannix Flynn as
the title character
in James X*

a time when contraception, had it not been banned, might have kept many families out of the poverty trap. We then leap with him to the discovery of his sexuality, something innocently fascinating, before it was disturbed at the hands of his adult abusers. Rhyming couplets drive on his recall. Like all good poetry, this cuts deep.

Flynn's tour de force of both writing and performing focusses on several key moments when the state was directly involved in his abuse. The first chilling moment is at the age of 11 when he is sentenced to Letterfrack Industrial School in Connemara. He moves us there with his own version of the eerie whistling wind of the desolate landscape, harrowing for an inner-city Dublin kid ripped out of his environment. He then brings us back to his placement in a psychiatric hospital, despite having no psychiatric illness.

RIONA MCDONAGLE

This would be torture for us too in the theatre, were it not for Flynn's extraordinary knack of "seeing light," injecting his own Dublin humour into the recall.

The second act brings us more harrowing details, but also some interesting rewrites and insights. The emotional arc of Flynn's journey through James' life is crystal clear. Brighton brings out in Flynn a more controlled pace, steady yet affecting, but still rage and fear spill out from both the muscular text and its performance. It pulls no punches but makes direct hits to the jaw of a once theocratic state: "The Christian Brothers, The Oblate Fathers, The Sisters of Mercy whose loving embrace was a slap in the face, the kiss of a leather strap." But Flynn does not write his character in a state of denial. Sure, James X is no angel, but neither does he deserve a punishment of systematic abuse over years for the theft of a bicycle.

All other media have tackled the subject, through documentaries, films, discussions, and reports, but Irish theatre has tended to shy away from it. Flynn's play manages to touch nerves which other media have failed to detect because he embodies the abuse rather than metes it out. His macho resilience belies a touching fragility underneath. Only the cynical will fail to be moved by Flynn's exorcism of demons. He is the shaman for our sick society. Towards the end he refers self-consciously to his drama as "a euphoric recall of events." It is obviously something learnt from psychologists. But that realisation stops him in his tracks as such "emotionalism" might be deemed "hysteria" by the court. In the most chilling moment of the entire performance, Flynn stops dead, and sums up his abuse in clinical matter-of-fact language. This is

his statement of truth which the court will hear. We were "privileged" (but also shocked) beforehand to witness the extent of the trauma behind that truth.

Brian Singleton is senior lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

LITTLE VICTORIES

by Shaun Prendergast

Barnstorm Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 10 Mar 2003 at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght **BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE**

BARNSTORM THEATRE COMPANY HAS chosen well. Shaun Prendergast's play *Little Victories* explores the themes of death and of coming to terms with the unpredictability of life in a refreshing and unpatronising manner. Through the eyes of Tony, an eight-year-old boy, the audience are swept into a child's view of the world that is both fascinating and insightful. With four actors onstage, Tony and his friend Josie are the only characters that break down the fourth wall and narrate events of the past 12 months directly to the audience. This narration is accompanied by a series of re-constructions of recalled episodes, Tony and Josie playing themselves most of the time. It is soon revealed that Tony has a lot to deal with at his age: his father is dead, his mother has a new boyfriend, and Josie is dying of cancer. Death and illness are often excluded from cultural representations for children in an effort to create superficial "happy endings." While there is a comfort and security in familiar formulae, many children become bored with such predictable and often clichéd representations. Prendergast's play offers something different, that speaks "to" rather than "at" children.



He creates an accessible forum for children in which battles with death and illness are explored through the analogy of video games. Tony is obsessed with the video game "Death Dealer" throughout. When Josie leaves for surgery, the hospital is transformed into the Death Dealer landscape and an adventure is played out which ends with Josie having to face "Skullmort the Reaper." Using concepts from popular children's culture, the play presents the audience with approaches to understanding death while simultaneously revealing life as an adventure where every unpredictable event must be taken one step at a time, in little victories.

Although death does feature throughout, Tony attempts to make sense of his life in an entertaining and humorous manner. One of the most difficult elements of children's theatre is the device

WRENCHING DRAMA

Stephen Kelly (top) and Brian Thunder in Little Victories

of adult actors playing children; the risk of talking down to children and thus alienating the majority of the audience is omnipresent. However,

Stephen Kelly brings vibrancy and energy to the character of Tony and at times tends to carry the entire production. Tony's wit prevents the play from simply becoming a morbid exploration of death, and Kelly successfully brings these qualities to the fore of his performance.

The production begins as something highly theatrical through the innovative use of Sonia Haccius' versatile set. As howling dogs emerged from the fridge, washing machine, and cupboards, the audience were immediately engaged. However, as the play progressed energy levels on stage began to drop and the spectators became restless. One factor which may have con-

tributed to this was the failure to update many of the allusions to popular culture. The play, written in the early 1990s, features references to programmes like "Baywatch" that have little relevance to Barnstorm's 2003 target audience of eight to 13-year-olds.

Another problem was Veronica Coburn's underpowered direction; despite the humour of the play, much of the dialogue was lost upstage, and at times the actors seemed to simply wander around with no particular purpose. There were instances of relief, however, through fantasy and puppetry sequences that momentarily re-engaged the audience, such as Tony's younger sister being represented by a giant baby puppet. But, overall, the use of puppetry, fantasy, masks and special effects were not explored or realised to their full potential. While Barnstorm has acquired an exciting script for children, this little victory could have been much bigger.

Pádraic Whyte is writing a PhD in children's drama, film, and literature at Trinity College.

MACBETH by William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company
and Theatreworks

On tour; reviewed on 3 Mar 2003 at the
Olympia Theatre, Dublin

BY EAMONN JORDAN

AS I SAT THROUGH THE ABBEY Theatre's recent production of Marina Carr's *Ariel*, I wondered what performers could have played the leading roles of Fermoy and Frances Fitzgerald; the actors who were cast, Mark Lambert and Ingrid Craigie, are both very accomplished in their own rights but were seldom capable of the emotions and inten-

sity necessary for Carr's work. Two names came to mind for my *Ariel* dream production: Olwen Fouéré and Denis Conway. That Michael Caven cast these two actors in the lead roles in his *Macbeth* is both fortuitous and telling. Conway, as Macbeth, the tortured Thane, dominates the stage space; Fouéré is often chillingly brilliant as Lady Macbeth, especially when she incites murder. Both actors have the capacity to inflect every line with new emotion; moreover they consistently sustain ambivalence and contradiction. Both display a displaced vengeance, the terrifying composure of malevolence and the paranoia of evil.

These actors have the stature, conviction, and urgency that are required for one of Shakespeare's most demanding plays, where there is no equilibrium and no pause in a remorselessly driven tragedy. However, occasionally, when together, both seemed to be more concerned with their individual performances and didn't give enough to the other. In general, Fouéré seems to be more successful playing dominant but intensely vulnerable roles, and less comfortable where the power dynamics shift uneasily between characters. Her final scene here, when she negotiates with madness, is truly forceful and never embarrassing.

The manner in which the full company of actors utilise the space is nearly always excellent. Mobility of location and the clever use of props, costume, and masks combine with a delivery of language which, although sometimes laboured and sporadically over-reliant on shouting, is varied and modulated successfully. An almost ever-present white cradle functions as a symbol of destruction and a reminder of what is ventured in order to succeed, as Lady Macbeth reminds us



how she would slaughter her own child in order to fulfil a promise. Later a rag-wrapped cradle serves as the witches' cauldron; this type of intelligent interplay occurs again and again throughout this production. Edward Hall's recent production in London linked Lady Macbeth to the witches; here it is the opposite. The witches are played successfully by three males, as three nearly-males, as gender easy distinctions are blurred.

Physically, some of the actors were uncomfortable when speaking and moving simultaneously. The need to deliver with clarity did slow things down a little, but given that the audience is dominated by second-level students who are probably hearing the language spoken for the first time in a live performance it was probably a good idea not to rush things.

TOIL AND TROUBLE *The company in Macbeth*

The fluidity and metaphysical dexterity that Caven is grappling with finds perfect resonance in the set designed by Ferdia Murphy, which offers an oval-shaped stage surrounded by screens and offering even more space through the use of a split-level, multi-functional playing area. Rebecca Wright's lighting and Sinead Cuthbert's masks and costumes, while impressive, were limited by a certain imaginative restraint.

Visually and gesturally, the production is unpretentious, yet unrepentant about its tragic aspiration, locating the play within the realms of ritual and the imagination. What Caven ultimately achieves is to make tragedy significant, to give meaning and relevance to a tragic perspective in a world that has grown increasingly tired and feeble in the face of disaster and trauma. The director gets from his actors a sense of purpose, mission, and — dare I use the word — vision. This is a play about evil, but the versions of it we get in contemporary culture tend to be playful takes, abnormalised and theatricalised versions of it. Here, this is a *Macbeth* on the plane of tragedy rather than on the trail of air-brushed irrelevance.

In recent years, Barabbas, Loose Canon and Blue Raincoat have all made very good attempts at this difficult play, but Caven's production out-performs all of these, as it operates in the psychic space between the banquet and the cauldron, between insomnia and hallucinato-

ry prophecy, between moral choice and compulsion, between the waywardness of tragedy and the tyranny of innocence, and between ambitious, ambiguous, insurrection and the restoration of order, however suspect that happens to be. Blood, we must remember, begets blood, and blood is the ultimate imaginative weapon in theatre's armoury.

Eamonn Jordan works for the Institute for the International Education of Students.

THE MEMORY OF WATER

by Shelagh Stephenson

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

15 Mar–12 Apr 2003; reviewed 11 Apr

BY PAUL DEVLIN

MARK LAMBERT UNDERSTANDS WHY Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water* works as a piece of theatre. Lambert recognises Stephenson's gift for characterisation and the skill with which she can draw her audience to empathise with her characters. Lambert trusts Stephenson's script. He trusts it to temper its pathos with humour, to connect with its audience, and to pay off exactly what it sets up. He trusts it enough to pay it the compliment of not over-directing it for this Lyric Theatre production, instead simply facilitating the safe catharsis it invites.

Set around the coming together of three adult sisters for their mother's funeral, Stephenson's play trades in fairly familiar themes: sibling rivalry, the need to confront the past, the need to recognise our parents in ourselves, and the inconsistency of memory. Her characters are cast in neat opposition to each other. Mary, a doctor, is a somewhat cynical and career-minded

woman. Teresa, the neurotic "stay-at-home," is the self-appointed martyr of the family who also runs an herbal remedy business with her witless husband. In contrast, Catherine is the flaky, self-obsessed, and immature "baby" of the family. The death of their mother, Vi, causes the three sisters to begin to re-evaluate their own lives. The subsequent deconstruction of character, while well-handled by Stephenson, unfolds without any great surprises or revelations. Mary had a child when a teenager and gave it up for adoption, and learns in the course of the play that the child has since died; this helps her recognise and acknowledge her desire for a family. Teresa attempts to confront her neurosis. And Catherine, beneath the bluff, bluster, and make-up, is an essentially lonely and vulnerable young woman. While there is nothing particularly unique or strikingly original in Stephenson's themes, this is a solid piece of writing. Her characters are sympathetically drawn and well developed. Her dialogue is sharp and heavy with telling subtext and, above all, Stephenson's ability to lace sadness with humour makes this a very enjoyable play.

Collectively, the female cast in this production (Orla Charlton as Mary; Lynn Cahill as Teresa; and Eileen McCloskey as Catherine) are very strong. As an ensemble, Charlton, Cahill, and McCloskey obviously enjoy the bickering exchanges between Stephenson's sisters and these scenes display Stephenson's writing at its strongest. Charlton is good as a sleepless and hassled Mary in the play's first act. In the later sections of the play, however, she's less



LES GIRLS Charlton,
McCloskey and Cahill in
The Memory of Water

While Charlton's performance establishes Mary's justifiable anger at the (double) loss of her child, it also leaves an overriding feeling that Mary is an essentially impenetrable character. McCloskey is a suitably frenetic and irritatingly fickle Catherine. She has, though, less to work with than her fellow female cast members, because the character is too simply drawn and largely functioning as a comic intermediary between the two other, more rounded, characters. Cahill, as Teresa, is brilliantly offbeat and neurotic. She steals most of the play's comic thunder and exploits her character's position as the play's "truth-teller" to maximum effect.

Stephenson's male characters are largely ciphers. Mike, a married man

successful in suggesting Mary's deeper vulnerabilities.

with whom Mary is having a long-term affair (played affably by Robert Reynolds), allows Stephenson to draw out Mary's inner conflicts and little else. Teresa's husband, Frank, is as ineffectual as the herbal remedies Teresa forces him to pedal. B.J. Hogg's plays him, aptly, as gormless, but also tends to lean towards pantomime at times.

The Memory of Water is not revolutionary theatre, but it is well-

told theatre. In this production, Jamie Vartan's meticulous set design and costuming, and Gerry Jenkinson's smooth lighting design, underwrite Mark Lambert's commitment to and belief in Stephenson's script.

**THE MISANTHROPE, by Moliere,
in an adaptation by Martin Crimp**

The Gate Theatre

11 Feb—20 Mar 2003; reviewed 17 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

THE GATE IS THE GATE, AND ONE knows what to expect when crossing its threshold. Generally, their productions are of predictably high quality, if not of ground-breaking innovation, and fans of costume dramas are assured of a pleasant evening out, often comprised of familiar actors doing the things they do best, in elegant surroundings while "got up" in appropriately glamourous togs.

Even fans of the Northside venue

CHRIS HILL

were hard pressed to extract pleasure from *The Misanthrope*, as the Gate out-Gated itself with this vapid and almost meaningless foray into the world of poncy London artists ensconced in a posh hotel with the latest American film star. The highly stylised result was an insipid wave of trifling tosh, a play whose narcissistic concept, while adhered to properly and not without irony and perception, overwhelmed itself with its own self-indulgence: Martin Crimp's adaptation of Moliere's 17th-century play is so in love with itself that it is impossible for us to feel the same.

Alceste (Nick Dunning) is on a one-man mission to stamp out superficiality and insincerity... despite the fact that his girlfriend Jennifer (Elisabeth Dermot Walsh) is the most superficial and insincere thing going. As she welcomes a seemingly endless string of sycophants into her Bruno Schwengel-designed boudoir, Alceste moans about commitment and whinges about her many admirers. His dear friend John (Dennis O'Meara) tries to talk him back into what we must presume was his old, bitchy self, but to no avail: Alceste holds true to his principles to the bitter end. Crimp himself stays true to the run of action until the second act, when, awaking from a drunken stupor, Alceste wakes to find himself in 17th century France — oh, no, wait a

minute, it's only Jen's fancy dress party... and what might have been an interesting sort of time travel idea, that might have actually saved the play, bites the dust.

It follows that Moliere's treatise on superficiality and disingenuousness should display qualities of superficiality and disingenuousness, but the degree to which this production achieved such goals bordered on extreme self-parody. Given the situation in which it was set — in the

HE LIKES HER FOR HER
BRAINS Dunning and Walsh
in The Misanthrope



TOM LAWREN

openly manipulative and false world of Hollywood stars and their hangers-on — it's such a no-brainer that there is nowhere satisfying for the text to go. Add to this the fact that Alceste is rather pathetically chasing after a girl half his age, and it becomes impossible to sympathise with his character, the supposed moral centre of the play. Less a crisis of conscience than a mid-life crisis, we can only roll our eyes at his continued pursuit of the beautiful but shallow Jennifer.

Production values reached high, but failed to grasp their goals. A large cast comprised of generally fine actors were hampered not only with Crimp's rather awkward approximation of Moliere's rhyming couplets, but also by Alan Stanford's lack of direction — it surely is the most static staging to come down the pike in a long time. Schwengel's black and white set is almost abusively stark, and the small touches of life become the visual equivalent of a lifeline.

The text made much of the critic Covington (David Pearse, who delivered the only performance that escaped unscathed) and of his attempts to write his own play; the disgust with which Alceste greets the notion that his beloved Jen has slept with a *critic* is meant to be a cheeky poke at those of us who have undertaken such a profession. The only joy to be extracted from the evening, from a reviewer's point of view, was the knowledge that she would totally and completely live up to the aspersions cast throughout the text, and live up to them wholeheartedly and unabashedly (see all of the above). It remains impossible to say, however, what the regular punters —

the few who were there — took away from the vacuous proceedings.

MIXING IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

by Maeve Ingoldsby

Calypso Theatre Company

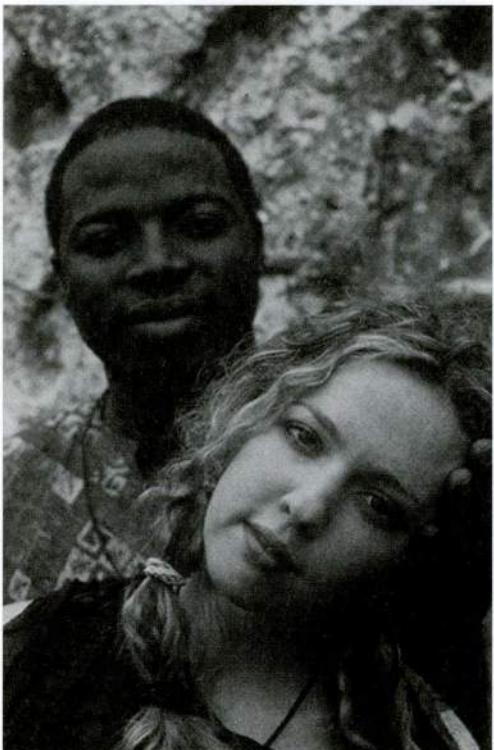
The Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin

18-22 Mar 2003; reviewed 21 Mar

BY KAREN FRICKER

MANY THINGS GET MIXED ON CALYPSO'S mountain, most of all the company's social and artistic agendas. Throughout its eight-year history, Calypso has attempted to confront issues of political and social injustice through professional theatre productions. This most recent show would seem to be the most elaborate instance yet of the company putting the nation's pressing concerns on stage. The 21-strong cast of *Mixing it on the Mountain* is made up, in large part, of young non-Irish nationals, from countries including Albania, Angola, Kosovo, Macedonia, Nigeria, and Vietnam. Seeing so many young people who are apparently non-Irish on an Irish stage is doubtless a novel, and an exciting, experience. It is also, potentially, a confrontational one, a transformational one, or a conservative one: it all depends on what the company is trying to communicate by putting so much difference in front of its audience.

Sadly, what Calypso were trying to say with *Mixing it on the Mountain* never becomes clear — not artistically, not socially. On some levels, Bairbre Ní Chaoimh's production offers difference as a material reality, which is tentatively queried and investigated from a number of standpoints. A theme emerges, however, which overrides any potential exploration of diversity, and that is



sameness. The show becomes a soft-centred, rose-coloured presentation of the power of romantic love and friendship to unite people across backgrounds and cultures.

Many elements of the production invite us to see it as a work of professional theatre: the elaborate set and lighting design, glossy programme, mainstream venue, 8pm start time, and (most of all) Calypso's established and funded identity as a professional theatre company. But most of its young cast are patently not

YOUNG LOVERS
Ijigade and Lambe
 in *Mixing it on the Mountain*

professional performers: only a few among them, in particular Solomon Ijigade, who stars as Patrick, seem to possess the talent and charisma to lead them towards careers as performers. This confusion is furthered by the casting of four professional and four student Irish actors alongside the non-Irish performers, which further accentuates the different levels of skill on stage. Clearly audiences are meant to adjust their expectations and understandings to accommodate the special conditions behind the production's creation. This is a conservative and unprogressive tactic: we are asked to treat this show differently because its cast is different — to change the rules for the foreigners.

The actual content of the show sends similarly conservative messages. There is a playful and potentially radical idea at its core: what if, Maeve Ingoldsby's script asks, Ireland's patron saint had been black? The accepted story is that Saint Patrick was brought to pagan Ireland from Roman Britain as a slave, and eventually

converted the country to Christianity; Ingoldsby's script has it that perhaps Patrick came from somewhere farther away. But the idea isn't pursued with any conviction or depth, and gets lost amid the production's mixed meanings.

The action takes place on a mountain-side compound where a group of pagan Irish keep blacks as slaves; early on, a new

envoi of slaves arrives who mostly look Eastern European. The majority of the play comes to concern the various ways in which they learn to mingle and merge, mostly facilitated by singing and flirting. While musical director/composer David Boyd has apparently attempted to accommodate many musical traditions in the show, the score is dominated by saccharine power ballads which add to the sense that what we're seeing is a contemporary animated Disney movie played in live action.

The ruling power on the mountain is slave owner Malachy; top marks to Fergal McElherron for giving the role full butch welly — mohican, tattoos, and all — but the character hardly represents any real force of authority or domination, particularly because in the show's fiction he is lame. Many of the show's white characters mix happily with the slaves, and indeed romance blossoms between the chieftain's ward Fionnuala (Lisa Lambe) and Ijigade's Patrick. The moment when these two attractive young people kiss is the only genuinely political moment in the production: the stage becomes a safe space for an action which would fall outside the bounds of official society.

But if its depiction of slavery is going to be so inconsistent and unconvincing, then, why does the production use slavery as a plot device at all? What was the goal of the production's creators in reinforcing received ideas that these non-white young people have less cultural agency than the native whites? This might reflect the real-life power balance in these young people's lives, but would it not have been more empowering, for audiences and performers alike, to mix things up for real: to show us a fictional

world in which our expectations of oppression are played with, queried, and overturned?

The production ends with the whole cast, presumably now playing their real selves, united on stage singing an uplifting song about freedom. They sang with joy and enthusiasm, and it may well be that many of them had an uplifting and empowering experience participating in this production. But for this audience member at least, watching it was a depressing experience that reminded me of how far away Irish theatre is from finding innovative and progressive ways of articulating and interrogating our changing cultural context.

MY CHILDREN! MY AFRICA!

by Athol Fugard

Galloglass Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at THEatre Space at the Mint, Dublin on 27 Mar 2003

BY JULIE SHEARER

ATHOL FUGARD'S PLAY OPENS WITH an inter-school debate, where a poor, black boy's school is hosting a middle class, white girl's school and the topic is "Education for women should not be the same as for men." Thami (a charismatic Kobna Holdbrook-Smith), representing the boy's team, argues articulately that notions of feminism are incompatible with black culture. African society requires different things of men and women, and therefore their education should reflect that. Equality between the sexes is a colonial imposition and must be resisted. Is this bigoted young man to be the hero of our play? Indeed he is. What is more, he will go on to reject peaceful protest in favour of mob violence and armed



struggle, and we will come to understand his decision.

The vigorous debate sparks an unlikely friendship between Thami and the idealistic Isabel, played with a touchingly vulnerable, adolescent self-confidence by Judith Roddy. Enthused by the success of the encounter, Thami's inspirational teacher Mr M. (Bisi Adigun) persuades the pair to compete together under his coaching in the national English Literature quiz. Unfortunately, the political reality of South Africa makes this triangular relationship untenable. A truly vocational teacher, Mr M. passionately believes in education and ideas, but can only teach if he obeys the law and offers a Bantu, apartheid education. He describes "hope" as "a wild beast I keep trapped in my heart" and to which he feeds children, his students, "like Christians to

SCHOOL DAYS

*Roddy, Adigun,
and Holdbrook-Smith
in My Children!...*

the lions." When the township erupts in violence and the Bantu schools are boycotted by the students, Mr M. turns informer. Problematically, Fugard presents the motivations for this betrayal so ambiguously that the teacher himself seems uncertain why he did it. Is it to protect the school and his students from the influence of the radical Comrades, or is he simply jealous that what he has to offer is so easily discarded? Who is Mr M. if he is not a teacher? However ambiguous his motives are, his fate is not. Despite Thami's best efforts to intervene, the mob will take their horrifying justice.

For a play with such dramatic subject matter, its intellectual verbosity presents the cast and director Theresia Guschelbauer with theatrical challenges. Apart from the opening debate, there are extensive soliloquies and also a long scene where Thami and Isabel exchange quotations from the Romantic poets like a tennis match. Even in conventional dialogue, all three characters are inclined to make speeches to one another. Unaccountably, Guschelbauer's direction is correspondingly static, with the actors far too often standing facing the audience and declaiming. This became a little monotonous over the two hour playing time and gave the piece an over-earnest, lecturing tone. That said there was great intelligence and passion in all three performances, especially

Holbrook-Smith's striking transformation from troubled, resentful boy to a young man infused with terrible purpose. Bisi Adigun's portrayal of the "old" teacher (of 57) involved slightly distracting physical mannerisms including a strange gait and a quivering hand, perhaps as an over-compensation for his much younger years. His Mr M. and Roddy's Isabel, however, were wonderfully committed and complex characterisations.

Like the ensemble, Carol Betera's set design was also much more than the sum of its parts. In the intimacies of the THEatre Space, Betera laid a square grey floor, placed two chairs and a desk on it, all backed by a scrim for the blackboard and wall, and there were the privations of a small, concrete classroom. A simple lighting change revealed long burnished grasses behind the scrim, powerfully evoking the great vistas of Africa.

Undoubtedly, the polemics of this play could present a few dilemmas for Galloglass and Amnesty, especially considering the latter's anti-war stance. Simplistically viewed, *My Children! My Africa!* is a historical tragedy set in apartheid South Africa and exposing the brutalising effects of a racist system that has now been overthrown. However, when Mr M. balances a stone that has been thrown through the school window against a book, the image contains both the idealism of the pacifist and the impotent, anxiousness to please of the colonised. Can injustice be defeated by words or is there sometimes such a thing as "a just war"? Fugard and Galloglass deny us the clear-cut slogans of agitprop, but by inviting an audience to decide for themselves they provide Amnesty with an ideal launch pad for education.

"Truth" in *My Children! My Africa!* is as complex, messy and relative as it is in life.

Julie Shearer is studying for an MA in Drama Studies at U.C.D.

OBSERVE THE SONS OF ULSTER MARCHING TOWARDS THE SOMME

by Frank McGuinness.

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

7 Feb-8 Mar 2003; reviewed 11 Feb

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME HAS an important role in the psyche of Ulster Protestants, commemorated to this day not only by military personnel but also by the Orange Order. For this was the battle in which the Ulster Division went to their slaughter defending the British Empire. The men who made up the division were largely composed of Edward Carson's anti-Home Rulers, the Ulster Volunteer Force. The German enemy temporarily replaced the republican "enemy" at home. Their sacrifice for the Empire was ultimate, and they were led blindly by an incompetent army command. These were the men whom Britain sacrificed and whom Ireland rejected. These are the men who were (and still are) in a cultural and political no man's land, beating drums in parades for an Empire now lost.

Frank McGuinness' play is an extraordinarily adept attempt to understand the Unionist psyche. He grounds his characters in trades which built or serviced the Empire, locates them in the six counties, and positions them along rivers like the Lagan, the Bann, and the Foyle. He then shifts them to another river, the Somme, and they are forced to defend that too. The play has expressionist qualities rem-



iniscent of the second act of *The Silver Tassie*, but unlike O'Casey he does not reduce his characters to expressionist ciphers for a greater machine. McGuinness' men are real; real in their belief in the cause of Empire, and real in their fear of what that actually means.

Michael Duke's production treads carefully to make the whole thing real. He does not brook reverence, but displays respect, directing his actors in a realism (of military procedures and emotional turmoil) which elicits a sympathy for even the most hardened bigots amongst the volunteers. The varying county accents are well placed, and their relationships are fleshed out with an ever-increasing physicality. The second act when characters are "paired" on leave before they go to battle, creates a multi-focused spectacle of truth underneath the

BATTLE CRY

*The company in
Observe the Sons
of Ulster...*

bravado. And if the pace dipped in this act, it was due to the care taken to portray the relationships between the men as well as to expose them as human beings.

McGuinness had made some changes to the text specifically for this production and the most notable among them was making the Belfast shipyard workers, McIlwaine and Anderson, into two city thugs representing a hardened loyalism with which we are familiar today. McIlwaine is even now referred to as "mad dog," evoking real-life contemporary UDA leader Johnny Adair, and Duke had him (as played by Vincent Higgins) snarling and snapping momentarily around the stage. This was too topical and, in my opinion, misplaced, as it is hard to see how the drug barons posing as defenders of the Queen could compare with the honest tradesmen's

sacrifice of almost 90 years ago.

In a cast of uniform excellence, Richard Dormer's Pyper, the rich, fey homosexual from Armagh who enlists almost as a death wish, stands out. Dormer's performance forces the character of Pyper to teeter on the brink of sanity at times, only to plunge into inner reserves of warmth and affection. He plays with the other men, pricking their conscience, probing their blind faith, attacking Empire, the class system, and religion. But most importantly, he is pushing back the military boundary around sexuality, but Duke's direction and Dormer's subtlety in the playing down of Pyper's sexuality might also be interpreted as fear of dealing with it. His relationship with Craig (cast — surprisingly — against type, as the actor John Paul Connolly is no gay icon) blossoms in key moments, the first being when he deliberately cuts his own hand. Duke directed this as a political symbol of the Red Hand of Ulster, but seemed to ignore the deeply sexual connotation of the act. And, further, in the "pairing" Act, when the two finally kiss, they were positioned in a less than prominent position and the actual contact was hidden from view. While not completely ignoring this strong undercurrent, the production shied away from graphic realism in this regard. Casting Mark Mulholland as Old Pyper, whose accent and behaviour was nothing like Dormer's, stretched credibility and seemed to suggest that the war had "cured" him of his class and sexuality. Dormer is electrifying, though, and even the semi-concealed affection between the two men still troubles the certainty of a heterosexist Empire.

Other notable performances include

the aforementioned Connolly as the rock on which Pyper leans, and Frankie McCafferty (as the dyer Moore) whose sense of comic timing is as acute as his subsequent portrayal of trauma. But this is a production of collective responsibility, and Duke's gift is to assemble an acting team, all equally skilled, dependent on one another in both their barrack-room banter and their final chorric war cries. *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* has extraordinary contemporary resonances and this Belfast production roots the play in a homeland where pain and sensitivity have been buried alive.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

by J.M. Synge

Big Telly Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the NTL Studio,
Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 1 Mar 2003

BY PAUL DEVLIN

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHRISTY Mahon, a seemingly parricidal raconteur, from ineffectual village idiot into local hero is compellingly strange. And funny. And sad. Playing to a Belfast audience desensitised to references to "shifts," and who no more view "the west" as representative of Ireland than they do Craggy Island, Big Telly Theatre Company's production of Synge's classic, *The Playboy of the Western World*, embraces exactly this sense of strangeness in *Playboy*, and plays it for all the laughs it's worth.

Zoë Seaton directs this production in a decidedly stylised mode. Her approach has advantages. By encouraging her cast to exaggerate the physicality of their performances, Seaton is able to generate the surface realism of Synge's dramatic locale, but this also functions as an immediate visual means of drawing out the



SYNGERS Allen,
Lovett, McGibbon, and
Hewitt in *Playboy*

grotesque violence and caricature implicit in Synge's text. With this, however, also comes a tendency for Seaton to, at times, push Synge's grotesque towards the fringes of a cartoonish, and much less dramatic, surrealism. By electing to have Jack Walsh and Richard Orr, for example, who play Michael James' drinking cronies Jimmy Farrell and Philly Cullen, double-up in two of the play's female roles (Sara Tansey and Honor Blake, respectively), a decision which may have been as much economically as it was artistically motivated, Seaton's inventive direction loses some of its edge. Walsh and Orr's palpable delight at playing in drag, while initially funny, is pitched far too high and, because the play requires that Sara and Honor flit in and out of the action, continually interrupts and undermines what is otherwise a

very strong and imaginative piece of direction by Seaton.

Chisato Yoshimi's set design is impressively intricate for this touring production. More shabby-chic than it is grimy shebeen, it works well in this colourful and spirited production. Yoshimi paints the walls of Michael James' ramshackle drinking den in brown Edvard Munch-esque swirls, but also infuses this with a golden shine. This, and the set's asymmetrical construction, point to Seaton's directorial approach: it suggests reality but leaves room for the fantastic. Marcus Costello's lighting design complements this by mixing pale naturalistic washes with more stylised shades, although the NTL Studio at Belfast's Waterfront Hall is a particularly cold theatrical space.

Seamus John Allen's quirky and strongly physical incarnation of Christy visually compliments Synge's dramatisation of his character's transformation. Initially shuffling and reticent, Allen's performance grows increasingly, and aptly, supple as the balm of self-delusion oils his joints. More than this, though, Allen's ability to work the comic potential of Synge's feckless Oedipus is especially good. Abigail McGibbon, as Pegeen Mike, is hard to the point of brittleness, making her fondness for Christy's "poet's talk" all the more telling. John Lovett, simmering with insidious sanctimony, steals more than a few scenes as the obsequious Shawn Keogh. Lynda Gough, as the Widow Quin, gives a

strong enough performance but suffers from being miscast. Gough garners sympathy for the Widow's essential loneliness, but she is perhaps too urbane and striking looking to suggest the Widow's more grisly sexuality. Eamonn Hunt brilliantly underplays his role as Old Mahon, whose mixture of fraternal rage and increasing perplexity Hunt subtly exploits for all its comic value. Hunt and Allen are a very unlikely father-son combination, but somehow, in Seaton's offbeat interpretation, this works all the better.

Seaton's gently irreverent direction refuses to allow the historical significance of Synge's classic to overpower the production. Playing to a 21st-century Northern Irish audience, this is, perhaps, an especially useful strategy to adopt. The "representative west" in nationalist Belfast's iconology is west Belfast, not the west of Ireland. Although Seaton's approach here may not be making any specific or deliberate points on the arguable lack of symbolic relevance in Synge's vision for local audiences, by playing the "otherness" in *Playboy* she opens the door to the play's comedy and compelling strangeness. It was this, and the verve of Seaton's cast, that made Big Telly's production a success.

SHIVER by Declan Hughes

Rough Magic Theatre Company
Project Arts Centre, Dublin

28 Mar – 19 Apr 2003; reviewed 12 Apr, and

TILLSONBURG by Malachy McKenna

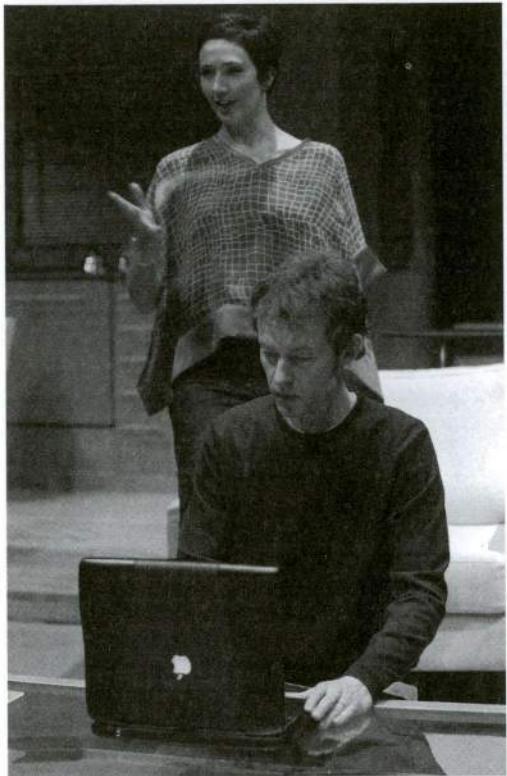
Focus Theatre/Irish Touring Company
On tour; reviewed 20 Mar 2003 at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway **BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

CRITICS HAVE BEEN DECLARING IRISH playwriting to be in a state of crisis for most of the last 100 years but, even so, it's

hard not to feel glum about the present state of our writing for the stage. The latest plays from established figures have been met with disappointment and occasional hostility; and we've had a glut of formally conservative plays from emerging writers that cover the same narrow territory of dead babies, abusive mothers, and sexually dysfunctional men. It's a pleasant surprise therefore to see two plays, from Declan Hughes and Malachy McKenna, that cover new thematic ground, while emphasising the importance of plot, dialogue, and many other characteristics not much seen on the Irish stage recently.

Hughes' *Shiver* is in many ways a counterpoint to *Digging for Fire*, the 1991 play that — with its iconoclastic attitude to Irish stage conventions, and Hughes' ease with popular culture — laid the ground for some of the best Irish theatre of the 1990s. As was the case with that earlier play, *Shiver* focuses on a group of couples. Richard and Jenny (Peter Hanly and Cathy White) have returned from the U.S. to set up an Irish dot.com enterprise, while Marion and Kevin (Cathy Belton and Paul Hickey) are in conflict about Kevin's decision to quit teaching to look after their newborn child. The title of *Digging for Fire* indicated its characters youthful dynamism and curiosity (and the volatility of their relationships) but, in contrast, the title of *Shiver* indicates these older couples' feelings of exposure and isolation, as their lives unravel along with the Irish economy.

Throughout the production, the audience is made complicit with these characters' declining fortunes. The cast — all of whom are wonderful — switch constantly from naturalism to direct, familiar address to the audience, encouraging us



to identify with what we're witnessing. It's assumed that the characters and audience share the same values and social status, so that when one couple tells us they're expecting a child, we're supposed to greet this news as if we're socialising with friends, rather than watching a play.

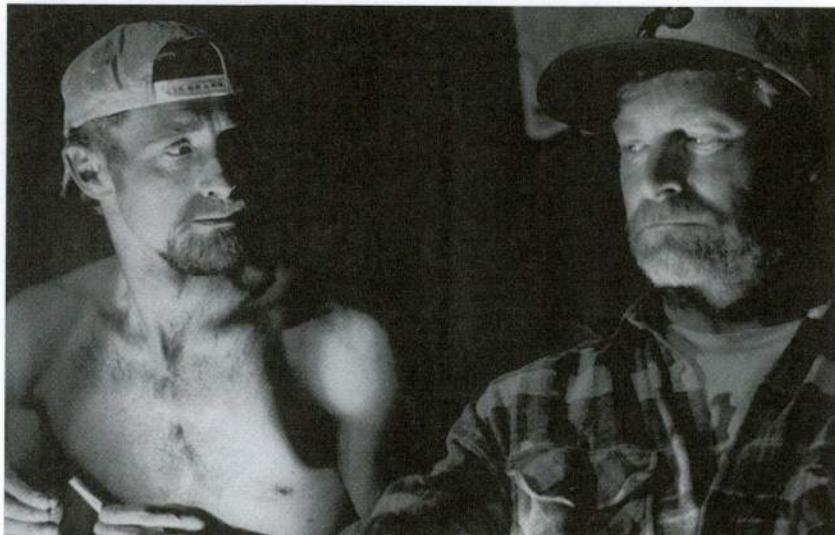
The set design intensifies this complicity. Gorgeously designed and lit by John Comiskey, it fills the entire centre of the Project space, with the audience watching from both sides. This immediacy

DOT.COMMERS

Cathy White and Peter Hanly in Shiver

means that there's no space between audience and performance: part of everyone's experience of the play involves witnessing not only the action, but also the reactions of other audience members. So Rough Magic have produced the play in a manner that encourages the Dublin audience to act communally, giving us work that's not just for us, but explicitly *about* us.

This is an interesting contrast to *Tillsonburg*, Malachy McKenna's promising first play, which also features excellent ensemble acting. A revival of a 2000 Focus production, it's designed to travel well, without any impediments to its being appreciated by audiences throughout the country. The problem for many touring productions is that the expense of transportation, and the need to be able to adapt to different stages, means that we often end up with sets that are cheap, shabby, and bare. *Tillsonburg* sidesteps this problem by setting its action in a place that actually is cheap, shabby and bare: a rundown timber cabin, with rudimentary furniture and décor, all designed and constructed by Robert Lane. So the play is well suited to the practicalities of touring. But it has, more importantly, been written without any impediments to its being appreciated by audiences throughout the country. Instead of any localising references of the



kind used in the Dublin production of *Shiver*, we have the neutral setting of Tillsonburg, Ontario for the action, which focuses on two students — Digger (played by McKenna, who gives himself most of the play's best lines) and Mac (Charlie Bonner) — who have come from Ireland to spend their summer holidays picking tobacco.

On their first night at the tobacco farm, its owner, Jon (Brent Hearne) asks about his new workers' country: "Ireland," he says, "That's part of England, isn't it?" Digger responds to this with consternation, declaring that "Ireland is part of nothing" — before doing a double take to consider the negative connotations of this statement. And this is one of the play's key moments, setting out clearly McKenna's thematic concern: he is considering the issues of identity, nationality, and masculinity — and suggests

CANUCKS *Paul Roe and Brent Hearne in Tillsonburg*

that when the bluster associated with national pride and male bravado is stripped away, what we're quite often left with is, as Digger states, nothing.

This theme is explored by a focus on two sets of relationships, which both revolve around the status afforded by money. Digger and Mac are on a working holiday; for them, manual labour is part of a youthful rite of passage, framed by the knowledge that they'll return to Ireland to resume their university education. This security is contrasted with the vulnerability of the Canadian with whom they share their hut — Billy (Paul Roe), a drug addict whose work on the farm doesn't just give him a livelihood, but also his only chance of dignity. McKenna handles the contrast between these circumstances interestingly. Less well handled is the relationship between Jon and a myste-

rious Indian called Pete (Liam Heffernan, who also directs). Pete has seduced Jon's wife, and now threatens to take Jon's farm from him — and in the relationship between the two men, there is a blurring of the distinction between sexual prowess and financial power that is never fully resolved.

Shiver deals with similar issues. Marion is encouraged to identify herself with the company for which she works, having been given share options that make the profitability of her employer a matter of personal gain to her. Hughes shows the damage this causes: being betrayed by that company is not just a financial loss for Marion, but a personal one too. Similarly, Richard and Jenny's attempt to set up their website is a way for them to gain the social status that will allow them to avoid coping with the fact that Jenny is an alcoholic. Like *Tillsonburg*, *Shiver* critically evaluates the doctrine that's informed Ireland's recent past: that you are what you earn.

Another important feature of both plays is their representation of Ireland's place in the world. In *Tillsonburg*, Pete the Indian draws parallels between the Irish students' journey to Canada to make money, and the European adventurers who, centuries before, stole his people's land and resources — an interesting take on Ireland's changing relationship with colonialism. And there's nothing post-colonial about the characters in *Shiver*. After his bankruptcy, Richard is uncomfortable to be left standing in the hallway of a former colleague's house with a maid. He has just blown over \$500,000, apparently without any sense of shame — but, sharing a space with a woman who's travelled from Mexico or the Philippines to make a living, he *does* feel degraded.

Hughes' juxtaposition of these characters and McKenna's portrayal of Pete seem to suggest that Ireland is a first world country that has lost its third world memory.

Where both plays falter is with plot, with the action in both cases building up to a second act revelation that doesn't really work. *Shiver* is enacted at remarkable speed, with one scene beginning before another has fully concluded. By piling on the action in this way, director Lynne Parker seems to be aiming for a sense of the nervous tension of recent Irish life. This is an interesting decision, but it made it difficult to be shocked by the play's conclusion — to use available clichés, we're being slapped in the face at the end of a roller coaster ride, and it's just too much to take in.

Tillsonburg also suffered from uneven pacing. It's a funny play, with some good one-liners and visual jokes, but its humour overshadows the play's darker elements — so that when Digger and Mac tearfully reveal the ordeal they suffered during their previous summer together, the power of their discussion is lost in the audience's expectation that another gag is just around the corner.

Even without these difficulties, audiences' knowledge of plot is too sophisticated for them to miss the signals that must justify these revelations. So when in *Shiver* one of the characters rediscovers religion — without any real justification — it's obvious that we're being set up for a final scene funeral, just as in *Tillsonburg* Digger and Mac's problems are only ever going to be resolved by revelations of sexual violence. This leads to the reduction of serious issues — religion and sexual assault — to rather obvious plot devices.

Hughes shows that his characters' thoughtless faith in money is as destruc-

tive as was the blind faith in religion of earlier Irish generations. McKenna shows that masculinity is not "in crisis," but that for many men, masculinity *is* the crisis, causing them to behave in destructive ways. In making these points, both writers show themselves to be strong on character, theme and dialogue — but instead of putting faith in these skills, they use final scene revelations to sell points that the audiences will already have bought, thereby undermining many of their achievements.

But if this plotting doesn't work — and it didn't for me — Hughes and McKenna are at least trying to do something that many of their contemporaries have shied away from. McKenna has produced an extraordinarily confident debut, giving us a play that succeeds on many levels, and Hughes' work is maturing interestingly: with *Shiver* he has given us a portrait of our times that's complex, truthful, and often provocative. *Tilsonburg* and *Shiver* don't rescue Irish writing from the doldrums, but their originality must be applauded, as must the conviction with which the Focus/ITC and Rough Magic have produced them.

Patrick Lonergan is studying for a PhD in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway and is book reviews editor of this magazine.

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

by Jim Nolan and Marina Carr

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

25 Jan-22 Feb 2003; reviewed 30 Jan

BY ALISON BURNS

SONS AND DAUGHTERS IS A CHARMING presentation of two short plays for children, exploring what it means to mature and become an adult. The two plays are

both based on children's stories and the well-known playwrights Jim Nolan and Marina Carr have excelled in adapting these stories to the stage. The plays are clearly targeted at a younger audience, but plenty of humour and insight provided this adult viewer with much amusement.

Jim Nolan's *The Road to Carne* is located in a familiar rural setting and details the rites of passage faced by a peasant boy when his father is crippled by a fairy curse. As the only son, Johnny must provide for his family and after failing to deliver the hard labour necessary for his father's work as a journeyman, he finds a mysterious talent with the gift of a magic flute. The play encourages viewers to believe in their own inner strength in order to make a difference in the world.

Carr's *Meat and Salt* is a feminist fairy tale which recalls Shakespeare's *King Lear* in its theme of a banished daughter. When Big Daddy asks each of his daughters how much they love him, the first two daughters extol his virtues whereas Little Daughter simply explains she loves him "as meat loves salt." Big Daddy is so appalled by this remark he promptly banishes Little Daughter to the outer reaches of the kingdom.

Much of the charm of this play lay in the comic notes: Big Daddy with his gold feet was a larger-than-life character effectively brought to life by Andrew Bennett. Visual gags are plentiful, as with Little Daughter's hairy-footed mother, and strong characterisations of the royal family. There is a more serious line of questioning that runs through the play, however, about what constitutes real love. It is only late in the play



that Big Daddy realises his mistake over Little Daughter and how fundamental salt is to the taste of good food. By then, it is too late to make amends.

The production at the Peacock was an excellent introduction for its young audience to the world of live theatre. Both plays were presented in storytelling style, with the narration divided between the actors, creating a variety of voices and perspectives on the action. Music provided a strong backbone to the plays. The fairy tale-like atmosphere of the play was strongly complimented by wistful cello music. Paul Keenan's haunting compositions for cellist Vyvienne Long provided a strong accompaniment to the excitement of the plot itself, as Little Daughter wandered in strange lands chased by wolves, the music added a

NOW HEAR THIS!
*Negga and Bennett
 in Marina Carr's
 Meat and Salt*

necessary frisson of danger to the scene.

The staging itself was relatively simple. A simple set with a canvas backdrop provided an easy means for projection and lighting effects. Simple devices such as trap doors cleverly hid prop and set elements, and revealing them became an enjoyable part of the stage action. Costuming was also relaxed, with actors appearing in neutral shades, adding simple clothing items to provide clues to their identity.

The accessible and relaxed approach of the cast at the beginning of the play serves to emphasise the welcoming atmosphere of this production. The actors entered the performance space apparently as their "real selves" before costuming themselves for the beginning of the first play. By this means, director Andrea Ainsworth emphasised the con-

scious theatricality of the performance and also provided a clear explanation that these characters were being created for the performance. This was a particularly effective technique in light of the young audience for whom the plays were written. By seeing the actors physically become each character it was clear what we were seeing on the stage was a performance. When the second play commenced and costume changes were made again, the transformation, again, was entirely revealed to the audience and an understanding that a new play was commencing was clear.

The Road to Carne took a more realistic approach to narrative whereas *Meat and Salt* was full of eccentric characters with unusual personalities. Throughout the entire performance, the ensemble cast maintained a high level of energy. The interplay between the actors was strong, and their transformation into each different role seamless.

The movement direction under Andy Crook displayed a solid understanding of the physical elements of performance. The actors created invigorating characters showing particular skill with animated creatures such as wolves and cart horses. Varying in experience, each actor performed admirably and the interplay between each character showed development of some interesting relationships. The variety of roles each actor played further showed off their talents.

Ruth Negga was particularly captivating as Little Daughter in *Meat and Salt* with a wide-eyed eagerness ready to embrace each new experience as she faced the greater world. Matthew Dunphy was a convincing young Johnny in *The Road to Carne*, whose loy-

alty to his family was clear to all. Andrew Bennett is to be commended for his sneering and selfish characterisation of Big Daddy and the loud assertiveness of his character proved a perfect foil to Negga's equally vocal Little Daughter.

It was wonderful to see children being introduced to live theatre and being captivated by what they saw unfolding in front of them. The follow-up information for teachers compiled by the Abbey was informative and provided some imaginative exercises to further explore the themes of the text. The audience of schoolchildren were most appreciative of the performance on the morning I attended the production. Most seemed to find the second play more accessible with its touch of humour and more melodramatic characters, but they seemed equally captivated by the haunting strains of Johnny's flute as he played his hopes and dreams aloud.

Alison Burns has recently completed an M.Phil in Irish theatre and film at Trinity College.

THE STRANGE VOYAGE OF DONALD CROWHURST by Malcolm Hamilton

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 27 Mar 2003 at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway **BY CATRIONA MITCHELL**

BE WARNED: *THE STRANGE VOYAGE OF Donald Crowhurst* is strange. But in a wonderful way. It's a series of kinetic tableaux that will transport you into another world — a beautiful, disturbing world of murky light, lapping waves, madness, and insanely graceful movement.

Don't bother looking for a plot: there



isn't one, although the show has its origins in a true story. Donald Crowhurst, a British sailor who set off on a solitary race around the world in 1968, in fact hid somewhere off the coast of Argentina, never leaving the Atlantic. His boat was found eight months later, intact without its skipper, containing two log-books: one was the fictional version Crowhurst had fed to the press about his travels; the other gave the true account.

It was Crowhurst's dual presentation of reality that drew director Niall Henry to the tale. "It's about the idea of perceived realities, and what we view as truth," Henry said in a recent interview. This idea is explored less through Crowhurst than through his wife, Clare. Five performers (John Carty, Ciaran McCauley, Fiona McGeown, Sandra O'Malley and Barbara Ryan)

AHOY Sandra O'Malley in *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*

play just two characters, on a darkened stage that is bare but for Crowhurst's boat. For the most part we see two Donalds, in weatherproof gear, and three

Clares, in polka-dotted dresses — though at one magical moment five Donalds appear, when the women don men's hats and coats, turn their backs to the audience, and all become indistinguishable one from the other. Our confusion — which Clare can we trust? Which Donald is the real one? — is a reflection of the consternation Clare faced upon the disappearance. She was confronted with the fact that she didn't really know her husband at all.

The writing, by Malcolm Hamilton, is fragmented and abstract; its rhythm rises and falls like the ocean. Clare speaks manically to herself, in an attempt to stay sane: "stare vacantly at floor... no report-

ed sighting of husband on radio news... find four school bags... remember to place bread in oven... ring post office for the twelfth time this week... keep going Clare..." Donald also speaks to himself, with a faultless delivery of tongue-twisting lines. He is clearly delusional from the start. "Look two hands ... obey me, they do, they must be mine..." His crazed outbursts are not without humour: "Has anyone seen an equator lying around here?"

The Clares lift laundry in and out of baskets, glide through the portholes of Donald's boat, and hang up washing at three in the morning, while the Donalds pace the stage, or scribble with agitated, exaggerated motion at a desk. All five performers are expert at articulating through the body, or "sculpting the body in a poetic way," as John Carty describes it in interview. Despite their feverishness, the actors are as fluid as the sea. Sandra O'Malley is particularly breathtaking as she spins across the stage with a desk and chair.

The boat, wheeled from stage right to center-stage during the performance, is crafted in a dark timber, smudged with ochre and rust — in itself a work of art. But every detail in the show is aesthetically pleasing, like a sepia photograph, or a painting that's accrued the patina of old age. The lighting by Barry McKinney is designed to give the effects of chiaroscuro, as in the paintings of Georges de la Tour. Spotlights demarcate what we should be looking at — the curve of a neck or the slant of a shoulder — while the rest of the stage is plunged in darkness. According to Niall Henry the intention, visually, was to create the way light and dark appears underwater — hence the sepia palette, which is bro-

ken only once, when one of the Clares sprinkles lurid pink and blue confetti from the boat. It swirls like shoals of phosphorescent tropical fish.

The sound design by Joe Hunt brings us deeper into the dark, turbulent universe. We hear wind and crashing waves, and at one stunning moment, water-drips are set in rhythm like a drum beat. But the highlight is the loud, clashing, carnival-style music — a style Carty refers to as "burlesque grotesque." BBC film footage and radio excerpts are used intermittently, and at the very end, in a voice-over, providing immensely satisfying closure, the real Crowhurst declares that traveling for a long time in a small boat is not unlike the journey from birth to the grave.

The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst is challenging to its audience — it may even be accused of being inaccessible. But it showed this audience member a new way of seeing, and its feverish beauty haunted me for days.

Catriona Mitchell is currently studying for an MA in Writing at NUI, Galway.

TO KILL A DEAD MAN by Kevin McGee

Inis Theatre Company
Project Arts Centre, Dublin
4-15 Feb 2003; reviewed 4 Feb
BY PETER CRAWLEY

PRIVATE DETECTIVE GRADY MAY HAVE solved some tough cases before, but this one won't add up. A hardboiled gentleman in the Philip Marlowe/Sam Spade mode, Grady has capped the Wolfman, unravelled the Invisible Man, and shed light on the Dracula mystery, but his shamus credentials are challenged by a spate of "jigsaw" murders as corpses



mount up, missing various body parts. Just as femme fatale Elsa limps into his office with entreaties to find her employer, Dr Victor Von Frankenstein, the latest jigsaw victim turns up minus her wrists... Something just doesn't fit.

Shattering the conventions of 1940s film noir and the cult horror flicks of the 1930s, Inis Theatre reassemble their generic shards, using underlying gender politics as thematic adhesive. It becomes more of a sticking point, however, even when conducting the wit of writer Kevin McGee and the theatrical ingenuity of director David Horan to reanimate the patchwork creature. The genre-gender-hopper that Inis duo Carmel Stephens and Iseult Golden perform may have serious intentions, but an increasingly screwball-parodic tone doesn't quite warrant two acts,

GENDER-HOPPERS

Golden and Stephens in To Kill a Dead Man

while their political fuel reserves eventually run so dry that the production virtually sputters to its finish.

Golden's Grady, like so many of the pessimistic protagonists of film noir, is undergoing a severe crisis of confidence. But Grady's private dick has something different to conceal. Behind the requisite trench coat, smoky monologues and Linda Buckley's tiptoe bass lines, Grady is really Sally, an altogether more sensitive creature whose alter ego threatens to consume her. It transpires that Elsa (Stephens), assistant to Dr Von Frankenstein, is similarly overshadowed by her male counterpart — and isn't it odd how they are never seen together? And if such Dr Jekyll and Ms Hyde allusions, strewn through encounters with midget gym owners and sexist barbers, don't alert your gender suspicions, by the time Grady meets 200-

pound transvestite Phil the Longshoreman (one of Stephens' many roles) all identities are clearly freewheeling. "I promise you things won't get weird," assured Grady earlier. The audience were right to chuckle.

Meshing together noir and horror — doing a sort of detective-monster mash, if you will — the company continues a pop cultural trend of ironic juxtaposition (think of the music fad for marrying Bob the Builder and Eminem). Staying faithful to their intriguingly perverse artistic policy, Inis continue to "renegotiate" non-theatrical artforms for the stage. In fact the approach has now reached its apotheosis, eschewing specific texts (such as previous productions of Austen's novella *Lady Susan* and Carol-Ann Duffy's book of poems *The World's Wife*) to adapt an entire medium. Kate Clarke's set design achieves this most elegantly, extending the noir convention of Venetian blinds to create a towering backdrop of skyscrapers, representing a screen convention with conventional screens. Likewise, while McGee's script makes all the right nods in Raymond Chandler's direction, (although his one-liner update, "It was a redhead to make Noël Coward reconsider," isn't in the same pithy league as Chandler's, "It was a blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window,") it is Horan's appropriation of the mechanics of stagecraft towards interpreting cinematic narrative that is most striking.

Essentially, film and theatre speak different languages. Horan provides a rough translation. In one approximation of a two shot, close-up and point of view perspectives, Kevin Smith's lights narrow their focus, Grady holds out his lighter to the audience and the dame's cigarette somehow ignites. Most memo-

rably, in an unshowy and gloriously effective performance, Stephens' malevolent doctor is shown on Pathé News footage. Another company might rely on strobe lighting alone for the effect, but Stephens, elliptical movements accelerate the motion amusingly, all the while preserving her starched character's strained dignity. Despite such moments, the production becomes increasingly frayed, its multiple role-play and comic pace upset by frequent costume changes that lose fluidity. When Act Two relocates the action to a gothic castle, exchanging each comic convention to match the new buzzing, bleeping, clichéd décor, generic sutures begin to separate. It's tricky to strike a balance between parody and homage, and evermore slapstick shenanigans unsettle the late introduction of an intriguing moral conundrum — the detective deals in death for the benefit of the living, while the scientist kills with the intention of leading humanity towards immortality.

Inis never shy from thoughtful subject matter, but thankfully won't settle for anything less than entertainment. Here, the balance is never comfortably maintained, its gender issues fail to develop beyond game play, while plot devices become eye-rollingly preposterous (a revelatory telephone call reaches Grady at the laboratory). There are, of course, worse flaws than high ambition, and when the characters, play title, genre and medium are each in the grip of an identity crisis, it seems implausible that the production could be any more stable. Confusing and invigorating, witty and exasperating, the case may be solved entertainingly but the mystery somehow doesn't add up to the sum of its clues.

THE UNEXPECTED MAN by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton

The Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

28 Feb-7 Mar 2003; reviewed 7 Mar

BY BRIAN LAVERY

POOR, PRETENTIOUS PAUL PARSKY. He suffers the sorry fate of a successful French novelist, tortured by worries about whether his advancing age is making him bitter. Even the word itself is a kind of torture, and he repeats it as a mantra as the lights go up on *The Unexpected Man*, stretching it to almost three syllables as he sighs through the word — “Biiih-tt-uh!”

Bitter is indeed the word to describe the taste left in the audience’s mouths by this roundly uninteresting and unsympathetic character, especially when actor Emmet Bergin speaks in a painfully pinched voice that sounds like wringing lemon juice

out of a starched handkerchief.

Parsky is on a train to Frankfurt, sitting across the aisle from a French woman who is a big fan of his work — she has a copy of his latest book in her handbag — but who doubts whether she has the courage to approach him. For almost all of the play’s one act, these two characters speak only in monologues, occasionally casting glances across the aisle that divides them, revealing their inner selves and neuroses to the audience. Unfortunately, their particular compulsions are quite banal, and by the time Parsky and Marta (Anita Reeves) actually interact, the curtain is about to fall.

Bergin and Reeves’ acting partnership goes back decades, and one draw of this production was their on-stage reunion in a two-hander. The anticipated chemistry failed to

DISCONNECTED

Anita Reeves and
Emmet Bergin in *The
Unexpected Man*



PAT REDMUND

reviews

materialise, however, principally due to flaws in Yasmina Reza's play, raising questions about what a regional Irish theatre accomplishes by staging bland international work like this. It did bring in a packed house on the cold and rainy night in March I attended, however. And it does have its virtues, namely, Reeves' touching and restrained performance, and an elegantly convincing set designed by Kathy Strachan and lit by John Comiskey. Parsky, however, cannot be ignored. Bergin's wound-up, constipated demeanour may perfectly suit an arrogant, self-obsessed Frenchman, but it also eventually pushes the character to parodic extremes.

Unlike the rapid-fire dialogue and compelling philosophical conversations in Reza's international hit *Art*, the monologues here are lacking in rhythm and content. Every time one character builds up some degree of dramatic momentum, the intensity dissipates as soon as the baton is passed across the aisle.

When Parsky crudely muses on his 68-year-old friend Yuri, sneering at the idea of Yuri's young Japanese girlfriend — "Flat-chested!" he exclaims, repeatedly — and imagining that Yuri's prostate gland must weigh three ounces, the snide remarks feel heavy-handed and unnatural rather than edgy.

Such internal asides form the bulk of the monologues, and most of them go nowhere. These distracting non sequiturs add little to the characters except to make them more French, and more irritating: "Oh, why did I pay for Mrs. Turner to go to Biarritz?" Parsky wails, and then promptly discards the thought like his many other inconsequential reflections, without offering even a clue about who Mrs. Turner is, or

what their relationship might be. (The reason for Biarritz, not that it matters, was so that she could buy her son a motor-scooter.)

The thoughts rolling through Marta's head are no more significant, but at least they involve more compelling emotions. She fondly remembers boyfriends with whom she shared flirtatious, and ill-fated, relationships. She worries about her brother, who, like one of Parsky's characters, suffers from a type of mania and for 25 years has avoided the black tiles on his apartment building's floor, stepping nimbly on only the white and pink ones.

Bergin plays Parsky as a caricature rather than a full character, as if the fictional writer had come to embody some contrived persona that he wrote for himself; the result is occasionally amusing, but far too simple to be interesting. In contrast, Reeves' Marta is natural and human. She fiddles absent-mindedly with her scarf; she expresses herself sincerely. She also has all the good lines. Her desire for love and romance is "nostalgia for what might happen." She hits on what might be intended themes for the play — Parsky's fear of being understood, and that "We keep talking of other people because we're made up of other people" — but these ideas go undeveloped.

Things finally get interesting when Marta takes out the book, *The Unexpected Man*, and Parsky notices. He instantly loses his polished composure and turns into an insecure teenager, desperate to find out if she likes it. He breaks the silence to ask for her opinion, and, assuming that she doesn't know he is the author, he keeps his identity to himself. She plays along by pretending not

to know, and the coy game lets them engage in a passionate and frank conversation about his work. His character gains sudden and surprising depth, for example, when he admits how bad he thinks his books really are. When Marta accidentally ends the anonymity charade — she slips up and says to Parsky, "You wrote..." — they simply pause for a wry moment of recognition and continue as before.

All this happens way too late for the sparks between Parsky and Marta to generate any heat. When Marta blurts out that she'll go anywhere with him, Parsky looks at her, stunned by her honesty, and responds by laughing loudly in her face. Then the lights suddenly go out and the play is over, leaving the audience wondering if the laughter was Parsky's awkward acceptance or rude rejection of her offer — or just a cheap way to wrap up a clumsy play.

Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for The New York Times.

WHEEL by BDNC

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

15-25 Jan 2003; reviewed 22 Jan

BY SARAH LING

IF A TREE FALLS IN A WOOD AND NO one is there to hear it... When the government sends you a certificate in the post, promising a tree planted in your name, does that mean it actually exists? BDNC is the serial number of Ciaran Taylor's millennium tree. An apt name for the director's theatre company, as much of the creative activity in our theatres these days is based on nothing but blind faith. As lovers of the theatre and as theatre practitioners, we need art to pro-

vide life, growth, and nourishment; we hope that it will deliver and we hope that our trees have been planted, somewhere.

For their third production, BDNC made a character mask play. When we think of masks we usually think of characters like Harlequin and the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*. Full expressive masks, however, provide silent characters whose stories are told entirely through the expressions of the body and the way that the character physically interacts with real objects.

Wheel is no one's story. Its 15 main characters meander through the bits and pieces of life, and expose to us their deepest fantasies and their harshest realities. The company's starting point for this production was the writing of Flann O'Brien, and in three weeks of devising they explored the dreamlike nature of characters' minds and the very small, personal moments that life has to offer. The show explores these themes while simultaneously experimenting with mask work.

For the most part, the characters were presented with skill. Physical actions like polishing a bicycle or making sandwiches become fascinating as the face is masked; while the character's stories unfold, the audience realises that no words are needed when the body can say so much. There were certainly times, however, when performers could have been even more aware of their bodies and of every physical detail that the mask exposes. The mask seemed to disappear when touched by the real hand of the performer, and it was awkward when characters kissed and the masks literally touched each other.

Wheel presented the cycle of life and the constantly revolving exchange between young and old. The biggest

reviews

problem in its presentation was the set design. With very intimate scenes ending at the very point a character should begin to speak, they seemed to be cut short by long dark scene changes and constantly moving furniture. Cleverly used lighting design could have provided tangible spaces and locations with specific moods while resolving many technical problems that the set presented. Again, the church scenes, for example, were recognisable by the characters' physical behaviour rather than any stage semiotics. What the set did provide were clear entrances and this is important as we start to "read" the character from the moment the mask becomes visible.

While watching, I wished for magic that would transport me from Project's Cube and into another world; I wanted to join the fantasies that were unfolding in front of me. Small details, however, left too many unanswered questions — why did the librarian stamp every book? Returned books, borrowed books, they were all stamped without thought. The use of carrier bags from recognisable high street shops also kept me firmly rooted in reality. The second set of eyes of a dramaturg might have helped to free the director from these staging details, as the emphasis of his work is so obviously based on the physical performance of the mask.



DOING WHEELIES A member of the BDNC company in *Wheel*

Wheel is a gentle show. The stories are clever and enjoyable: my favourite is the tale of the old woman who made sandwiches for her grown-up son — she would chase him all day to make sure that he got them, even though he was on a bicycle and she on foot. Though *Wheel*'s simple stories were presented with too many technical complications of costume and set changes, the mood of the show still came across very clearly, and displayed a very interesting view of the world, in which we can make sense of reality by climbing inside our heads and embracing the great potential of our fantasy life. BDNC are constantly chasing new ideas, and this could be a good starting point for some very interesting work.



Sarah Ling has a BA and MA in Drama and Theatre Studies.

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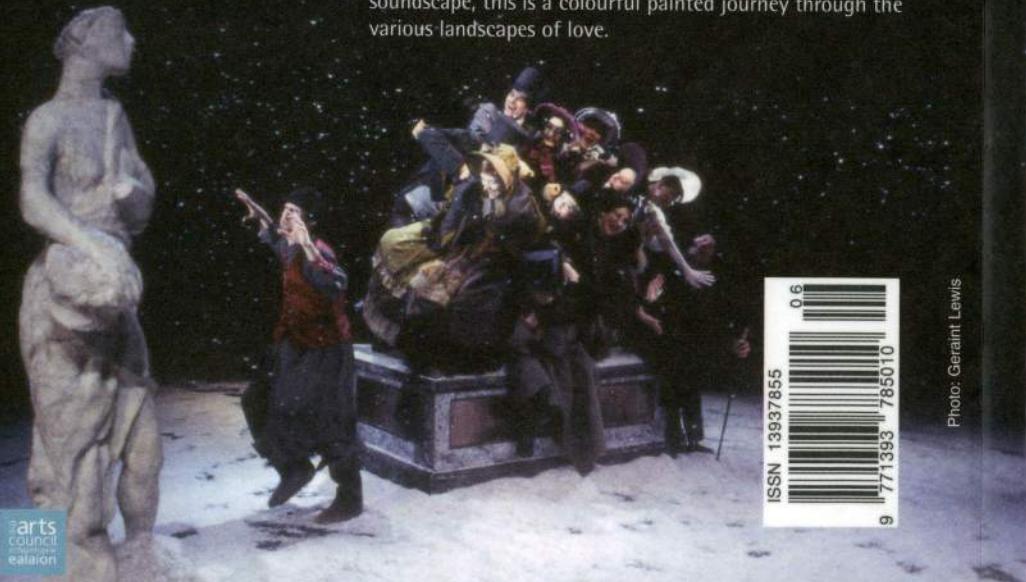
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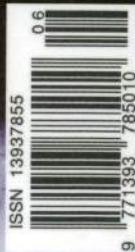


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