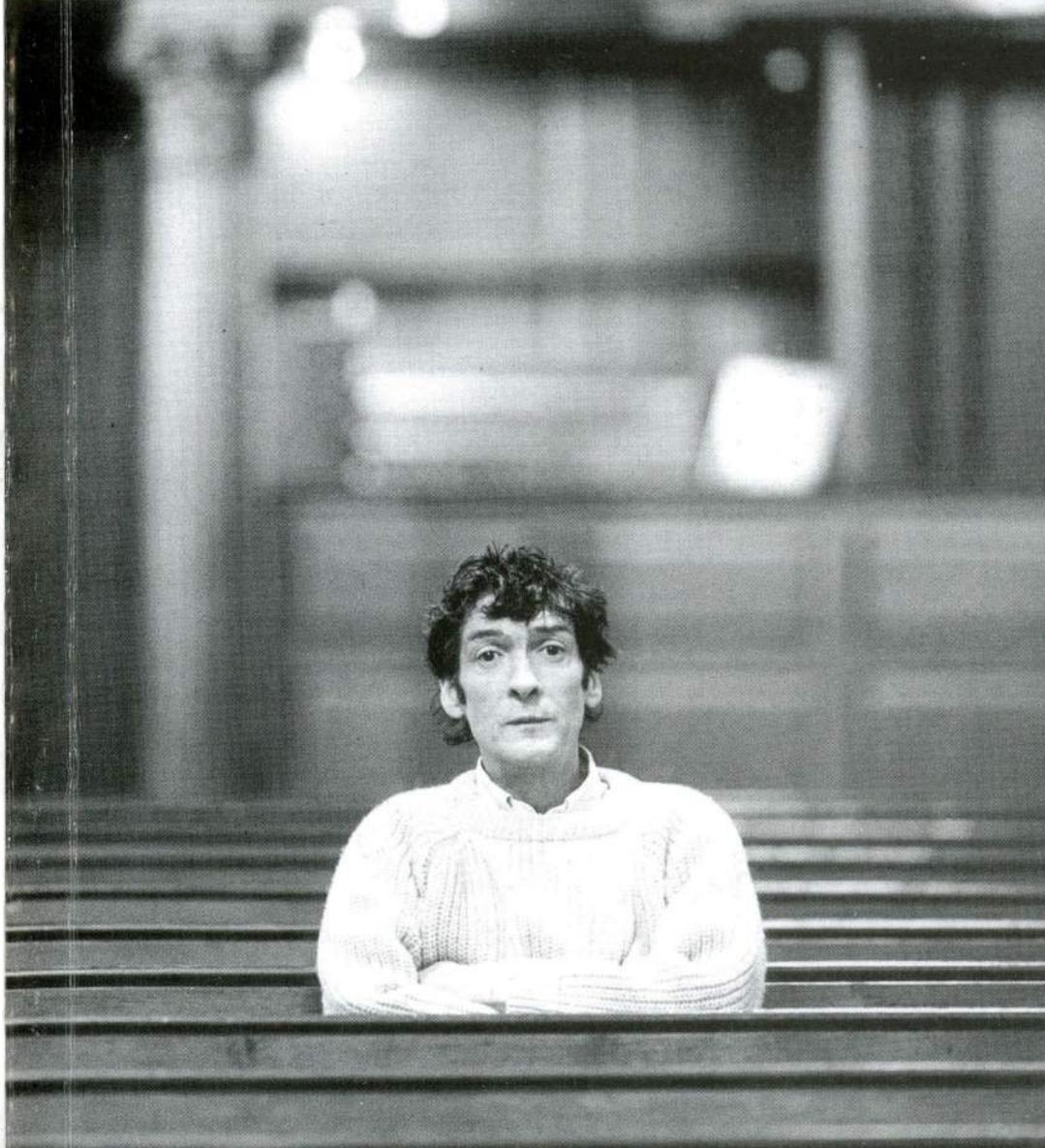


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MAGAZINE



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Who's Not Getting What

WE CROWDED HAPPILY IN OUR last issue about the "payoff" that had begun in the theatre sector in the Republic, as 13 theatre and theatre-oriented organisations received generous multi-annual grants representing, in some cases, 100-200% increases in their existing funding levels.

We spoke too soon.

In the next round of funding decisions announced in February of this year, nearly every revenue-funded theatre organisation in the Republic received a standstill grant. Less than five companies received raises, and they were small ones; only three theatre organisations were newly funded this year.

It is hard to fathom what strategy is at play here — or if there is a strategy at all. Did the Arts Council simply run out of money after granting so generously in its first round of decisions? A caste system is quickly developing wherein organisations funded multi-annually can flourish — and it is wonderful to see new initiatives, like the Rough Magic/Dublin Fringe Seeds project, already springing up as a result of multi-annual grants — while the rest of the sector struggles to function, and to get on the multi-annual register.

A different, but related situation, has arisen from the Northern Ireland Arts Council's recent round of grant decisions. There was a massive influx of

funds into arts organisations and events that prioritise access, including community and Irish-language organisations and regional venues; meanwhile nearly every independent theatre company received a standstill grant.

The issues here are complex and embedded in the unique cultural and political situation in the North, and require close scrutiny — and indeed we will be looking into the Northern funding environment in greater depth in our next issue. Our purpose here is not to argue for or against grants to access-oriented organisations but to highlight that in the North, as in the Republic, the bulk of the theatre sector now finds itself coping with decreased financial resources in the midst of an atmosphere of financial prosperity.

independent

itself coping with decreased financial resources in the midst of an atmosphere of (relative) financial prosperity elsewhere in the arts world.

Both Arts Councils are in the process of evaluating their strategies and policies, and this year's decisions might hopefully end up being a once-off phenomenon. Let's hope so, for the message sent by his year's grants is a deeply troubling one. The independent sector is a primary crucible of creativity; in the words of Paul Mercier it has been "the life force, touchstone, spring well, inspiration, and conscience of Irish theatre over the last 30 years." Keeping that sector vital should be a top priority.

The independent sector now finds itself coping with decreased financial resources in the midst of an atmosphere of financial prosperity.

McMISHAPS

THE MUCH-AWAITED WORLD PREMIERE OF MARTIN McDONAGH'S *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* has been pushed back nearly a month by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the announcement of the delay was made only two days before the scheduled 18 April opening. The RSC says that the production fell behind when an actor (Owen Sharpe) broke his arm and a performance had to be cancelled, and that the company needed additional time to meet the production's complex technical requirements (which we understand involve painting a live cat onstage and hanging a man upside down). Michael Billington will review the embattled *Lieutenant*, which is now slated to open 11 May, in Issue 9 of *itm*.

SEEDLINGS

Six writers have been chosen by the Dublin Fringe and Rough Magic for their Seeds playwrights development programme; they are Ioanna Anderson, Mark Doherty, Aidan Hearney, Oonagh Kearney, Gerald Murphy, and Raymond Scannell. The writers will be paired off with mentors — leading directors of new writing from Ireland and the UK — and will go through a script development process over the next year, which will result in a series of staged readings in spring 2002. The potential of each script for full production will then be investigated.

I'M HEARING VOICES

And critical ones at that. Planning for the second annual *irish theatre magazine* international critics' forum is underway; the event will take place in the second week of October and will feature critics and theatre professionals from a number of countries responding to work they have seen in the Dublin Fringe and *eircom* Dublin Theatre



LAWLOR ON LALOR: Pictured on this issue's cover is Lalor Roddy in "Court No. 1," Owen McCafferty's contribution to Tinderbox's *Convictions* project. Roddy was photographed by Tom Lawlor, whose images have appeared on some three *itm* covers — and counting. They are pictured above.

Festivals. *itm* is also planning a round-table on "The Writer and the Theatre: views on new play development" for late in 2001; both events are in association with the Arts Council's Critical Voices programme, in which international writers and practitioners will visit Ireland and write and broadcast for outlets here and in their home countries about Irish culture.

ABBEY SWEEPS AWARDS

The National Theatre won eight out of 12 awards in the 2000 *Irish Times/ESB Irish Theatre Awards*, which were announced at a gala celebration on 13 February at the Burlington Hotel, Dublin. While Tinderbox Theatre Company took home the coveted best production award, for *Convictions* (which is pictured on our cover and reviewed on page 64), the Abbey swept nearly all the other major prizes including best new play (for Tom Murphy's *The House*) and best theatre company.

"DEAR MARK, AND CONLETH, AND SEÁN, I ADORE YOU..."

The New York Times' lead theatre critic Ben Brantley has penned two love letters to Irish theatrical talent in the last few months. In January he raved about Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie*, which opened at PS122 in its original Bush Theatre production: "a thrilling new play... one of those rare, shiver-making instances in which language seems to become truly physical." *Howie* is slated to return to another off-Broadway theatre this autumn. It was less play than production — and particularly acting — that sent Brantley over the moon about the Broadway transfer of *Stones in his Pockets*; he praises actors Conleth Hill and Séan Campion as "human Etch-a-



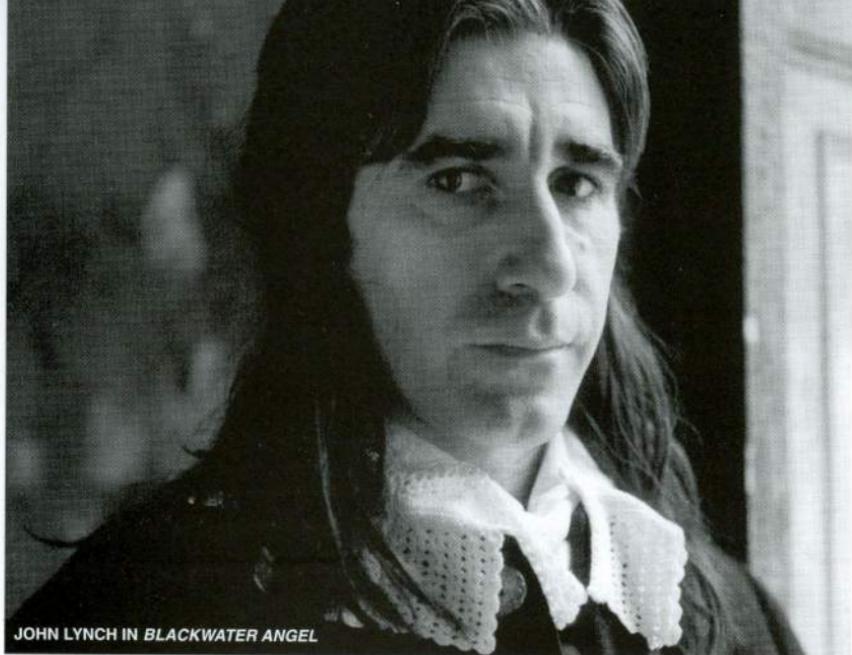
WOMEN'S WORK

Soon to hit the bookstalls is Carysfort Press' latest volume, *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women*, edited and with an introduction by Cathy Leeney. The tantalising selection of plays is: *Women in Arms* by Mary-Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, *Couch* by Síofra Campbell, *I Know My Own Heart* by Emma Donoghue, *La Corbière* by Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, *Lost Letters of a Victorian Lady* by Michelle Read, and *In the Talking Dark* by Dolores Walshe.

Sketches" who "offer overwhelming evidence that there are special effects the movies will never do better than the theatre does." *Variety*'s Charles Isherwood, however, found the whole *Stones* experience a yawn, saying that the play "hardly seems to merit [its] much-coveted prizes" and calling its central "gimmick" — that Hill and Campion play multiple characters — "hardly groundbreaking."

WHERE DO THE BUMS COME FROM FOR THOSE SEATS?

Alternative Entertainments, the Civic Theatre, and Creative Activity For Everyone (CAFE) are holding a day-



JOHN LYNCH IN *BLACKWATER ANGEL*

long seminar on "Audience Development — Myths and Realities" on 20th September 2001 at the Civic. The seminar will address and inform issues surrounding the challenge that all arts organisations face in developing audiences. For further information phone Dublin 462-7460.

THEATRE FORUM THINK TANKING

The Theatre Forum has received support from the Arts Council to commission research on priorities for development in the Irish theatre sector. Promisingly, they are focussing on developing an action plan rather than restating the underlying issues and concerns, with which the sector is well famil-

iar. They're now looking for a consultant to carry out the research — e-mail grainnehowe@abbeytheatre.ie for more information.

DO-IT-YOURSELF DOT COM

The Arts Councils in the Republic and the North have teamed up to create an "All Ireland arts and entertainment website" — www.art.ie — which allows companies and individuals to post their own listings. Check it out!

Talking about the North

What role does and can theatre play in the landscape of contemporary Ulster? It's a good, and complex, question, which Belfast's Linen Hall Library will open up through its upcoming "State of Play" programme, running from 15-30 June. The programme will feature play readings, talks, and a major exhibition. Phone Belfast 321-707 or email info@linenhall.com for details.

CORKONIANS ROCK FRANCE

UCC's production of Michael West's *A Play on Two Chairs* swept the recent Actéa Festival of European Student Drama in Albi, France.

The production took home honours for best actress (Hannah McCarthy), best actor (Paul Mulcahy), and best production (director Tom Creed and producer Lynda Radley). *Felicitations!*

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

Galglass are planning a celebration of touring theatre, called "Junction," in their home base of Clonmel from July 9-14: among the productions showcased will be Donal O'Kelly's *Bat the Father*, *Rabbit the Son* and Púca Puppets' *Mary Mary's Last Dance*, and the celebration will also include talks, workshops, and a festival club... The Lyric Theatre are presenting a new production of Gary Mitchell's *As the Beast Sleeps* directed by John Sheehan, running 27 Apr.-19 May... The Abbey are premiering Jim Nolan's latest, *Blackwater Angel*, from 4 May-9 June; then *Big Maggie* returns from 13 June-28 July; *Translations* follows from 1 Aug into September. In the Peacock, Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water* (17 May-30 June) is followed by an experimental *Playboy* directed by Niall Henry (5 Jul.-11 Aug.), and a return run of *The Hunt for Red Willie* (15 Aug. thru Sep.)... Tyne Daly is playing the title role in Brecht's *Mother Courage*, in a new version by Joe O'Byrne and directed by Vanessa Fielding. It starts performances at Dublin's Olympia Theatre on 31 May. O'Byrne's version is set against the backdrop of Troubles violence and will feature songs by Northern singer/songwriter Juliet Turner... Following the *The Homecoming* at the Gate, Alan Stanford will direct Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* running 5 July into September... Corn Exchange have something *un peu different* coming up next: a collaboration with the French theatre Comedie de Reims on *Death and the Ploughman*, a new version by



WHITHER THE GATE?

The Gate Theatre's grant for the year 2000 was £200,000, a third of the amount it received in 1999. Documents released by the Arts Council under the Freedom of Information Act reveal an increasingly strained relationship between the Gate and its funder over issues including financial accountability and the composition of the Gate's board. At press time the Gate was awaiting news of its 2001 grant, while moving plans forward to bring four plays by Harold Pinter to the Lincoln Center Festival in New York this summer, including *The Homecoming*, which will play first in Dublin from 7-30 June.



LOCO COUNTY LONESOME

Michael West of a 1401 German play by Johannes von Saaz. The production will be directed by the Comedie de Reims' artistic director Christian Schiaretti and opens 2 July for a three-week run in Project. Also coming up in Project are a work in progress from Michelle Read, *Play about my Dad* (15, 17, 19 May) and Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding*, a co-production between Purple Heart and Iomhá Ildánach (18-30 June)....Druid's next is Bernard Farrell's *The Spirit of Annie Ross*, directed by Bairbre ni Chaóimh, running 25 May-9 June; their announced produc-

tion of Geraldine Aron's *My Brilliant Divorce* has been postponed... Tall Tales Theatre Company, in association with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght, is producing Deirdre Kinahan's *Passage*, directed by Maureen Collender; after a 2 week run at the Civic it will tour and then play Andrews' Lane Studio from 14-19 May.... next up for Pan Pan Theatre Company is *Deflowerfucked*, which plays at the Granary Theatre in Cork in September and in the Dublin Fringe in October following a short Irish tour... Barabbas are planning a festival of three devised productions for late 2001, directed by Raymond Keane, Veronica Coburn, and Gerry Stembridge. They're also conducting a two-week physical theatre workshop in June — ring Dublin 671-2013 for info... Island Theatre Company are presenting Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* from 26 July through Aug. at the Belltable in Limerick and then tour the production in September; they're also presenting Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* from 8 Nov.-1 Dec... Quare Hawks' lauded production of *Cracked* opens an island-wide tour on 16 May at Garter Lane, Waterford and ending at the Beckett Centre, Dublin from 25-30 June... Black Box Theatre's new production of Pat McCabe's *Loco County Lonesome*, directed by Joe O'Byrne, finishes an Irish tour with a run in Andrews Lane, Dublin, from 30 Apr.-19 May... Bickerstaffe are bringing back *Rap Éire* for three weeks in Andrews Lane this August, and will be presenting another play, later this year, directed by Conall Morrison.

SUBSTANDARD

MARK PHELAN surveys the standards — or lack thereof — of actors' pay in the Republic of Ireland.

A RECENT SURVEY BY THE BRITISH ARTS COUNCIL REVEALED that nearly half of the performers questioned are turning down work because pay levels are so low — a finding shared by a similar British Equity survey two years earlier.

Although such research has not been conducted by the parallel organisations in Ireland, it is clear that actors' wages are actually worse in Ireland than in the U.K. There is widespread disagreement as to why this is so: some blame chronic under-funding, others the low minimum wage, a weak union, high taxation, inflation, a perennial influx of young actors who are willing to work for little or nothing, and in rare cases, unscrupulous management.

Most would agree that standards throughout the Irish theatre industry have improved from the days of the '80's and early '90's, when small fees and profit shares were the norm for actors who were

not employed by major companies. But though the independent sector has matured significantly since then, it is glaringly obvious that in terms of structures and formalised codes of practice, payment in the Irish theatre industry remains almost wholly unregulated. This means that relationships in the industry between actors, agents, the Arts Council, Equity and theatre management are complex, sometimes contradictory, and often confusing — all of which clearly isn't in the interest of the actors or the industry as a whole.

The document that is meant to regulate and standardise actors' pay, working

hours, and conditions is the Equity contract, but the list of companies that actually have signed a contract with Irish Equity is eccentric, to say the least. Most people I talked to believed that there were perhaps four or five companies that were signed up with Equity — in fact, there are 22 (see box). But what are the criteria to get on this list, and how often is it updated? Several of the companies listed — Co-Motion, Pegasus, Sticks and Stones — haven't been heard from for years. Down to Earth is an emerging group, smaller than many other mid-range companies that don't have Equity contracts. And several major players, particularly commercial managements, are conspicuous in their absence — where are Lane Productions (Andrews Lane's producing arm), Noel Pearson Productions, and Tony Byrne Productions (e.g., the Tivoli Theatre)?

The haphazard nature of this list is in fact symptomatic of what are widespread and worrying irregularities in the industry. For example, although a venue may have a contract with Equity, companies performing within it may not — an anomaly which confuses the terms and conditions of employment. More worrying, though, is the fact that many companies and agents who have not officially signed an agreement with Equity are still, as actor and agent (with Castaway Actors Agency) Jonathan Shankey explains, using the Equity agreement "as a *pro forma* contract." This practice, Shankey maintains, weakens the position of actors: "if an actor is injured in a show, but the theatre company hasn't signed up to the Equity agreement, the actor is not protected and won't be able to avail of Equity's legal aid, in spite of the fact that they've signed an Equity-based contract."

The branch secretary of Irish Equity, Gerry Browne, says that this unlicensed use of Equity contracts "is news to me. I'd no idea about this and I'd strongly disap-

prove of this practice... for a start, I don't think these contracts would be legally binding, in the sense that [companies] wouldn't be obliged by the contract to comply with the terms and conditions of the [Equity] agreement as they haven't signed up to it. The contract would simply be a piece of paper." This use of Equity contracts in a free-standing capacity, invariably leads to confusion and, according to Shankey, frequently, it is "all a bit of a lottery when it comes to getting overtime or holiday pay."

Management has also expressed dissatisfaction with acting contracts in Ireland. Deborah Aydon, who moved from London to Dublin nearly two years ago to work as executive producer of Rough Magic Theatre Company, says that she finds contracts here to be "very different...[they're] quite limited and out of date. There are a lot of grey areas given its brevity, and as it hasn't been updated for some years." Druid Theatre Company's managing director Ciarán Walsh describes the Equity contract as "antiquated" and says that Equity has been "relaxed in enforcing or updating the agreement"; accordingly, says Walsh, Druid has revised it on "an unwritten basis." Indeed many companies have taken it upon themselves to adjust or adapt contracts over the years, in what Upstate Theatre Company's artistic director Declan Gorman attributed to "a general culture which wishes to adhere to good practice."

Confusion concerning contracts is further compounded by the lack of an external, independent body to police them. An under-funded and understaffed Equity is simply unable to carry out what Gerry Browne described as the "impossible and thankless task" of policing contracts, while the Arts Council doesn't believe that this is a role which falls within its remit. Things have therefore largely been left up to the

goodwill of companies and the integrity of individuals. This situation is regarded by Gorman as "not such a bad thing, as there is an unwritten self-imposed code of good practice, on the whole, adopted by the industry." Actor David Pearse believes this unwritten code works well: "I've never been treated unfairly. Companies usually do try to do their best."

But the lack of any formalised regulatory structures or codified practices has meant that there is a "huge information gap," according to Gorman, between actors and the issues that relate to their working situation, especially as regards recent domestic and European legislation concerning workplace standards. Gorman adds that "clear guidance is needed but there is still no central information point for theatre companies, so that we're forced to independently consult Equity, the Arts Council, British Equity, other theatre companies and government departments regarding different things."

Others in the business also expressed a desire for greater clarity. "I'd prefer to see all theatre managements operating under the terms of the Equity agreement," says Shankey. "It provides better protection for actors in terms of health cover, holiday pay, and overtime — things usually left to negotiate after a contract is signed." "Though I'm loath, as an employer, to say

IRISH EQUITY THEATRE COMPANIES

(list provided by Irish Actors Equity)

Calypso Theatre Company
Co-Motion Theatre Company
Cork Opera House
Down to Earth
Druid Theatre Company
The Dublin Theatre Festival
The Gaiety Theatre
The Gate Theatre
Graffiti Theatre Company
Island Theatre Company
Macnas
The National Theatre
The Olympia Theatre
Pegasus
Red Kettle Theatre Company
Second Age Theatre Company
TEAM Theatre Company
The Passion Machine
Rough Magic Theatre Company
Sticks and Stones
Storytellers Theatre Company
Vesuvius Arts Ltd.

it," remarks Druid's Walsh wryly, "I'd like to see greater clarity with the actors' union."

Is it the Arts Council's role to fill this breach and police payment in the industry? The Arts Council's drama officer Enid Reid Whyte doesn't seem to think so: "While we are monitoring companies and their use of Council funding, we have always operated an arm's length policy. Companies need to run their own business, but at the same time, it is important that we enforce a standard of ethics and look after those in the workplace. I personally will be keeping an eye on pay practices and the Council will be insisting upon compliance with EU working time agreements. The Arts Council

isn't here to judge companies, nor do we wish to, but we will not condone unethical work practices."

Given this vacuum, should those working within the industry be considering other alternatives? One scenario, mooted by Gorman, is to evolve the Theatre Forum, a consortium of independent theatre companies in the Republic, into a more formalised body which could represent the independent theatre sector as a whole and negotiate with both Equity and the Arts Council on its behalf. An umbrella group like this would "make things a lot easier" admitted Browne, and many in the

industry, like Bedrock's artistic director Jimmy Fay, say they would support such a development.

In many ways, this would replicate the overarching structures which operate in the North and in Britain. Belfast-based Tinderbox Theatre Company, for example, is one of over 250 theatre companies that belong to the Independent Theatre Council, a formal body for UK companies which negotiates with British Equity on behalf of theatre management, in all matters relating to contracts and terms and conditions of employment. Such structures, according to Tinderbox's general manager Eamon Quinn, "protect the rights of both parties, which is healthy for the industry as a whole. This set-up helps develop a higher level of professionalism, which in turn protects the livelihood of everyone in the industry." Such a formalised set-up in the south could help address what Gorman names the "obvious need for clear benchmarks for pay, and clearly written guidelines for ensuring sound moral practice in the workplace."

So finally, how much *are* Irish actors paid? The funded end of the industry seems generally to have adopted Equity minimum as the bottom-line benchmark for rates of pay; that sum, as of April 2001, is £201.76 per week. This is barely more than the national minimum wage of £4.40 per hour, a sum which Shankey derides as "appallingly low." Shankey contends that "it has badly weakened [agents'] negotiating position with management to have a minimum which is essentially laughable."

Certainly this figure contrasts poorly with British Equity's minimum of £265 sterling per week, enjoyed by actors working in Northern Ireland as well as England, Scotland, and Wales. Equity's Browne places the blame for low levels of pay partially at the foot of the Arts Council, maintaining that low funding lev-



DAVID PEARSE: "COMPANIES USUALLY TRY TO DO THEIR BEST."

els make it impossible for companies to manage higher salaries, an opinion shared by many company managers. The Arts Council's Reid Whyte agrees that levels of funding "are not ideal," but says that significant increases are not likely in the immediate future. She added that with a large number of theatre companies now in receipt of multi-annual funding, there should accordingly be a knock-on effect in terms of actors' pay, and she said she has asked companies to consider increases.

Current pay practices vary dramatically across the board. Some companies pay a flat rate for all actors, while others use a sliding-scale system. According to representatives of each company, the National Theatre's wages vary from £225-£500 per week; the Gate's from Equity minimum to £500 per week; Druid from £230 to an

ROS KAVANAGH



PETER GOWEN: "ACTORS ARE DESPERATELY UNDERPAID OVER HERE."

undisclosed maximum; Island Theatre company from £202-£300; Rough Magic's flat rate is £345; Bedrock pays from £250 to £300; and Upstate pays "a little over £200."

All of these companies stated that they were committed to seeing pay rates go up. The Abbey's general manager Martin Fahy says that the £500 ceiling would soon be broken with the implementation of the national wage agreement; the Gate boasted that top salaries had increased in recent years by a whopping 27%; and Upstate were hoping to increase pay to £300 per week. In terms of compensation for actors working away from home, Bickerstaffe said they paid £5 over the current per diem rate of £36.00-49.20, and Druid, Island, and Bickerstaffe all find and pay for out-of-town actors' accommodation.

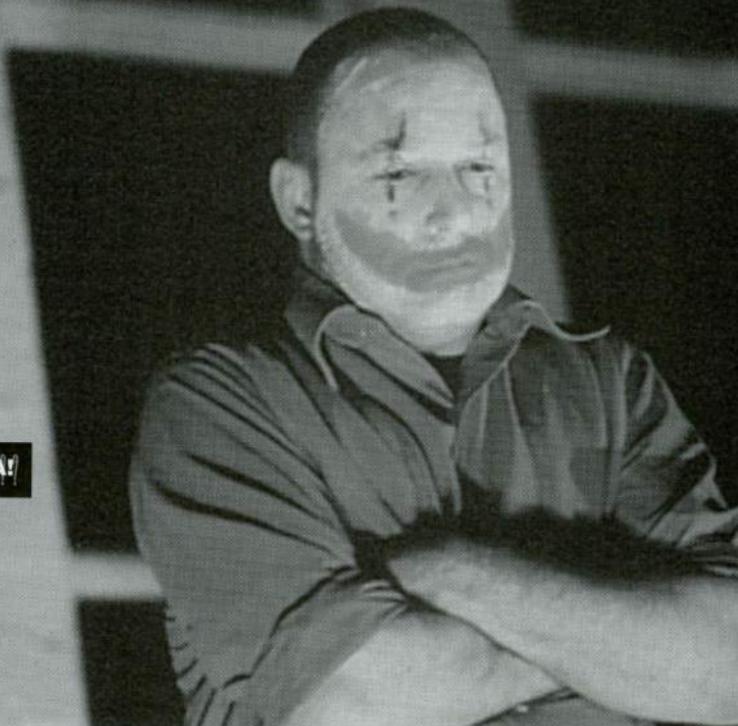
Actors' opinions about their working

conditions almost vary as much as their rates of pay. Some, like, Peter Gowen, are bitterly unimpressed with current salary rates: "Actors are desperately underpaid over here. The disparity between pay at major English and Irish companies is vast. I know that companies are all hampered by their funding, but it is disgraceful to think that a 17-year-old labourer earns more in a week than an actor with 20 years' experience." David Pearse sees things from a sunnier perspective: "I've never made a lot of money acting, but I never expected to be paid well... it's not about that... in some ways you have to have a vocation, and if you want to make money you're in the wrong job... you should be a doctor or an engineer or a theatre producer — that's where the money is!"

Tinderbox's Quinn, however, describes wage levels as "a disgrace, especially when you consider that no graduate would work for the same wage and actors undergo a similar level and amount of training as university graduates." He also says that the idea that work in the sector was in some way "vocational" has meant for years that the industry, particularly in the south, has been shored up by hidden subsidies, and while he personally admired those who work for free, "this practice hasn't helped the industry."

In the last issue of this magazine, Enid Reid Whyte declared that the "days of the hidden subsidy have got to end." But it is apparent that this cannot be achieved while the industry remains rife with irregularities, and this is particularly true of contracts which are patently in need of revision in the world of a rapidly changing workplace. The theatre sector must make an effort to structure itself in a more open and accountable fashion, if the livelihoods of actors, and in turn, the life of the industry is to be protected.

Mark Phelan is news editor of this magazine.



QUIZOOOLA!

& A QUESTIONS & ANSWERS Q

THE PAN PAN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE SYMPOSIUM has emerged as one of the most important dates in the calendar for artists and audiences interested in theatre that pushes the boundaries. Here, **PETER CRAWLEY** offers an appreciation of the work of those masters of the Q&A format, *Forced Entertainment*; **MARK PHELAN** questions the contribution of two Irish companies in the Symposium; and **MATTHEW CAUSEY** wonders if the Symposium's interrogation of the field is going far enough.

Are you enjoying the game?

APERFORMER IS SITTING ON A CHAIR, doubled over with embarrassment — her face is in her hands. I sit directly in front of her doing exactly the same. Frozen together in this mirror image, both of us aware of the other, the gap between stage and audience dissolves — this is what makes Forced Entertainment brilliant.

The show is *Quizoola!*, a questions-and-answers extravaganza that breaks the mould of theatre and quiz show alike. It is one of two off-the-wall productions Forced Entertainment brought to the fourth Dublin International Theatre Symposium this January, in their first visit to Ireland. Since 1984, this Sheffield-based company has sought to address audiences in a provocative and contemporary way, eschewing set play texts or anything approaching conventional narrative.

We are entering the sixth hour of *Quizoola!*, a "durational performance" during which the audience are encouraged to come, go, and return as they please. I've stayed for almost the whole thing, unable to miss a moment. In the Green on Red Gallery, actor Sue Marshall — exhausted, giddy and freezing — has just been asked by the other actor on stage, "What is the chemical formula for ice?" Beleaguered by rapid-fire questioning, she brusquely answers, "Water... plus... cold."

The question is one of thousands that have been posed all night; most read directly from a huge bundle of worn and discoloured typed pages; some divined from previous responses; some plainly coming from out of nowhere. Trapped before us in a circle of lightbulbs, wear-

ing slapdash clown makeup, the pair of actors look like circus rejects marooned on a desert island, passing the time with interrogations. This is so engrossing it's almost unhealthy.

"Are you enjoying the game?", they ask one another as the roles of quizzier and respondent are swapped every half an hour or so. It is one of the most revealing queries in *Quizoola!* When it comes to theatre, Forced Entertainment may not play by the book, but as director/writer/performer Tim Etchells explained later in a public discussion, there are strict rules to their game. Just as the "channel-hopping"-style randomness blurs the lines between what is rehearsed and improvised, Forced Entertainment never allow themselves get stuck in a groove. If the performance becomes too humourous, the interrogation swings into a darker vein — often with the shock and force of a gun blast. The pattern is repeated in the other piece the group performed in the Symposium, *Speak Bitterness*.

Speak Bitterness was originally another marathon performance; they've since streamlined it into the hour-and-40-minute version they perform in the Samuel Beckett Theatre. Like *Quizoola!* it relies heavily on reams of paper, covered this time with confessions rather than questions. The pages are spread over a downstage metal table, behind which the seven actors stand in business suits and read the confessions. Surrounded on three sides by blue tarpaulin walls and lit by strings of lightbulbs that span out over the heads of the audience, the performers seem like employees of an evil corporation finally coming clean about their dirty secrets. We quickly realise, however, that the confessions — ranging from mundane to farcical to diabolical — are no burden to the panel,

who tell them in the third person, distributing the "blame" until none remains.

"We thought that ethics and free-market capitalism were... the same thing" one of the suits labours. "We shot Muslims and posed for photographs with the bodies," announces another, in hysterics. Sometimes they laugh their statements off, other times they seem to be on the verge of breaking down. They sit, they stand, they move around their confined box, eyeballing the audience, forming allegiances, distancing themselves from any outcast whose admission seems too incendiary or too genuine. And then — all of a sudden — they retreat to the rear of the stage, abandoning the set confessions and leaving a lone scapegoat downstage to repeat confessions they call out. "We didn't know that Prada had brought out a line of disposable nappies," one sounds off. "But when we found out we rushed out and bought them... The stitching was superb."

This improvised call-and-response section is intriguing and involving for the same reason that *Quizoola!* is so gripping: it's another game. And we are figuring out the rules fast. In the discussion Etchells says that during *Quizoola!* he feels there are two performances going on in the spectator's mind — the answer the performer gives and the answer the audience member thinks. When Forced Entertainment go to lengths to affirm the presence of the audience (even checking if they recognise anybody in one instance) and as their games become more apparent, audience participation doesn't just seem possible — it seems inevitable. And that participation is not limited to the mind.

Etchells recalls a New York performance of *Quizoola!* when a woman in the audience offered to relieve a cast member to allow her go to the toilet. It didn't happen,

but the possibility is intriguing. Viewing the shows I repeatedly found myself ready to volunteer questions, answers, and confessions, but stopped just short of interrupting. Forced Entertainment dangle this kind of participation before the audience like a carrot on a stick, leading us into their performance. During *Quizoola!* I am watching and know that I am watched. As I peek around at the faces of the audience I see others peering back. We share the performers' space and, as the night wears on, we share their fatigue. Here the usual "suspension of disbelief" no longer applies. Rather we piece together what is real and what is fiction from competing affirmations and denials, truths and fictions. We all come up with our own answers.

Describing the Forced Entertainment experience is like trying to explain a melody's charm. It's personally affecting yet hard to convey. Simultaneously achieving all that's good about theatre — community, challenge, entertainment — while turning the theatrical experience on its head, Forced Entertainment shake you up in the process. I tried to recount huge chunks of the performances to friends to put them in the moment. But I guess you had to be there.

If Forced Entertainment lived up to the paradox of their name, the disturbing but fascinating level of self-exposure was its epitome. We devour the revelations of the players, their hopes, lewd details, and common fears — in short, their bare humanity. It works both ways, however — under their scrutiny we run the risk of being exposed for the interrogators, the confessors, and the voyeurs we ourselves become. Very late in the night, one of *Quizoola!*'s final questions — "What do you remember?" elicits a long meander through the life of Tim Etchells, including a vivid recollection of the happiness he felt at the birth of his

son, mixed with the realisation he no longer loved his partner. Is it startlingly candid or calculatedly devised? With Forced Entertainment you can never be sure. They occupy the gaps in performance, in text, and in reality... it's an amazing place to visit.

Peter Crawley is studying for an MA in journalism at DIT.

Saying nothing new?

IN ITS SHORT LIFESPAN, THE DUBLIN International Theatre Symposium has established itself as a vital, vibrant forum for both Irish practitioners and their public. Featuring performances from prominent European companies alongside more homegrown groups, it has facilitated discourse and debate through the exploration and explanation of celebrated companies' different visual, verbal, and physical styles and techniques.

In the past decade or so an increasing number of Irish theatre companies have sought to explore and experiment with new styles and techniques in an effort to liberate performance from its traditional, literary stranglehold. The Symposium's showcasing of "the extraordinary variety of styles, approaches and viewpoints in contemporary theatre," has helped galvanize this process, whilst gilding it with an international perspective, in an effort to generate new creativity from Irish companies and help them make the limits of theatre stretch yet further.

This year, many of the companies taking part participated fully in fulfilling this purpose — Unga Klara and Forced Entertainment were particularly commendable — but the contributions of others, specifically Pan Pan and

Ridiculusmus, were deeply questionable. It was hard to see how the sloppy, shallow work from these two Irish companies furthered the Symposium's serious objectives. Both companies seem to revel in an anarchic, absurdist approach to theatre, which they might see as running contrary to definitions or ideologies; but behind such an all-protecting proviso, indolence can easily masquerade as innovation.

Although both of these Irish compa-



nies gave performances during the week, they failed to participate meaningfully in the debate the Symposium was designed to facilitate. In fairness, Pan Pan must have been severely stretched as they were the organisers of the whole event, but it was nevertheless worrying that they did not participate in the programme of talks, which gave companies an opportunity to discuss the influences on, and intentions of, their work and how this in turn has affected their creative processes and artistic policies.

Ridiculusmus did make time for a "talk," but it was merely a mildly entertaining extension of the same surreal stand-up routines upon which most of their performances are based, and this precluded any serious discussion of their work, which might have benefited both audiences and actors alike.

Pan Pan offered one production in the Symposium, *Standoffish*; it was a particularly empty experience. The very title, of course, suggests a deliberate eschewal of the saccharine sentimentality and easy empathy which sweetly greases so much of Irish drama, but their manic deconstruction/mere destruction of the audience's notion of a play at best bordered on puerile and at worst on pretension.

In the course of *Standoffish*, one of the actors whipped out his willy and urinated on stage, soliciting giggles from the some of the audience and an uncomfortable shifting in seats from others. A palpable sense of panic passed among many in the audience as they anxiously realised that these lunatics were capable of doing anything, and we collectively shuddered at the scary possibilities that this entailed. However, the radical potential of this "danger" soon dissipated as what could have been a daring attempt to disconcert the audience and detonate traditional theatrical taboos

was sadly played for laughs. The actors regularly tried to court the favour of the audience: at one stage, after performer Emma McIvor gave the most graphic of blow jobs to a microphone, the actors moved amongst the audience and hugged individuals in gestures of "maximum love vibes from us to you." But in contrast to McIvor's hard-core fellatio, these hugs were hollow and fake — they hardly held us at all. These empty embraces emphasised the cynical superficiality of the piece.

If you dispense with text, plot, and narrative — what remains? Well, possibly direction, lighting, choreography, technique, discipline.... But all of these seemed missing in this messy show, which was particularly wasteful given the evident individual talent of the actors, McIvor in particular. But their charisma alone couldn't carry the evening.

This was also the case, to a lesser extent, with the double act of Ridiculusmus' Jon Hough and David Woods. Both are undoubtedly talented performers who proved themselves sublimely suited to staging the surreal world of Flann O'Brian in their previous work. But both their shows in the Symposium were devised pieces and their hilarity was a more of a hit-and-miss affair.

The absurd, demented incoherence of *Yes Yes Yes* defies any analysis or interpretation. This was a manic shambles of a show, supported by a few hilarious gags and my growing, grudging admiration that just like the Morecombe and Wise whom they are often compared to, Woods and Hough are able to get away with a lot despite very little material. *Yes Yes Yes*, though, was altogether more successful than *Say Nothing*, as the former, in its madcap meaninglessness, said nothing about anything in particular, whereas the latter tried so very hard to

say something about the political situation in the North.

A basic problem with this piece (play is incorrect, for this was a sketch stretched out), was the fact that both actors performed within the cramped confines of a tiny patch of grass. This effectively recreated the claustrophobic tension which exists between divided communities in the North, but unfortunately imprisoned the actors in a space which precluded a performance making "full use of the company's physical dexterity," as promised in the programme.

One actor played a range of local characters and the other an earnest PhD peace studies researcher, who originally hails from the town of Craigavon, situated in the sectarian heartland of mid-Ulster. They engaged in a series of conversations, in which they strived not to reveal their own allegiances whilst angling for those of the other, under the cover of inane and innocuous small talk, all of which says nothing but means everything.

The "reticence" of the speakers prevents them from communicating with each other above tribal trenches, and so these conversations are ritually rewound and repeated — a repetition that rapidly becomes tiresome, but then again that is the point of the piece. At one stage, in the midst of this monotony, their inane dialogue was punctuated by a sudden spurt of blood from above which spattered both their suits, in what was perhaps a non-sequitur reference to the random bloodshed which can result from such casual talk.

Whilst all of this is an interesting area to investigate, it must be questioned whether such a literal evocation of Northern incalcitrance is best suited to theatre, based as the genre is upon expression. It seems that medium and message are at odds here, and it is far from an illuminating clash; the material

seems better explored in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, who wrote of the "menace in a knowing nod." Accordingly, the fact that *Say Nothing* did little to delve deeper into this linguistic pirouetting; and that its programme was a rambling, potted history of recent bombings, beatings, and stabbings seasoned with selected extracts from poets, politicians, and pundits, served cold with cliché; meant in effect that it said nothing new.

As pieces of absurd stand-up, *Yes Yes Yes*, *Standoffish*, and *Say Nothing* succeeded in entertaining audiences, but their surreal surface comedy belied their lack of dramatic depth. The essential vacuity of these pieces seemed to me to be deeply at odds with the very manifesto of the Symposium, given its emphasis on workshops, talks, and performances, which, in demonstrating the variety of verbal and physical styles, disciplines, and techniques of contemporary European theatre, is designed to inspire, inform, and innovate Irish theatre in the future.

—Mark Phelan

New forms are required

THE STRONG POINTS OF THE DUBLIN International Theatre Symposium are clear. The useful combination of full-length theatre works, demonstration performances, workshops, and artist talks allow both general audiences and theatre practitioners access to a wide variety of contemporary Irish and European theatre. Artists are able to create a dialogue amongst themselves regarding the processes of theatre politics and aesthetics. Audiences are able to get a deeper understanding of the work of contemporary artists and perhaps

have an opportunity to have their own voice heard. The Symposium is almost unique in being able to support and advance non-commercial, experimental theatre practice in Ireland and beyond.

Theatre in Ireland, for many good reasons, has often relied on the tradition of psychological realism to help construct a national identity and ideology. However, a new generation of Irish alternative theatres, including Pan Pan, Barabbas, ArtsLab, Blue Raincoat, CoisCéim, Irish Modern Dance Theatre, Operating Theatre, and others, are continuing the century-old work of experimental world theatre that attempts to make a theatre whose aesthetics, ethics, and politics are not dominated by realism but which looks to find performance techniques that are responsive to the contemporary culture. The dialogue of these theatres is the appropriate exchange of the Symposium. Therefore, the vision and commitment of Pan Pan Theatre Company to the Symposium needs to be applauded, admired, and supported. Nonetheless, it may also be time to rethink the structure of the Symposium in order to truly advance current theatre practice in Ireland, and not simply replicate past successes.

Up until this point, the focus of the Symposium has relied, primarily, not completely, on acting training in devised, physical theatre. Many of the companies (Odin Theatr, Blue Raincoat, Theatr Osmego Dnia, Unga Klara) which have taken part in the

Symposium over the years rely on models of theatre-making such as corporeal mime, Grotowski-inspired physicality, and collective devising schemes that have developed out of a long tradition of alternative theatre. Many styles and influences exist including commedia dell'arte from the Renaissance; a variety of Asian performance practice; Meyerhold's biomechanics in revolutionary Russia; the work of Grotowski and the Polish Theatre Lab; Decroux and Lecoq in France; and the American collectives of the 1960s, including the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the Performance Group.

Although acting training in Ireland has long been neglected (and TCD's Professional Acting Program is a welcome addition to the island), does the Symposium need to be weighted so heavily around the model of actor training? The stated goal of much devised, physical theatre is to foreground the art of the actor. Grotowski wrote in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, "We consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the



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core of theatre art." The bias for text-based theatre on the commercial stage, and for performer-based devising on the Irish alternative stages, runs deep. Brian Friel has made his thoughts clear in an accompanying document to the 1999 Friel Festival by suggesting that directors are "bus drivers," usurpers of the art of the theatre, which rightly belongs to the writers and actors. The Symposium is making its bias clear in a reliance on actor-based, devised theatre.

The disciplines of theatre-making are varied, and their respective strategies will offer different solutions to the problem of making theatre suited to our times. Symposium "think-tanks" might be conducted that would combine the talents and concerns of directors, playwrights, actors, performance artists, film and video artists, installation artists, designers, multimedia technologists, theorists, dramaturgs, and academics (god forbid the latter!). The goal would be to mix it up, privilege difference so as to support new performance processes and products. In the future, why not a sharing of ideas with scientists and engineers who are working in areas of scientific visualisations, or genetic engineering, or the human-computer interface, in order that theatre artists might more fully engage in the critical discourses that are shaping our identities and culture? Brecht suggested on many occasions that the theatre needs to look to the world at large to find answers to its own form.

The most unproductive element of the Symposium is its isolation in the limited genre of "live theatre." Performance is now an accepted mode within a variety of the arts. Performance art, multi-media and installation performance and digital, internet and electronic performance are engaged in adventurous explorations of the limits of theatre and have much that

can inform the work of the contemporary theatre in Ireland. Cross-discipline discussions and workshops between theatre practitioners and artists working in performance could perhaps stimulate not simply a sharing of previously established ideas but allow for a wider concept of the art of performance to take hold on the island.

If one assumes that Irish contemporary culture is substantially different from that of the Irish renaissance, which gave growth to the realist theatre tradition that runs from Synge to McDonagh; if Irish culture now sees new models of identity and nation, accelerated modes of communication, and a new involvement in Europe and the world, then new forms are required.

Are the aesthetics and ideologies of realism and devised, physical theatre the appropriate response to 21st century culture, which is a culture, as Lea Vergine argues, made of "shifting identities, technological contaminations, and generally of hybridisations"? Is the theatre in Ireland partitioned in isolation from the general discourse of contemporary art that looks to create border crossings at the levels of genre, politics, and identity? If the answer is yes, the Dublin International Theatre Symposium may be one arena in which to begin to propose solutions.

Finally, in years to come, perhaps with the aid of additional funding, the Symposium can earn its title of "International" through the inclusion of world theatre and performance artists from outside Europe. That might be a good start to opening the discussions to wider concerns. Only half-joking, I propose a new name for the symposium: The Dublin International Interdisciplinary Performance Symposium.

Matthew Causey lectures in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

CAR PARK

2:15 AM

TOPLESS

New play development is bustin' out all over the Irish theatre sector, and the last year has seen a number of companies appoint literary managers and dramaturgs. But are the new jobs, schemes, and competitions the best way to support writers and encourage innovation?

In the first of a series of two articles, ROSY BARNES surveys the current dramaturgical landscape.

IRELAND'S INDEPENDENT theatre sector is beginning to recognise the need for literary management. For many years there has been only one full-time literary manager on the island (at the Abbey), and while a few of the smaller companies have worked with literary managers and dramaturgs (with varying degrees of formality) it seems that there is now a move to solidify and fully recognise the role, with many new appointments being made. While he has been associated with the company for ten years, it was only last year that Charlie McBride was officially appointed part-time new writing manager of Druid Theatre Company. Last year also saw the appointment of playwright Loughlin Deegan as Rough Magic's part-time literary manager. Gavin Kostick, also a playwright, has recently taken on role of literary officer at Fishamble; Project Arts Centre now have

INNOVATIVE: DYT's Timebomb

THE LIT MAN (AND WOMAN) COMETH

a play director in residence, Chris White, whose remit may cover new play development; and even Tallaght's Civic Theatre has a dramaturg "on call" in the form of director Rebecca Bartlett.

Whilst the knock-on effects of the Arts Council/*An Chomhairle Ealaíon*'s new funding strategies are complex and many-fold, it seems clear that these

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changes are playing some part in the present trend towards finding and facilitating new writing for the stage.

There has also been a visible upsurge of new writing initiatives. Last year Druid began its Début series — semi-staged productions of plays by relatively untested writers. Now Rough Magic and the Dublin Fringe Festival are jointly presenting their own major new writing initiative, called Seeds; and Corcadorca and Fishamble are offering playwriting competitions, Corcadorca's launched last year, and Fishamble's officially announced in March of this year. The Gate Theatre, as well, made an attempt to install a script development programme in 1999; but with the departure of development manager Judith Roberts last November, the situation there remains unclear.

Loughlin Deegan, for one, believes that good literary management is essential to the future health of Irish playwriting. "One of the great failings of Ireland at the moment is that companies who are under-resourced, who don't have literary managers... are commissioning scripts for the benefit of the Arts Council" claims Deegan. "An awful lot of writing that is staged is new writing that is under-developed, or developed too early."

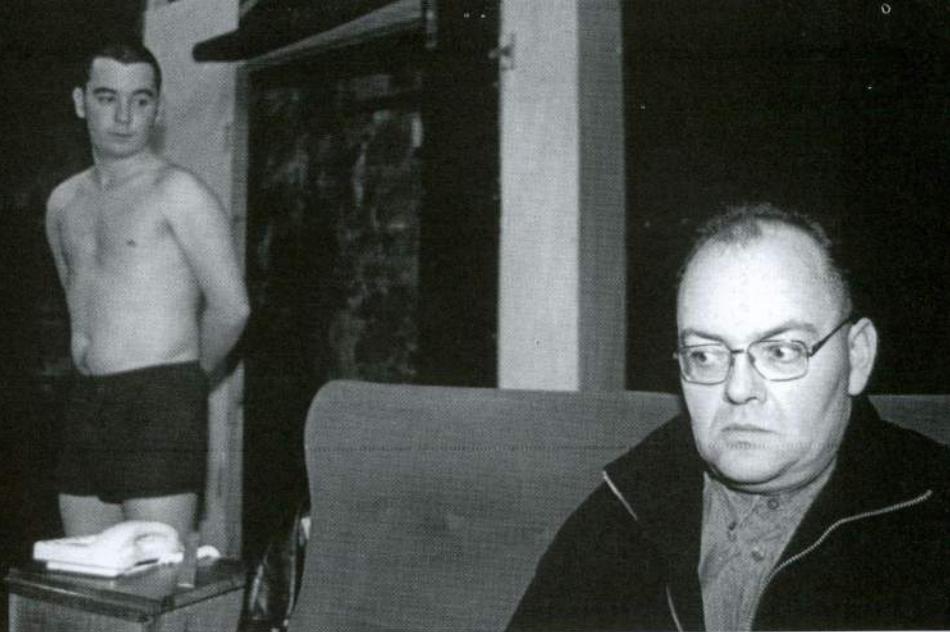
Seeds is Rough Magic and the Fringe's largest and most formal attempt to redress this balance. Launched in March, Seeds ("Seek out, Enable, Encourage, Develop, and Stage") will pair six writers with a literary manager and an experienced new-writing director each, over a period of months to develop a play. The finished scripts will receive public readings early next year.

With few producing houses and building based companies, Ireland significantly depends upon non-building based companies and touring companies (those that need to tour to be financially viable) to produce new work. However, as Deegan points out, companies are limited in both the number of productions they can produce and the risks they can take. "In the case of Rough Magic," he says, "...the risk of producing new plays is magnified because the balance of the company's income a year is weighed on two productions...the company has to look at alternative ways of providing productions for young writers." Deegan believes initiatives such as Seeds offers one practical way of negotiating these limitations to encourage new work.

The Druid Débuts programme, which has already been running for a year, is similar to the Seeds model. The scheme, which was nominated for a special judges' prize in *The Irish Times/ESB Theatre Awards* this year, allows a handful of writers to work with Charlie McBride over a period of months, before showcasing the final plays in a season of semi-staged productions. McBride sees the Débuts as useful not just because it might uncover new plays for Druid, but because it "nurtures writing in general."

CORCADORCA'S General Manager, Dyane Hanrahan, insists that Corcadorca's playwriting competition — launched last year — is also for writers rather than the company (although 50% of Corcadorca's yearly professional output comes directly from the project). "It is very difficult [for a writer] to hand over a piece of new writing" she says, explaining that the idea of a competition was developed in order to make it easier for writers to submit plays in a more anonymous, unpressured way.

As yet, Corcadorca have no literary per-



DEBUTING: The Welcome by Gerald Murphy, one of the *Druid Début* plays

sonnel, relying instead on artistic director Pat Kiernan to workshop and develop scripts. The competition, which is to run every two years, offers prize money and a full production for the winner. The company also intend to set up a "theatre laboratory" to commission and develop the work of eight writers on a given theme.

With the watch-words: "see, if," Fishamble's new literary officer Gavin Kostick is taking a slightly more wide-ranging approach. His aim is three-fold: to stage public readings to "encourage the writer to look at things objectively," to run workshops, and to organise a play-writing competition. The competition has a site-specific brief — writers will be asked to write a piece for outdoor performance in Meeting House Square, Temple Bar. Kostick also intends to launch a website both to encourage play-writing, and to give dramaturgical advice online. It is an audacious plan.

However, Kostick is enthusiastic about first-time writers, even professing to be "fond" of unsolicited scripts — that is, scripts that are submitted to theatre companies without having been invited, commissioned, or procured through a competition or scheme. It is in the somewhat unglamorous area of unsolicited scripts that Deegan sees potential for improvement within the Irish system as a whole. It is something he has been working on within Rough Magic.

"One of the weaknesses in the company when I joined was how we were communicating with writers who were sending work unsolicited.... This is generally very poorly handled by Irish theatre companies. People sending out scripts very often...were not getting any response at all [or it's] up to one or two years after that the writer gets a completely inadequate letter basically telling them thanks but no thanks."

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Deegan hopes that a more efficient handling of unsolicited work within companies could eventually lead to better systems and communication between companies — so that, for example, a script that is not suitable for one company could be suggested to another. At the moment, most companies have neither the resources or the personnel to deal with unsolicited scripts, leading to a hearsay system of production and commissioning based around people already in the theatre "scene."

While the presiding view seems to be that you have to work in theatre to write a play, Druid's McBride, interestingly, believes writers have to live a little. Not just interested in hot young playwrights, McBride believes that older writers who have a little real-life experience often have more to say. Sending in a script unsolicited remains one important route for non-theatre people to get a play produced.

"This is going to sound very... snobbish," says Alex Johnston, who is a playwright as well as Bedrock Productions' literary manager, "but I think perhaps not enough is being done to *discourage* new writing in Ireland..." While Johnston is generally supportive of the move towards encouraging new writing, he is skeptical about the ability of such new writing schemes to combat what he sees as a problem of lack of imagination in Irish theatre as a whole.

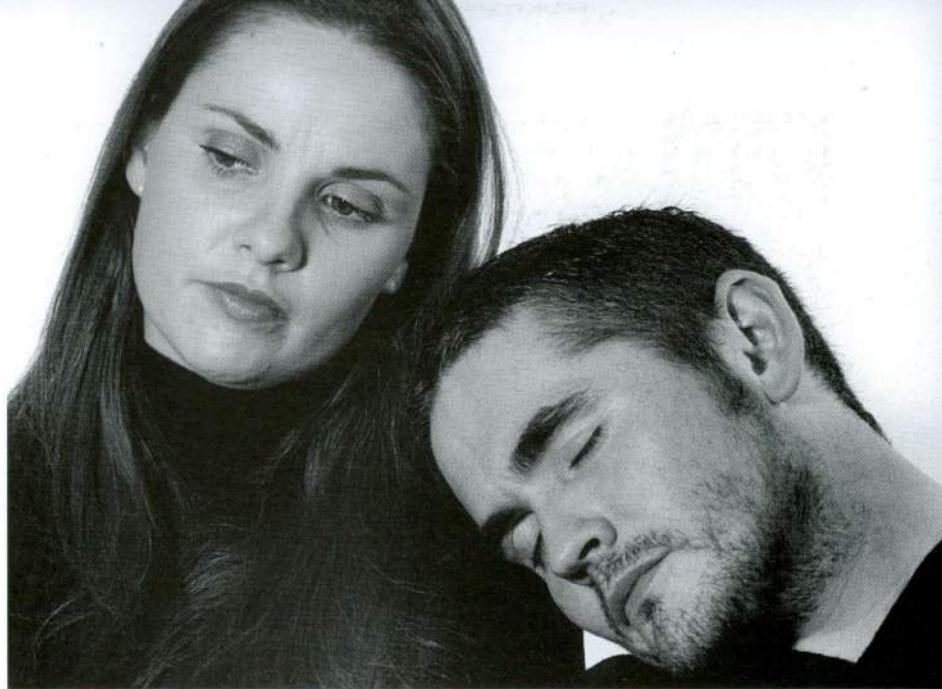
Johnston articulates a worry about the literary tradition being the primary bench-mark for emerging writers, and cites innovative companies such as the London-based Irish group desperate optimists (who recently worked with Dublin Youth Theatre on a devised piece,

Timebomb) or the UK company, Forced Entertainment, (who took part in this year's Pan Pan International Theatre Symposium) as examples of writing practice that is new and relevant, yet not catered for within more literary boundaries.

This is something that Chris White is aware of. White has been researching the possibility of installing a script development programme at Project Arts Centre. Still in its embryonic stages (White has submitted a report to Project's artistic director Kathy McArdle), White's proposal, a result of numerous interviews with writers around the country, is geared towards making a variety of approaches available to writers which will allow them to engage with theatrical languages "away from the dusty old typewriter." The nuts and bolts of his proposal cannot yet be revealed, pending Project's decision on it ("money has to be there for a programme to function"), but it seems clear that the programme would be geared towards experiment rather than production.

White is obviously committed to the facilitation of new writers, but the apparent lack of possibility for production in the Project scheme raises an important issue: Commitment from companies and funding bodies towards development is all very well, but without any kind of corresponding commitment from venues, how practical can these schemes really be?

It is a missing link that Project's artistic director, Kathy McArdle, sadly acknowledges, but says that unfortunately Project are not able to produce theatre due to financial restraints. At the moment, Project is somewhat impoverished because they have no way to deal with unsolicited work and, according to McArdle, "no structure in place to supply critical response."



GIVEN THE GREENLIGHT: Why I Hate the Circus

McArdle is enthusiastic about encouraging writers to diversify and explore the nature of the written word in relation to other theatrical elements (she mentions plans for a "total theatre immersion programme.") A newly advertised "writer-in-residence" post, offered jointly by Project and Dublin Corporation, offers a two-year salary, with — again — no production. According to McArdle, this is a case of "writer development" without "the carrot of production." It seems that for the moment, Project are more interested in process than product — but surely rather than being the icing on the cake, gaining experience through production is *fundamental* to a writer's development?

Meanwhile, the other traditional home of new writing in Dublin, the National Theatre, seems focussed on image, with

PETE MATHEWS

artistic director Ben Barnes looking to "rebrand" the Peacock Theatre. So far the broadening of the Peacock's remit (to, in the words of Barnes' inaugural speech last year, include "British, American and European drama" along with "spare, intense exploration of classical work" as well as new Irish writing) has reduced its commitment to new writing, with the 2001 programme containing only three new written plays at the Peacock.

Along with the creation of a new position of director of the Peacock (Barnes says the term "artistic director" is misleading), there has been a major structural overhaul of the Abbey's literary department. The position of dramaturg is being dissolved. Literary manager Judy Friel is now concentrating on what Barnes calls "the pragmatic side of literary management," while a new post of commissions

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manager has been advertised to deal with new play commissioning for both the Peacock and the mainstage. It remains to be seen who will fill this post, and what their attitude will be towards new writing for the Abbey's smaller space.

With a wealth of new writing initiatives springing up around the country, seeking to nurture and develop young writers, will the Abbey be looking to offer anything similar? "We can hardly be accused of not encouraging new writing," says Barnes, testily, "...a lot of the other companies are playing catch-up in that regard."

One venue that is offering real production possibilities to young writers is the Civic Theatre in Tallaght. Offering rehearsal space and sometimes performance spaces — both the black-box Loose End and the mainstage — rent-free, director Bríd Dukes provides a chance for younger companies to showcase new work with the help, expertise — and funding — the Civic can offer. Despite the difficulty of marketing plays by completely unknown writers, Dukes is planning to showcase at least eight shows a year from young companies — with an emphasis on new writing. Dukes believes actual productions are essential to both new writers and small companies — both to see work in front of an audience, and, as importantly in her eyes, to get reviewed.

The difficulty of being reviewed is a little-discussed problem for young writers. Dukes is adamant that reviews — good, bad or indifferent — are of fundamental importance, both as a source of critical response and also to provide the material to allow the writer/company to

move forward in their careers. A recent Loose End production, Ioanna Anderson's *Why I Hate the Circus*, received a staggering seven reviews — reflecting the Civic's active efforts to persuade more critics to cover new shows in the Loose End.

Anderson is just the latest example of a writer who works within her own company, being both writer and administrator of Greenlight Productions. It has been the way a lot of writers have traditionally operated here in Ireland. Johnston at Bedrock, Enda Walsh in the earlier days of Corcadorka — and before them, Declan Hughes with Rough Magic, Jim Nolan at Red Kettle, Paul Mercier and Passion Machine... the list is endless.

However, changing economic circumstances means this may not remain a tenable model. Tougher dole restrictions and rising rent prices make it increasingly difficult for groups of people to come together and put in the time and money to put on a show — unpaid. The bottom line is: running a company can be financially crippling and creatively draining. The days of putting on a show "for five pence," as Enda Walsh remembers, seem to be in the past. Without proper project funding from the Arts Council (apart from the process-oriented mise-en-scene grants) or real commitment from the venues, the days of the new writer developing and working within a small company could very soon be at an end.

It is in this changing economic climate that the role of festivals could be not just a welcome addition, but of central importance to the future health of Irish theatre. Both the Dublin Fringe and the UnFringed Festival in Limerick are acknowledging this responsibility, and are exploring ways of redefining and

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Stand and Deliver

ALEX JOHNSTON offers an excerpt from his piece *Entertainment*, which had a partial demonstration-performance at the Dublin International Theatre Symposium this January.



ALEX JOHNSTON: *Entertainment* (this is a working title) is a bit different from my previous writing. ■ I had been working for 17 months on a play for a Major Dublin Theatre. For various reasons, I ended up pulling it. Rather than getting depressed, I felt a peculiar sense of freedom — now I could do whatever I wanted. I began to write a big play about the twin themes of death and entertainment, but over the course of writing, the whole thing gradually boiled down to one guy on a stage with a microphone. More sinisterly, he had my name, my life, and my memories. The normal distance between writer and character had become exhilaratingly blurred, and I knew I had to perform it myself. ■ The piece

uses associative and discursive rather than narrative logic; it revolves around a number of themes rather than telling a linear story. It has no set text, just a series of routines and an overall architecture, and is in theory indefinitely modifiable; we could keep adding bits and cutting bits forever. Here are two of the more self-contained routines.

People often ask me why I became a comedian. And I always say the same thing. The reason I became a comedian is because I was blessed with the rare and wonderful gift of laughter.

Ever since I was in school I've loved making people laugh. I was a small, weak, essentially nerdy little boy, much as you see me now, in fact, and the bigger boys often used to gang up on me. So I would play the fool, you know — defuse a tough situation with my wonderful gift of laughter. And they would laugh. And then they would kick my head in.

And as I lay on the damp gravel of the all-weather pitch with blood leaking from my mouth and nose, I learned an important lesson. And the lesson I learned was, if you're small and weak, and somebody larger and stronger kicks the fuck out of you, you very soon want to find someone even smaller and weaker, so that you can kick the fuck out of them.

So I did. I found an even smaller and weaker little boy, and I decided to fuck up his life. Let me just describe this guy to you. He wore shabby clothes, his folks obviously didn't have as much money as

.....PLAY EXCERPT.....

mine, not that we were rich but this guy was really dirt poor. He had a bad haircut and adenoids and he spoke through his nose. He was always vaguely dirty. He was very shy and hardly spoke and nobody really liked him very much. He and I were always the last two to be picked for anyone's team during P.E. So you could say that his life was already pretty fucked up, and that there wasn't much I could do to make it worse. But I found a way to do it. And what I did was, I started a rumour that he was gay.

Has a drink of water.

Pretty soon, everybody in my year had the unshakable conviction that this kid was a flagrant and promiscuous homosexual. There was no evidence for this at all, I mean we were 13 years old, we weren't even kissing girls, let alone boys. But nobody cared that it wasn't true, it just made it easier to hate him, rather than pity him.

And then, of course, the inevitable happened. This totally innocent little boy decided that he had to prove his manhood one way or the other. So what he did was, he chose the only kid in school who was even smaller, even weaker and even more unpopular, and he challenged him to a fight.

Now, forget Italy 1990, forget Dennis Taylor winning the world snooker championships. This was the great sporting event of my life.

We all gathered in the changing rooms after P.E. The even smaller and weaker boy — we'll give him a name, we'll call him... Seamus Heaney, it wasn't his name but it'll do for the moment — little

Seamus obviously wasn't too keen on having this fight, but he wasn't running away, either. The alleged homosexual, who we'll call Derek Jarman, he was raring to go. He rolled up his sleeves and he put up his fists. And it was suddenly, pitifully obvious that the useless prick had never been in a fight in his life. I don't know *what* he thought he was doing.

Still, none of us were prepared for what happened next. Derek stepped towards Seamus and made a bit of a swipe. Seamus ducked and hit Derek in the face. Derek was so surprised that he just stood there, blinking, at which point Seamus hit him again, knocked him back against the wall, hit him again, knocked him to the floor and starting kicking Derek really hard in the head.

He kicked him about six times and then stopped, because Derek was just curled up on the floor crying.

Pause.

There was a mighty cheer, the like of which I've never heard before or since. We cheered because justice had been done — which is to say that somebody *none* of us liked had stepped *way* out of line, and had been put *back* in his fucking place.

So this kid, my victim, pathetic, useless little shithead that he was, gathered up his stuff and ran off, and I don't remember seeing him ever again. A while after that we heard that his folks had taken him out of school.

As for little Seamus Heaney, for about a week he was like a mascot. Everybody liked him, especially me. Then we all for-

got about him. But one thing's for sure, he never got any trouble from anybody else.

And when you think about it, I did him a big favour. If I hadn't helped ruin the other kid's life, little Seamus would never have had his moment of glory.

I wonder if he was grateful.

I wonder what happened to him.

Pause.

And that's how I became a comedian.

I hate my material.

I'm sorry. You've got me at a very, very bad time. I'm in a very dark place right now.

My work... hasn't been going too well. Every time I try to think of something funny the words just slip away. My career... what you're watching right now is my career rolling over and dying before your very eyes. I think the problem, really, is that... I just don't find anything funny anymore. I don't think that the world, as such, is a funny place. I think it's a stern, hard place full of guilt, and pain, and fear, and yearning.

I used to like standing here and making people laugh. I thought that with laughter you could look at things in a new way. I thought that comedy mattered. In short, I was a stupid cunt. Not as much of a stupid cunt as my fellow comedians, who've gone on to get fucking Perrier Awards and sitcom deals and book deals and panto and gameshows and all that other shit, so that they can dance away in their little fucking fantasy worlds thinking that the

sun shines out of their arses just because they can raise a limp giggle out of a shower of apathetic fuckwits like... all of you.

Cause you see, I can see my life in twenty years time. I know what'll happen. I'll be aged fifty doing *Waiting for Godot* with Graham Norton.

[camp] "Let's go!"

"We can't."

"Why not!"

"We're waiting for Godot."

"Ladies and gentlemen — it's Godoooot!!"

Fuck that! I'm not going there. And you can't make me.

"Jesus. This guy's really aggressive. I thought Irish comedians were supposed to be sort of benignly surreal." Yeah? Well, wake up and smell the coffee, people. This country is going down the shitter because of people like you and me letting a bunch of rich cunts fuck it up for everybody. And I for one am MAD AS HELL, AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE! I HAVE FUCKING HAD ENOUGH!!

I MEAN THIS IS THE 21st CENTURY FOR FUCK'S SAKE! WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE LIVING IN SPACE BY NOW!! WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!!!

[Pause.]

I'm sorry, I think perhaps I...overstepped the line a bit there.

SCREENING SAM

The long-awaited Beckett on Film series – a co-production between Blue Angel Films, RTÉ, Channel 4, and the Irish Film Board – premiered at the Irish Film Centre in February, and was subsequently screened on RTÉ in March and April. In anticipation of the series, The Irish Times published a lengthy article about filming Beckett by Fintan O'Toole, to which REDMOND O'HANLON responds here; while SUSAN CONLEY offers an extended critical look at the films themselves.

BECKETT FILM PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK REDMOND

DIFFERENTLY REAL

FINTAN O'TOOLE OPENS HIS ESSAY ("THE REEL BECKETT," *The Irish Times*, 27 January 2001) with a statement of fact: "Samuel Beckett is dead," and goes on to say that this is also a statement about the nature of Beckett's plays. This is a strange leap for a philosophically-minded critic like O'Toole to make:

at best, the statement allows us to deduce that we can no longer seek Beckett's views on a given production of his plays — nor on anything else for that matter. O'Toole then goes on to buttress the notion that the author is the ultimate authority on the meaning of his/her play, a notion that has long been theoretically discredited.

O'Toole's piece is rife with the intentional fallacy: he repeatedly refers to the possibility of "determining the meaning of the work," and makes numerous reference to the author's "intentions." He then refers to Beckett taking "a hard line

against anyone taking liberties with the plays," instead of giving us "faithful renderings of the originals." The tell-tale quote here is perhaps the one in which we are likened to characters in Beckett's plays, "alone in a world that has been abandoned by God," as if we were poor little lambs who have lost our way, with no shepherd to feed us His meaning.

O'Toole is in the meaning business and has been no mean contributor himself to the way in which we confer meanings on events. Artists, however, are not — except at one remove: artists make things that didn't exist before, things

that are "differently real." A famous French sculptor once said: "If I make a piece and I find that it turns out to already exist in nature, I throw it out." Artists' articulations of reality may well enter the contest for meaning once they enter into circulation, but it's not the artist's business to control any subsequent play of meaning "out there" in the world. Anyone desiring to control meaning would be better off employed as an omnipotent god or a political dictator. As Sartre once wrote in an essay on Mauriac's omniscient narrators: "God isn't an artist; neither is M. Mauriac."

We might add that Beckett couldn't be both an artist and the punitive, controlling God suggested by O'Toole: one who gives down The Law to us, who tells us what it means and how it is to be realised in action. As someone who is active in the dissemination of meaning, O'Toole must have often been surprised, if not dismayed, by the many "distortions" of his intended meaning perpetrated by readers coming at his work from a perspective alien to his own. The idea that you can control meaning in a democracy is a dangerous one: it also negates the role of the unconscious and of the inexhaustible polyvalency of the image — particularly in artistic modes of discourse. And, further, when O'Toole refers to Beckett "demanding that the meaning must remain indeterminate" we can discern the instability of his position.

Another difficulty is that O'Toole seems to assume that a play is complete when it leaves the author's pen. But it's just not possible to write the entire theatrical event — even for the divinized Samuel Beckett. Theatre is a collaborative art, and we don't need the practice of Shakespeare and his contemporaries to teach us that. Theatrical texts, where they exist, are essentially incomplete;

they are pre-texts for performance and we have no choice but to take liberties with them. They demand, by their very nature, the active participation of others to make them live at all. In spite of the very tight, precise, quasi-musical notation in many of Beckett's plays, he cannot close down the multiple possibilities of interpretation within even a single line of text, let alone within the play as a whole. Anyone interested in imagining what a play-text might look like if the author did attempt such a thing would derive great pleasure from those passages in Jonathan Miller's *Subsequent Performances* where he demonstrates just how ludicrously complex even a single page of text would be if the playwright were to score it so as to ensure it could be interpreted only in his/her way.

And it is hard to see how "the real question" to be asked about the Beckett films is "not whether they follow the author's instructions in every detail but whether the deviations are justified by the beauty, power and strangeness of the images." Such can be "the real question" only if you believe that what is of paramount importance is that Beckett was happy to sacrifice a "faithful reproduction" of his intentions for "sheer beauty, power and strangeness of image." It would be all too easy to imagine a film of great beauty, power, and strangeness of image that might bear no discernible connection to the written play-text.

There must, I suppose, be some limits to the liberties we might legitimately take when transferring a play from page to stage: it would be hard to justify a production of *Hamlet* which was articulated around Hamlet as child molester; or one in which every opening syllable in the iambic line were stressed. The question of respect for the text's "integrity," so problematic in theatre where the text is

essentially incomplete, raises a host of theoretical and practical problems. In *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer engages in an interesting discussion of this problem in relation to music: she asks where and what is the musical composition? Is it in the score, in a single performance, in an ideal performance, or in the mind of the reader/listener?

Whatever the difficulties of transposition when we stay within the theatrical mode, things become even more complicated when we transpose into film. These problems are dealt with in detail elsewhere in this issue by Susan Conley, who, unlike myself, is competent to make relevant judgement. Suffice it to say that I greatly appreciated the robust, perspicacious way in which O'Toole pinpointed the failure to re-think certain elements of *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and

Not I in purely cinematographic terms — though he might have included *Waiting for Godot* in his discussion, for there were several moments in this film which were not re-thought in such terms but were left dangling in their theatrical limbo.

In general, then, I think it's a pity that O'Toole got embroiled in the question of meaning, instead of staying with the more diffuse notions of the tone and spirit of the plays. Even then, there would be plenty of room for debate and interpretation: it's not clear at all to me why he needed the shaky foundation-stone provided by the Imprimatur of the Late Archbishop of Foxrock, Mr. Samuel Beckett. Is it a case of "once a Catholic ...?"

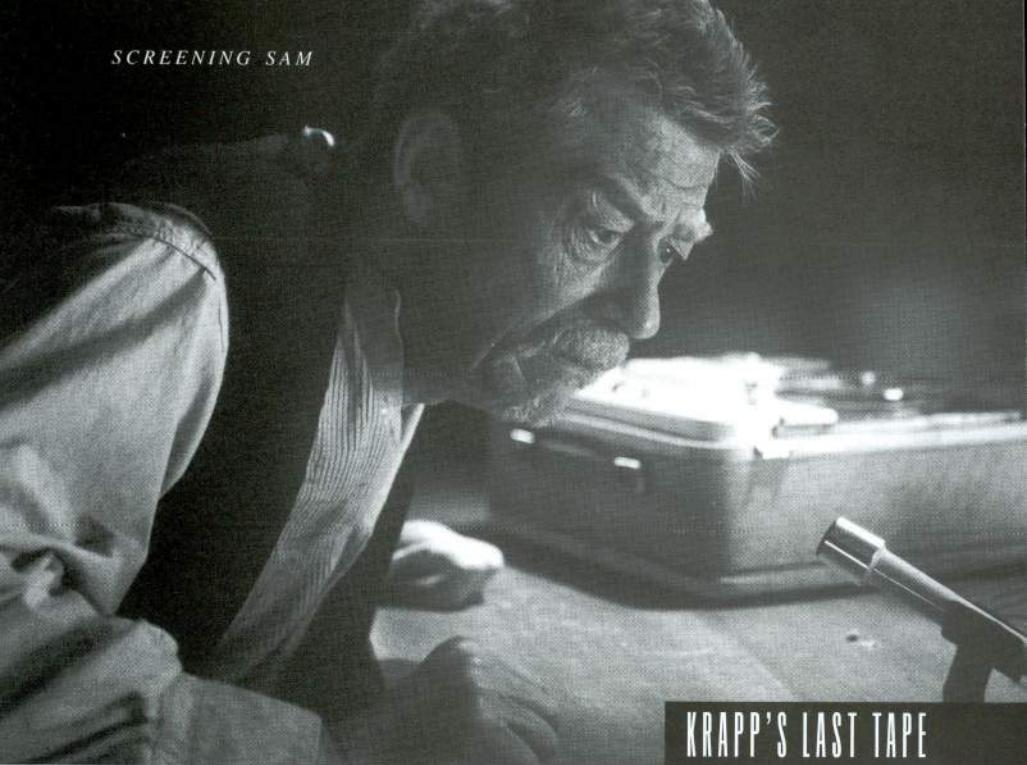
Redmond O'Hanlon lectures at the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin.

TIME AND SPACE DIS-CONTINUUM

IN 1966 BECKETT MADE HIS ONE AND ONLY FORAY INTO MOVIEMAKING with *Film*, starring American silent film genius Buster Keaton. It was an ill-fated affair: both men were famous for their inscrutability, yet in the taciturn sweepstakes, Keaton came out the winner. Working relationships were fraught, and Beckett

never approached the medium again. The film itself is almost entirely silent — no music, no voiceover, one "Ssh!" — and deals with a character named O's desperate attempt to escape the gaze of the camera. At the end of the film, O relaxes, is effectively "caught" by the camera, and a reverse shot shows that the "camera" is in fact Keaton himself, dressed differently from himself as Object.

Implicit in this is the notion that there is always a spectator; and the meta-cinematic notion that the camera is in fact scrutinising itself is pure Beckett. In *Film*, he took the camera out of a passive role and made it a creator of physical meaning — it takes us along with it as well as mediates for us. This was the crucial layer missing from many of the films in the recent *Beckett on Film* series: the



KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

camera reduces us all to mere observers, and in doing so, fails to serve the work, either theatrically or filmically.

The release of the Beckett films this February engulfed the Irish Film Centre in a tornado of buzz, and the majority of the advance press surrounding the star-studded works was fulsome praise. But having seen many of the films I can't help but stick my neck out and say, in Hollywood parlance: the product isn't that good. This has nothing to do with talent and determination, and everything to do with space and time. The fact that theatre and film have different time and space constraints must be addressed when translating from one medium to the other. The approach to the story must change completely, and the techniques implicit in successful production of the

one must be almost entirely thrown out in order to be successful in the other.

There are several unspoken agreements that we make when we walk into a theatre showing a play, as opposed to a theatre that's screening a film. As regards live theatre, we agree, more often than not, to sit where we are told, to read the programme and acquaint ourselves with the players, and to accept that this is a finite, ethereal event. In a cinema, we choose our seats; we put our coat on the one next to us to create more space; we eat and drink. We already know who is in the film — probably having chosen the film because of Arnold, or Hugh, or Julia — and if we like it, we'll rent it when it comes out on video, or buy the DVD, in order to repeat the experience in the comfort of our own homes.

So the spaces themselves, as occupied by the witnesses, are radically different. Next, and obviously, are the areas in which the performances take place. The film screen in the average cinema is at the very least 12×8 feet, and upwards to 40×20 , as is the size of Screen One in the IFC. The canvas is so huge that we must be led around it, by the camera and by the editing of the film. We are told something is important if it is in close-up; we are told to pay attention to something if the camera dollies in towards it; we are led onto the next moment by the cut of a scene, by the raising and lowering of a sound effect, by a fade to black. In a theatre, we adapt our perspective via the seat we are given. If it's in the back, we watch more of the stage than does someone sitting in the second row, far left. We act as our own cameras, shifting attention from actor to set — and to the light-

ing rig, if it's an unfortunate experience. We are subtly driven by the text and the actors, but we are always in the same place and the same perspective.

Perspective plays an enormous role in Krapp's *Last Tape*, Beckett's wrenching tale of loneliness and "the road not taken." In Atom Egoyan's film version, we are led by the camera into and around a highly stylised office, crammed with the papers and file folders of a lifetime. We are not consciously surprised by this — if we know the play, we know the playing space: Krapp is a pack rat and has documented his entire existence and it's all in that room. But unconsciously, the film set is disturbing, and verges on "too much information." On stage, we would have seen simply the desk, the lamp, the tape recorder, the bananas, the man. This precision is something I now appreciate about



WAITING FOR GODOT

Beckett: those meticulous — near-maniacal — stage directions set the frame strictly, yet leave just enough empty space in which to allow the audience to do their job. The film lets us do nothing. Going in for a close up is absolutely correct film language... yet through the use of this technique, we lose everything about this man's supreme isolation and regret. Watching John Hurt slowly bring himself closer to his machine, to his young voice, to his memory, becomes diluted and colourless when the image is 40 times bigger than our heads.

Waiting for Godot, directed by Michael Lindsey-Hogg and starring the sublime pairing of Barry McGovern and Johnny Murphy, suffers in its turn as well. The humour is there, and the pathos, but the filmmaker's need to open up the location itself in order to satisfy cinematic demands of movement and depth adds nothing to the text, and indeed serves to take away from it. Set at the turn of the road in a barren-like wasteland, it's all there, as it is in the play: the tree, the rock, the boots, the hats. During a live production, the constraint of a stage constrains our vision, and in turn our perception of the lives of Didi and Gogo — we believe that they will never leave, because they don't have anywhere else to go; watching them negotiate the use of their time is heartbreakingly under these circumstances.

But the film, with its shifting takes and changes of perspective, gives the illusion that there is more world out there, and we lose our connection to the characters. Indeed, the attempt to move the action into a more realistic setting seems to have stopped halfway, as the set is caught in the nowheresville of a sound stage: bigger than a theatre, smaller than life, the choice leaves us stranded in a limbo of cognition. We are neither here

nor there, not in a theatre and not in the real world, and it could be argued that being "neither here nor there" suits the themes of the play, the cinematic tease of the bend in the road implies that Didi and Gogo are not truly trapped and by extension, neither are we.

Another major perceptual issue is the concept of time. Film time is not real time. Beckett time is real time. His painstaking stage directions even go so far as to dictate the number of seconds before a reaction, a line, the length of a silence. He is a writer unconcerned with conventional running times — *Breath* is only 45 seconds long — yet he is bound by it, by choice. Forty-five seconds is 45 seconds. Thirteen minutes is 13 minutes. In film time, 13 minutes could be three days, three months, three years. This problem of time is perhaps best illustrated by Neil Jordan's film version of *Not I*, starring Julianne Moore. It is a startling image, the isolated, anonymous mouth, moving, talking: when spotlit on stage as the only thing we can see or watch, it has a uniquely compelling dramatic quality; and the strenuousness of the work for the actress unifies performance and audience, rather than alienating us.

In Jordan's piece, we are let know right from the start that this mouth is not anonymous: Moore, in jeans and a polo neck, enters the frame and sits on a chair (this contradicting Beckett's stage direction that the actor stand on the chair). In addition to this relaxation of the form, there are many distractions: the sheer size of Moore's mouth calls to mind *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* logo, and we know from cross-cutting that we are not seeing a continuous effort; the spit bubbles on Moore's teeth become more interesting than the text. What's she on about? Who knows — I think a bug just flew onto her teeth.



NOT I

Did any of the Beckett films work? Yes, when they managed to remain true to the inherent belief that we invest in the text and managed to use the techniques and trickeries of film to conceptual effect. In Charles Sturridge's version of *Ohio Impromptu*, Jeremy Irons, somewhat disturbingly bewigged in a shock of long white hair, plays both roles — something which can possibly be achieved live, with low light and hats, but which the trickery of film pulls off with ease. There was something satisfying and enriching in watching Irons act with himself — which is something that all the solitary Beckettian heroes do: they act alone; think alone; speak aloud, alone, to themselves.

Most of the Beckett films I saw used dollying motion — but few of them used it well. A "dolly" is a piece of equipment that runs along straight or circular track

(or a combination of the two); the device allows the camera to move fluidly and effortlessly around a scene, thus creating movement that guides our perception of space. Here it seemed to be the catch-all answer to solving problems of perspective by filmmakers who didn't want to or perhaps weren't allowed to cut from camera angle to camera angle. Dollying worked brilliantly in *Ohio Impromptu* because the movement of the camera expanded upon the circularity of the text (the speaker is continually prompted by his witness to return to the beginning of his speech, over and over).

While John Crowley succumbed to a bit of the dollying temptation in his *Come and Go*, overall he transferred some of the essential qualities of the original script — its simplicity, its charm and its humour — to the new medium. Shot in one take, the three women are lushly lit



COME AND GO

and costumed, the light slightly out of focus and sepia-toned, the coats and hats consonant yet individualised. The women come and go, the two left behind talking about the missing third behind her back, and as they go they disappear at the back of the frame in perfect use of film trickery, but with a gracefulness, and with the illusion of real time. And it was funny — we felt encouraged to laugh. It was a relief, and as refreshing as seeing the piece for the first time.

In his *Irish Times* article about filming Beckett, Fintan O'Toole took as his thesis the idea that with Beckett dead, no good can come of producing his work ever again, in any form. This seems a bit overwrought, and ultimately a loss, consigning the plays to academia as opposed to performance. As pieces of dramatic literature, those plays were

meant to be performed. But were they meant to be filmed? Given the Beckett estate's iron-clad control of the work, and given the presence of Edward Beckett, the playwright's nephew and executor of his estate, as associate producer in this venture, it seems highly unlikely that, like three out of five Hollywood films these days, they will be remade. This is perhaps the most disturbing result of the series: it could become definitive. Taken out of their natural habitat, the plays suffer, and one worries that schoolchildren of the future will be getting their Beckettian education from a rake of videos as rather than from the plays as written or as performed live.

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

UNFRINGED AT FOUR

PAUL HAUGHEY gives a critical overview of the theatre productions in this year's *UnFringed Festival* in Limerick.

LIMERICK'S BELLTABLE ARTS CENTRE LAUNCHED THE UnFringed Festival in January 1998, offering local audiences an opportunity to see small-scale theatre productions from Dublin-based companies like Bedrock and Corn Exchange as well as local companies such as Impact. Unfringed has grown

successfully over the years and now, along with the Pan Pan International Theatre Symposium in Dublin, helps fill the gap in the otherwise bleak January theatre calendar. This year's UnFringed, under the leadership of Belltable director Liz Culloty, offered a slate of new and nearly new plays — the premieres of *Gift* by Ursula Rani Sarma and *Rap Éire* from Kilkenny's Bickerstaffe, as well as the recently premiered *Jocasta* from Sligo's dhá éan Theatre Company. The Festival also included Owen O'Neill's one-man show *It Was Henry Fonda's Fault* and a dance commission from Limerick-based Daghdha Dance.

Sarma's *Gift*, a Belltable commission, explores relationships between father, son, and deceased mother. Now a priest, Oisín (Kevin O'Leary) returns home from faraway lands to say mass at the

funeral of his father (Eamonn Hunt), and is greeted by his uncle (also played by Hunt), with memories subsequently unfolding in flashback scenes.

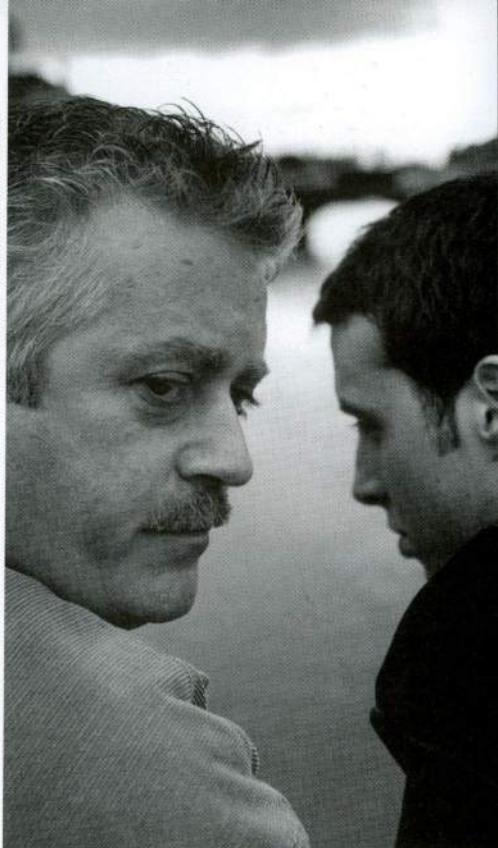
Sarma trawls through the murky world of the Irish family, complete with bodies in the basement, an absolute suppression of sensitivity, and the seemingly inevitable fusion of sexuality with religion. Sarma directs the play herself, a feat most authors tend to steer away from — and with good reason. Sarma's production moves jerkily between realism and symbolism with neither holding ground with strength or clarity. The scenes told through flashback, though primarily symbolic, are cut through with clunky and unconvincing tales of father/son conflict (Does an Irish father oppress his son by forcing him to sing for him? Not

any I've heard of). The symbolism itself — Oisin's wearing his mother's dress/playing the role of a mouse/dead bodies in the basement, etc. — is too forced, unjustified, and certainly unclear. Nor are proceedings helped by Sarma's choice of set and props, with two inappropriate kitchen tables (God knows *one* kitchen table is hard enough to contend with in Irish theatre!) awkwardly taking up space, both psychological and physical. The resultant piece fails to offer a clear sense of identity or intent.

Sarma does have an ear for the eloquent in speech, and can create both texture and substance in her characterisations, but in *Gift*, those character interactions lack authenticity and are thus difficult to engage with. A new voice in theatre is a rather delicate thing — discouraged it may die, but if too many demands are placed on it, it can easily become distorted. A new voice is just that — something not yet fully formed, something which, in time, will find its identity and eventually (ideally) continue to redefine that identity.

Gift does not come across as an expression of an inner vision but rather as a play constructed from the outside-in. The pronounced, heavy symbolism of this play — a supplication to the dead, whether represented as actual bodies or as the paraphernalia of the dead, and the use of religious incantation — all point to an attempt to write the "Irish Play," rather than a release of Sarma's own personal thoughts or feelings. Nonetheless Sarma does show potential as a dramatist — hopefully she will allow that potential to come through at its own pace, with its own stories.

Jocasta by Leland Bardwell arrived later in the Festival, freshly windswept from the Sligo coastline where it had its *al fresco* premiere earlier in the year. With



FATHER AND SON: *Gift*

Jocasta, Bardwell refocuses the story of Oedipus (that self-same ancient Greek that Freud went a little nuts about) around the character of his wife/mother Jocasta. But the question which grew to overwhelming proportions whilst watching *Jocasta* unfold was, what exactly is this play about? No clear point of focus was evident in Fiona Peek's production for dhá éan.

The play moved continually between different theatrical approaches, from colloquial/slapstick, to highly formal, to introspective reflection, and back again. The result was a work which did not connect either emotionally or psycho-

logically with the audience. Had a central linchpin — subtextual or actualised — been established and maintained, any deviance from it might well have been accepted. As it was, however, the failure to establish this audience connection, resulted in a work which did not deliver the basic tenet of theatre — communication of heart and/or mind.

The reason for this failure is in no small measure due to the text itself, which seemed unsure if it was telling of personal domestic angst, universal disparity of the sexes, or the complexity of sexual desire; or if it was rather just providing a light-hearted romp through ancient Greek mythology. All four of these themes could of course exist together, but only if one theme holds centre ground. The clearest indication that they did not was the author's erratic reliance on a narrator/solo chorus figure (played by Fionnuala Gallagher).

Because such difficulties existed in the text and because the directorial approach was unfocussed, the opportunity for the assembled actors to offer a consistent or engaging presence on stage was limited, most notably for Sorcha Carroll in the title role. Maintaining clarity or credence as Jocasta proved an impossibility, with audience empathy diffused and deflected as text and directorial demands determined her identity as flighty, then grounded; casual, then distant, with pretty much anything in between.

Nor were proceedings helped by the set, a group of metallic/futuristic furnishings designed by Sinead Aldridge — which might have been quite at home in an art gallery but not on this particular stage where it became more a physical obstacle than anything else. Mudita Proctor's costume design, a mix of modern and classical style using leather and man-made fabrics, did effectively fuse

different periods adding a much needed line of continuity. But overall, *Jocasta* was a muddle.

Rap Éire by Kilkenny's Bickerstaffe is a satire on Irish rather than Greek mythologies — namely, the myths of Celtic Tiger, Irish Hospitality, and of course Political Integrity. And what a great job it does in toppling these totems, and more! Written by two of those acting (Des Bishop and Arthur Riordan) and directed by Jimmy Fay, *Rap Éire* is full of fire, fury, and devastating humour.

The play chronicles the experience of an American visitor to present day Ireland (Bishop) who, in an attempt to establish cultural ties with an enchanting Celtic caillín (Renee Weldon), puts his name forward for election in the local constituency. The unfolding shenanigans excellently illustrate the huge contradictions in current day Éire, from the unpopularity of honesty and the "moral high ground," right through to the maintenance of Ireland's prosperous image at the price of social and spiritual destitution. Using rap music (a tongue-in-cheek version of rap — not for purists), video, and quirky dance routines, the Bickerstaffe crew take us on a journey with Bishop's "American" (we never learn his real name) along the roads of bribery, bluff, and bickering (a.k.a. the election trail). The play moves along at a fine pace, deftly balancing the riotous with the sublime, the frivolous with the serious, never losing our attention. Especially endearing was a song about how joining Fianna Fail will put anyone in touch with their "Inner Asshole" — truly heart-rending stuff.

Paul Haughey is a theatre critic for Arts West magazine and Galway Bay FM. Mic Moroney offers an extended critical look at Bickerstaffe's Rap Éire in the review section of this issue.



On 7 February 2001 the Abbey Theatre's artistic director BEN BARNES dropped an apparent bombshell on the Irish public: that, contrary to previous statements by the theatre, it did not wish to stay on its current site but rather to move to a new location in Dublin's docklands. But because the story had been rumoured and leaked in the press for months, few were actually surprised — except, seemingly, TAIOSEACH BERTIE AHERN, whose response to the Abbey announcement grabbed the press coverage of the story and sent it careening out of the Abbey's control. But was the Abbey ever on top of this story? How could the Taoiseach actually claim to be surprised? And how did a discussion about the future of the nation's most important theatrical institution descend into a personality battle in the pages of The Irish Times?

KEVIN LIVELLI reports on the media coverage of the Abbey move, a story whose moral should resonate throughout the theatre sector: in today's environment, you've got to spin first — or bear the consequences of being spun.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL J. HOLDEN

GOIN' SOUTH?

THE STORY OF THE FUTURE OF THE CURRENT ABBEY BUILDING DATES back to well before the current controversy; its origins lie, of course, in Michael Scott's 1966 building itself, which has long been maligned for its poor acoustic, inadequate behind-the-scenes and administrative facilities, and uninviting public spaces and exterior. While former artistic director Patrick Mason expressed the need and desire for improvement of the building and indeed commissioned a model for the refurbishment of the existing site in 1996, no significant action could be taken during his tenure due to lack of resources.

It's clear that the issue of the building ranks high on Ben Barnes' priority list for the theatre; according to available press coverage, Barnes and the Abbey board made significant progress towards addressing the problems of the building in March 2000 — only 2 months after Barnes had taken over as artistic director — when they won a meeting with the Taoiseach and asked for money to refurbish the current site. At this stage, keeping the theatre on the Abbey Street site appears to have been the only option that the theatre was considering; no mention was made in that meeting with the Taoiseach of moving to a site in the docklands or anywhere else — a fact confirmed by James Hickey, chair of the Abbey board of directors, in a radio interview on RTÉ's "Morning Ireland" the day following the Abbey press conference of 7 February 2001. (This interview was also significant in that it marked the first and last time the person speaking for the Abbey on this issue would be anyone other than Ben Barnes.)

The notion of a move also did not figure in Robert O'Byrne's article of 30 June 2000 for *The Irish Times*, in which the reader learned of the need for urgent and

drastic change of the Abbey building through the eyes of Síle de Valera, Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht, and the Islands as she toured the building and agreed to seek government funding to refurbish the existing site, to the tune of £50 million.

In his February 2001 radio interview Hickey indicated that it was in August 2000 that the Abbey received an offer from the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) to move to the docklands. The DDDA were offering a greenfields site on Misery Hill in the Grand Canal Docks development, which would be given to the Abbey free of charge and which would also bring a £500,000 annual subsidy to the theatre. The DDDA offer to the Abbey was nominally confidential at this stage, but news of it soon crept into the press.

In an *Irish Times* article of 24 August 2000 by Ian Kilroy, "Opera on the docks — inspiration or folly?" which speculated about the possibilities of building an Irish opera house in a docklands development site at Grand Canal Quay, it was mentioned that the idea of offering the site to the Abbey Theatre as well had "been in circulation for some time." Both U2 manager Paul McGuinness and Gaiety Theatre director John Costigan spoke in favour of the Abbey moving to a new site on the docklands. The word of a potential move from Abbey Street was clearly out at hearsay level, as the Abbey had not made any official statement on the subject. Still, Kilroy believed that the

suggestion was "strongly opposed by the Abbey Theatre itself" and quoted the Abbey's managing director, Richard Wakely, as saying that "it would be totally inappropriate to rehouse the Abbey in the new site. It would take us away from our historic roots in Lower Abbey Street."

On 5 October 2000, *The Irish Times* reported that Minister de Valera had told the Dáil that the Abbey was discussing whether to move or stay in its present location; de Valera even seemed to indicate a favourable attitude towards the move option by saying that "we can't deal with this matter by just tinkering around the edges." This gave some factual basis for the existence of docklands move option. The story then died in the pages of *The Irish Times* for nearly three months — but was picked up and significantly advanced by another paper.

In the 12 November 2000 edition of *The Sunday Business Post*, Jennifer O'Connell and Stephen McMahon reported that "the Abbey Theatre is likely to relocate to a one-acre site on the Grand Canal docks in the Dublin docklands area." While acknowledging that other plans were under consideration, including a move to the docklands on the north side (at Spenser Dock) and to the old Carlton Cinema on O'Connell Street, they insisted that "it is understood that the proposal by the DDDA [the Grand Canal Quay move] is emerg-



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ing as the favoured one."

The journalists here spun de Valera's prior comments about the need for radical changes for the Abbey as a sign that she would back a decision to move to the DDDA site. As they put it, "a central site on Grand Canal Quay has been earmarked by the DDDA for the development of a high-profile cultural centre, and it is believed the Abbey Theatre would fit the bill perfectly." O'Connell and McMahon even suggested that "it is understood that Ben Barnes, the Abbey's artistic director, has been pushing for a move away from the theatre's existing site."

The Business Post added to its coverage of the move story the following Sunday: In an interview article with Barnes, which mostly focussed on the controversy

around the Abbey's production of *Barbaric Comedies*, O'Connell concluded with comments about the Abbey docklands move.

"... Sources suggest," wrote O'Connell, "that unlike his predecessor, the Abbey's new director is strongly behind a move to a new building." She then quoted her source directly: "...A move is very much the favoured option." The notion of an Abbey move to Grand Canal Docks was well and truly in the public domain now — but still, no official response from the Abbey.

In what can now be called the lull before the storm before the 7 February press conference, *The Irish Times* picked up the Abbey story again in its Weekend supplement of 3 February 2001 with a

full front-page article, "To move or not to move," by Frank McDonald, the paper's environmental editor; this was to be the most extended and even-handed assessment of the aesthetic and cultural/political issues surrounding a possible move.

On 7 February Barnes finally officially announced the news of the intended move at an Abbey press conference convened to reveal the theatre's programming and plans for the upcoming year; the presence of multiple television cameras at the conference indicated, however, that key press outlets had been tipped that a major announcement was in the offing. At the end of the conference, in a clearly written and cogently reasoned statement, Barnes announced the board's preference to move to the docklands, while pointing out that the board must be, and wants to remain, flexible on the issue. Finally, some clarity and an official statement by the Abbey board. But it was, it seems, too little too late.

The next day's headlines spun the story as political. The news was not of the Abbey's preference to move; it was of the Taoiseach's reaction to the Abbey announcement. Ahern's ire was front page news in *The Irish Times* ("Ahern claims plan to move Abbey is serious mistake") and *The Irish Independent* ("Angry Ahern set to bring curtain down on Abbey move"). As TD of the north-side constituency that contains the present Abbey, Ahern expressed "surprise" at the theatre's "U-turn" decision to leave its present location where it is seen as holding a central position in a long-discussed (but so far never realised) rejuvenation of the north inner city.

Of course, it seems impossible, in light of previous press coverage of a potential docklands move, that the Taoiseach was truly surprised by the announcement — but since the Abbey never made such spec-

ulation official, they left themselves wide open for forces other than themselves to grab the story and make it their own.

A flurry of articles blitzed the newspapers for the rest of the week. Headlines like *The Irish Times'* "Consultants warn Abbey on dangers of 'dream'" and the front page "Report urges that Abbey remain in city centre" along with *The Sunday Business Post's* "Government not told of Abbey's plan" brought pressure down on the Abbey — and drove Barnes to the boiling point.

On 10 February 2001 duelling articles appeared on *The Irish Times'* Home News page by Barnes and *Irish Times* columnist (and former theatre critic) Fintan O'Toole. In his portentously named "Frailty, thy name is Abbey Theatre," O'Toole pointed out the political naivete exhibited by the Abbey in the period stretching from its initial approach to the Taoiseach last March to its recent press release, stating that if the plans for the docklands move were to blow up, the Abbey will have supplied the explosives. But he simplified things too much, denying the complexity of the issue and assuming that since no official PR statements were made by the Abbey that they were, in fact, pulling a U-turn and jumping at a free offer. In his article, Barnes recontextualised the story in a theatrical arena, but did not engage with the wider implications of his announcement in terms of the broader social and political arenas.

The Irish Times' coverage then went back to its summer and autumn plan of soliciting opinions from the theatre community, keeping the stories in the home news sections, but essentially relegating it back to the arts world. Everyone seemed to be calming down.

Everyone, that is, except Barnes. On 15 February, he wrote in to *The Irish Times'* letters page to claim that poor sub-editing of his 10

February article had fundamentally misrepresented his position. He indicated he felt personally attacked, not by the government, but by *The Irish Times*. He said that inquiries as to purchasing additional properties around the current site were still open at the press conference. "But because I had to be labelled as the man who wants to move the Abbey to the southside, the statement on the building was selectively reported to reflect that position." The article had been edited, Barnes claimed, to portray him in an inaccurately rigid manner. "On a personal level it made me look both belligerent and politically naïve to be restating a black and white position in the face of considerable high-level political opposition." He went on to express the Abbey's view: "We contend that this is a serious and complex issue and that *The Irish Times* do us all a disservice by attempting to orchestrate the protagonists into pugilistic positions which are both unhelpful and ultimately unproductive."

On that latter point, he is exactly right, but his letter represents the nadir of Barnes' personalisation of this story: central to his affront, clearly, is the notion that he has been personally maligned. But what is Barnes doing as the personal face of this story in the first place? That the theatre's press department was in flux at the time of the announcement might partially explain the theatre's lack of control over the story; but of course the ultimate responsibility on issues of this weight lies at the feet of the Abbey board. It was they that could have kept this story on the



BECAUSE BARNES' VOICE WAS THE ONLY ONE EMANATING FROM THE ABBEY, HIS ARTISTIC CONCERN WERE DROWNED OUT BY THE SWELL OF OTHER VOICES

high road and away from personality politics. Barnes' clear priorities throughout this process have been what's best for the theatre and the artists who work in it; he continually foregrounded these issues in his discussions — often at the expense of the wider cultural ramifications. But because Barnes' voice was the only one emanating from the Abbey, his artistic concerns were drowned out by the swell of other voices which took over the story as soon as — even before — it officially left the building.

Gratefully, now, the dust has settled; Barnes (who declined to comment for this article, saying he had made his position clear in his press conference statement and his two *Irish Times* contributions) and the Abbey are lying low, negotiating

with the government and relevant bodies about where the National Theatre will make its home. Northside or southside, docklands or inner city — it seems impossible at this stage to predict where the Abbey will end up. But whatever does happen, we can rest assured that the media will do their best to root out the news as soon as there's the slightest hint of progress; and we can only hope that the Abbey board and executive will put a strategy in place to manage the story before it once more slips out of their control.

Kevin Livelli is studying for an M.Phil in Irish Theatre Studies at Trinity College.

Entrances and Exits

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



MARTIN DRURY has left his position as director of the Ark. **PAULA SHIELDS** has been appointed full-time administrator of Theatre Shop. The top three positions at the Lyric Theatre are all being vacated: **JOHN SHEEHAN**, **LES MCLEAN**, and **MARY TRAINOR** are stepping down as executive producer, head of administration and resources, and director of marketing and development, respectively. **SIMON MAGILL** is the new artistic director of Tinderbox Theatre Company.

DAVID TEEVAN is leaving his position as general manager of Galloglass this summer. It will be advertised later in the year. **MIKEL MURFI** (pictured), a director and founding member of Barabbas...the Company, has left the company to devote more time to other work. **ALICE KENNELLY**, formerly of Sadler's Wells and the Lillian Baylis Theatres, London, is the new general manager of Island Theatre Company. **ANNE LONGFORD** has replaced Paula McLaughlin as general manager of Kabosh.

At Draoicht in Blanchardstown, **HELEN CHAMBERLAIN**, previously of the Theatre Royal, Stratford East and the London Bubble, has been appointed general manager; **EMER McGOWAN**, formerly executive director of Babaró, has been appointed outreach officer; **JANICE McADAM**, formerly director of public affairs at Project,

has been appointed development director; and **MADELINE BOUGHTON**, formerly head of PR and marketing at the National Theatre, has been appointed marketing, press, and public relations manager. Kate Bowe PR is handling the press requirements of the National Theatre on a short-term basis. Also for the National Theatre, **PAUL MERCIER** of Passion Machine, the London-based director **KATIE MITCHELL**, and **LÁZLÓ MARTON** of the Vígszínház Theatre in Budapest have been made associate directors.

DENIS CLIFFORD is leaving his position as executive director of the Hawk's Well Theatre Sligo. The position has been advertised. **PAUL O'HANRAHAN** has been re-appointed director of Droichead Arts Centre. O'Hanrahan replaces Derek Verso who held the position for six months. **PATRICK O'MAHONY**, formerly of the Oxmantown Hall in Birr, Offaly, has been appointed as director of the Dean Crowe Theatre and Arts Centre, Athlone.

SITUATIONS VACANT:

irish theatre magazine and the Dublin Theatre Festival are looking for an administrator to work for both organisations. Ballymun Arts and Community Resource Centre has advertised a number of positions including administrator and technical manager.

Volume Control

JOCELYN CLARKE makes his quarterly troll through the pages of new books about theatre, performance, and dance.

There are two stories in particular that linger in the memory from Tim Etchells' extraordinary and inspiring book *Certain Fragments*. The first is about how the late Ron Vawter would mix the ashes of the performance artist Jack Smith with glitter and rub the mixture onto his face as part of the preparation for his one-man show *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*. The second is about Etchells' arrhythmic heart which, before his pacemaker was inserted, would slow to two or three beats per minute, and almost stop as he slept — only to start again because he suddenly moved his body, agitated by his dreams. These are beautiful stories, told with a born storyteller's gift for detail, and a theatre artist's gift for metaphor. In the book Etchells writes about the practical and the magical, distinguishing little between either, and combines storytelling with criticism in a unique exploration of the relationships between performance and play, between technology and the body, and between identity and performance in contemporary theatre practice.

Certain Fragments: Contemporary

HUGO GLENDENNING

Performance and Forced Entertainment (Routledge) charts the continuing evolution of the Sheffield-based performance/theatre company Forced Entertainment (FE) since its founding in 1984, through Etchells' collected writings as well as texts of four of the company's productions. FE began as an articulation of a "shared eclectic sensibility that seemed natural to us and to others to make work, drawing on music, fine art, city life, cinema, science fiction, photography, graffiti, personal history, performance; trying, as we like to say, 'to discuss the concerns of the times, in a language born out of them.'" Etchells, the company's co-founder and artistic director, offers in his book a series of provocations about contemporary theatre practice



NEW LANGUAGES: *Forced Entertainment*

and theory, and explores various preoccupations at the core of FE's work, from the use of found text and lo-fi technology to non-traditional venues and alternative performance forms.

If FE's early work provoked confusion

opinions & overviews

among critics and some audiences with its disruption of traditional theatre conventions and forms — it combined found and poor text (from soap operas, pulp fiction, porn movies) with unstable narrative and fragmented characterisation — it was firmly rooted in the socio-political and cultural climate of the Thatcher years. If processes of fragmentation, disruption, and assemblage mirrored the cultural disenfranchisement in the country as a whole, then use of found technology, sampled text, and broken forms refracted the landscape of Sheffield, both in its cityscape of abandoned factories, and in its economic devastation after the steel industry collapsed.

Etchells, as writer and director, blurs the lines between his role as a theatre "maker" and as a theatre writer, at once exploding the authority of the playwright while affirming the importance of text in FE's work: he makes text from different sources — collaborators, films, books, magazine, posters, etc. — in which content and meaning are as important as its material. It is "made" like every other element in a FE piece, from the fragments of the lives and experiences, objects and "works" of the company.

And it is primarily as a theatre maker that Etchells writes and assembles *Certain Fragments*, a document whose very fragments cohere into a unified and evolving articulation of related themes / ideas / concerns. His writing is characterised by an almost epigrammatic quality; at its best it's at once simple and profoundly acute. Etchells on documentation and performance: 'The work is a document of the processes leading to it

— a body that bares trace of its past.' On collaboration and process: 'When working on performance projects, having amassed some material... and having worked with it a little, we ask ourselves the question 'What does it want?' 'What does it need?'" On performance and technology — "Our work is understandable by anybody brought up in a house with a television on."

If, according to Peggy Phelan in her loving introduction, "Forced Entertainment creates a space for the staging of cowardice rather than courage, for both loneliness and exuberance in the middle of the circus we can't seem to quit and can't seem to love," then *Certain Fragments* is a challenging programme note to this staging, by turns beautiful and disturbing, angry and insightful, and profoundly rewarding.

Though slimmer than Etchells' book, Diana Theodores' *Writing Dancing — Righting Dance: Articulations on a Choreographic Practice* is no less meaty, not least Theodores' acute observations about documentation and performance. Commissioned by Firkin Crane as a documentary record of the interchanges between dancers and dance-makers during a gruelling research programme, *Writing Dance* evolved, through the course of Theodores' observations and her later compilation of material, into an integral part of the process itself. It is a document

which interrogates its own process of documentation and articulation — even its dynamic layout and vibrant typography recapitulate choreography's concerns of space and form: "Dancing and writing share a common space. To choreograph is to



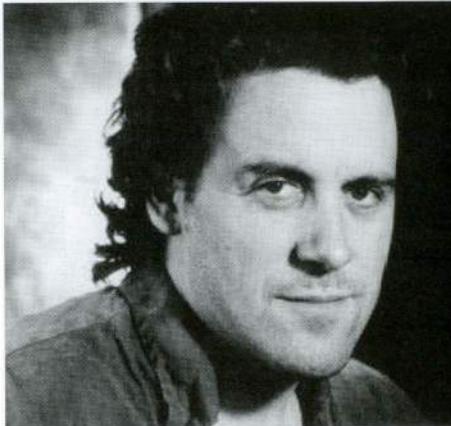
MEATY: Writing Dancing

write dance in to space."

For the book Theodores observed the work of two choreographers (Paul Johnson of MaNDaNCE and Mary Nunan of Daghda) as they researched their practice with dance dramaturg Tedd Senmon-Robinson. The process of writing about these observations leads Theodores not into a po-mo hall of reflexions but instead into a bold articulation of choreographic process. She poses urgent questions, and offers if not answers, then compelling insights, which lead to further discussion — from "How do dancers own and perform the material?" to "To be able to see, some sense of distance is called for" and "forget the concept see the material." *Writing Dancing* is a smart and provocative book, and like the best books about arts practice, it is about more than just choreography — "at every moment, we are enacting a ritual of bringing something into existence that was not there before."

Finally, director/producer Dominic Dromgoole's highly opinionated, self-congratulatory, ill-informed, and infuriating *The Full Room* (Methuen) is a howl. And not in a good way. Though sub-titled *An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting*, the selection is idiosyncratic and personal (and mostly apparently based around what Dromgoole has actually seen himself). The book is made up of 90-something mini-essay/reviews about playwrights from the UK, Ireland, Canada, and the U.S. While most writers get a page or so each, some entries are notably shorter — Dromgoole's single sentence on Brian Friel: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (Top man.)" Dromgoole on *Art* playwright Yasmina Reza: "Yasmina Reza is very rich."

He writes at more length about his favourites (Sebastian Barry, Howard



OPINIONATED: Dominic Dromgoole

Brenton, Harold Pinter, David Storey, Billy Roche, David Rabe, Conor McPherson, and Sarah Kane) as well as those he *really* doesn't like — the "twat" Charles Wood, Patrick Marber, David Mamet (for his acting theories), and David Hare, deemed as "musical as a cement mixer." Elsewhere he indulges in Little Englandisms about identity ("the single most startling fact about Brad Fraser... is he's Canadian") and cultural history (the Abbey "style" caused "the diaspora of [writing] talent" to London) while firing off salvos at such targets as "fuckwit directors," "press stupidity," and pretentious "Eurowriting."

The Full Room, with its knowing titular nod to Peter Brook's *Empty Space* ("We are living in a grand glorious tender wild burst of new plays," proclaims our Dom), is a gossipy survey of Dromgoole's theatre world — as former director of the Bush Theatre, and current director of the Oxford Stage Company — and ultimately succeeds and fails with its chattering authorial personality: it's occasionally funny, but mostly overbearing and dull.



THE WEXFORD TRILOGY

by **Billy Roche**

Oxford Stage Company at the Tricycle
Theatre, London

6 December 2000 – 11 February 2001

Reviewed on 10 December

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

EIGHT YEARS AGO, I FELL IN LOVE. I didn't have a clear run of it — my beloved had many other admirers — and in the nature of things it couldn't really last, but while it did, oh, it was glorious. Since then I've seen my inamorata once, from a distance; she seemed unsure of herself, a little diminished somehow. But last weekend we met again, and the warmth, familiarity and even the ghost of that first magical

spark were still there, together with the poignant knowledge that, after a few brief hours, we each had to move on our separate way. The object of my affections was a trilogy of plays written by Billy Roche and set in his home town of Wexford, and such little, unimportant heartbreaks are his territory.

The constituent parts of what are now called *The Wexford Trilogy* received their London premieres at the Bush between 1988 and 1991, and the entire trilogy was put on show there the following year, constituting one of the first wave crests of the current high tide of Irish playwriting in Britain. (The subsequent encounter I mentioned earlier was Stuart Burge's slightly disappointing television version of the *Trilogy* for the BBC in 1991.)

PHIL CUTTS

LITTLE HEARTBREAKS: Elaine Symons and Hugh O'Conor in Poor Beast in the Rain

1993.) This current production, by the Oxford Stage Company and the Tricycle in the latter's Kilburn space, was the first revival of the whole thing, with single plays performed on weeknights and all-day weekend sessions of the lot.

The heartbeat of Roche's plays continues to sound loud and affecting as we taste the tang of three progressive flavours of unfulfilment: the directionless railing of young tearaway Jimmy in the gaming club in *A Handful Of Stars*; the continuing legacy of an old adulterous elopement in the betting shop of *Poor Beast In The Rain*; and the foredoomed and minor, yet life-changing, love affair of no-longer-young sacristan Artie in *Belfry*. The trio of snapshots are entirely unrelated: no common characters or locations, not even offstage figures or places fleetingly referred to. Each story stands alone, but the whole is synergetically more than the sum of its parts, potent and affecting as those parts are in the first place.

The order in which the plays were written, and were staged on omnibus days, is the best one in which to see them, but it matters little. The crucial point is that Wilson Milam's production gave Roche's beautifully sensitive and observant creations, these small-town characters and events, their full human weight — less would be contemptuous, more crippling. Milam also allowed a subtle shift in balance between the component plays: where once *Belfry* had been a climactic minor-key movement, this time it was the legacy of the past in *Poor Beast* around which the trilogy pivoted, as the event of several years ago continues to spread its ripples through those left behind.

Poor Beast was also the play in which Geoff Rose's design could be seen to have updated the small-town-backwater look of the original productions. Where once, for instance, Des McAleer as the babbling eternal sidekick Joe was a down-at-heel vision in crumpled wool jacket and porkpie hat, Eamon Maguire in the same role was so much more flash that, for the hurling final, he even donned a waistcoat (a waistcoat, mark you!) in Wexford county colours beneath his blazer, which combined with his frivolous manner to create an almost queenly air. In the same play, Elaine Symons as Eileen looked positively *à la mode* in miniskirt, opaques, and platform trainers.

Rose's Wexford is not as timelessly essence-of-Ireland as Andrew Wood's 1992 designs or, say, the stage settings of the likes of *The Weir*. This is probably a good thing, as it dispels notions that Roche may be trading on a fictional, distilled sense of Irishness, rather than upon universally shared traits and relationships that simply happen in these cases to manifest in south-eastern Ireland.

As an old jobbing muso, Roche's sense of the musical components of the plays was well honoured, as snatches of songs from the Rolling Stones to Nirvana peeped round the edges of the action (although I couldn't help missing the poignant commentary formerly offered at the opening of *Belfry* by the choral intro to the Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want"). Roche's own words carry the simple, self-effacing heft of the lyrics of one of rock's master singer-songwriters — a Costello, a Cave, or of course the finest of Van Morrison's reminiscence songs.

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A dimension was added to the experience for old Trilogy hands by seeing two of the original company move into roles one slot older, as it were, than in their previous appearances; in particular Gary Lydon, once a menacing force of nature as Jimmy in *Handful*, now modulated to the ambitionless Conway in the same play, and to the slowly awakening Artie in *Belfry*, although he still felt on the young side for the latter role. Life had not yet passed Lydon's Artie quite so comprehensively by, and his affair with Angela did not feel so much like a last gasp as an extremely belated but not-yet-fatally-too-late awakening. Lydon's former younger roles were taken on by a rumbustious Peter McDonald, who perhaps flattened out the portrayal of Jimmy the hothead in *A Handful Of Stars*, rendering him simply as an obnoxious nuisance without the added air of menace, the threat of causing major grief that his predecessor always hinted at.

Hugh O'Conor and Elaine Symons had fairly big sets of shoes to fill (platform trainers notwithstanding), given that their groups of roles had first been played by Aidan Gillen and Dervla Kirwan respectively; however, neither was ever less than efficient and each was often downright delightful. (As Symons' Linda teasingly led Jimmy on towards the end of *A Handful Of Stars*, my companion borrowed my notebook and scrawled, "I want one of her.") Michael McElhatton was especially touching as a trio of various kinds of failures who each retain an impressive dignity: the past-his-best boxer Stapler in *Handful*, former wide-boy hero turned car assembly line worker Danger Doyle in *Poor Beast* and cuckolded husband Donal in *Belfry*.

On first viewing, Roche's works were hailed as classics-to-be; last December

they came into their birthright.

Belfast native Ian Shuttleworth writes about theatre for the Financial Times (London) and the divento.com website.

BIG MAGGIE

by John B. Keane

The Abbey Theatre

10 February – 17 March 2001; reviewed
on 23 February BY MARY COLL

WHEN JOHN B. KEANE'S *BIG MAGGIE* was first produced in Ireland in the late 1960s, it subverted cherished notions, fostered by both church and state, of Irish motherhood as selfless and self-sacrificing. Maggie Polpin stormed out of de Valera's misty, soft-focus vision of Ireland into the cold light of a very different, but altogether more realistic, day, with a very clear sense of where she was going, and without the slightest hint of an apology. In the years just before the beginning of the women's liberation movement in Ireland, *Big Maggie* gave voice to Irish women's need for self-determination in a world of men.

Neither lovable nor likable, but yet strangely familiar and compelling, the character of Maggie is more representative than real, having little more than an aggressive sense of self-preservation as her one relentless dimension. It was this articulation of female assertiveness, coupled with an earthy pragmatism for the subtleties of sexual frailty, that made Keane's work groundbreaking in the Ireland of its day. The play has since become a contemporary classic, and is greeted with enthusiasm in towns and villages where it is performed almost ritually by local amateur drama groups. For the Abbey to revisit this territory professionally under the direction of

PAUL McCARTHY

Garry Hynes makes an important statement about the status of Keane's writing, and Hynes' intense and unsentimental production breathes sufficient new life into the work to carry it forward to audiences in the 21st century.

The play opens in a Kerry graveyard



GRAVE: Eamon Morrissey in *Big Maggie*

on the day of Maggie's husband's funeral, and within minutes we learn, through her exchanges with her neighbours and her children, that sentiment and affection will never define her relationship with them or with the wider world. Finally

freed from the restrictions of a loveless marriage, Maggie shows herself to be a tough, pragmatic woman with a fierce need for security. She takes complete control of the family's grocery shop, farm, and financial resources at the expense of her children's hopes and expectations.

Keane tries to justify this utter lack of natural warmth or affection by giving us brief glimpses into Maggie's past — we hear of an unhappy marriage to an unfaithful man and a thankless life of hard work and childrearing which have embittered her. But while we understand something of Maggie's anger, we are given very few glimpses of anything else within her character that suggests a woman of depth or complexity. It is this one-dimensional aspect of Maggie, this tendency towards caricature, which has always been a weakness of the writing, and remains so even in Hynes' incisive production.

Hynes strips the play back to focus everything almost exclusively on the character of Maggie. In doing so, she tones down the comic flashes in Keane's work which have reduced past audiences' discomfort with Maggie's excesses. This is a darker production than we are used to, and in this it connects Keane's world with that of McDonagh (a world, of course, that Hynes herself knows intimately); the production subtly acknowledges the relationship of one writer's work to the other, underlining a continuity in the Irish theatrical tradition.

Marie Mullen pours energy and credibility into the role, embracing it with wicked enthusiasm. Mullen strides across the stage with the self-assured air of a woman in her prime, and imposes her authority upon the lives of her four children with no regard for feeling, and utter contempt for sentiment. To make

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them her own she needs to break their spirits one by one. She begins with Mick (Peter Gaynor), who rather than face disinheritance and dependence on Maggie walks away from the farm and the family to make a life of his own in England. Then she humiliates and chastises the initially feisty Katie (Dawn Bradfield) for her illicit relationship with a married man, and marries her off to a wealthy farmer to protect the family's reputation.

Norma Sheahan, in a beautifully observed and sincere performance as the younger daughter Gert, is subjected to the cruellest shattering of illusions. Maggie teaches Gert a hard lesson about the foolishness of romantic love by seducing Gert's suitor, the commercial traveller Teddy Heelin (Peter Hanly), and making sure that Gert witnesses this double betrayal. Hanly, however, is hopelessly miscast in the role of seducer and manipulative charmer, and his passionate entanglement with Maggie, which should create a sense of collusion between adversaries equally matched, mainly achieves the effect of embarrassing the audience with its obvious incongruities.

Finally it is the turn of Maurice (Owen Mc Donnell) to face his mother's wrath. He stayed behind to run the family farm in the hope that one day his mother will approve of his love for the penniless Mary Madden (Sarah Jane Drummeley) and permit their marriage. But Maggie has no intention of allowing another woman, with no dowry, into her world, and following a confrontation between Maggie, Mary, and Mrs. Madden (Maire Hastings) Maurice is also forced to leave home.

In the interludes between these familial conflicts, Maggie is pursued by the local "monumental sculptor" Byrne (Eamon Morrissey), and Morrissey and Mullen's flawless performance of the

"courtship" scenes offer the audience a brief space of relief from the relentless harshness that Maggie brings to bear on the lives of those around her.

One by one Maggie faces down family, friends and neighbours with a clear knowledge of the consequences, and no remorse. There is no allegorical intention apparent, and no attempt by writer or director to redeem her character, or suggest the even the possibility of redemption. Big Maggie takes responsibility for her every action and never looks back. The extent of her uncompromising assurance and utter lack of remorse can still startle an audience, and still raises questions about the role of women in Irish society, in particular the role of the mother figure. Many of the ancillary elements of the story may be somewhat dated, but the fundamental issues of the drama have a sustained relevance, which make the production a very satisfying evening of theatre, as well as reminding us of Keane's enduring contribution to the Irish stage.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based poet and critic.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

by Anton Chekhov

The Dublin Theatre Company and

Sionnach Theatre Company

The New Theatre

5-20 Dec. 2000 and 3 Jan.-10 Feb. 2001;
reviewed 20 Jan. BY DEREK WEST

DEAR RONAN WILMOT,

Thank you for directing *The Cherry Orchard*. Going to the revamped New Theatre brought me back to my own days in the Lantern (that labour of love by Liam Miller and Paddy Funge, which never recovered from the dousing it received during the burning of the

CARMEL WHITE



FAMILY STORY: The Cherry Orchard

British Embassy) and to my early visits to the Focus, where I first encountered Ibsen and Chekhov.

It was great to see a seriously committed body of people stepping through the glitz of Temple Bar, browsing pre-show through the books in the Connolly bookshop before putting enthusiastic bums on hard seats to view a classic. Judging by the applause before Firs' final entrance, that sad coda to the main action, some people in the audience were seeing *The Cherry Orchard* for the first time and enjoying it. So I do think that your outstanding achievements have

been to secure a serious acting space in the heart of Dublin and to awaken a new generation to the poignancy and wit of the well-wrought play.

But, Ronan, I have to interject some mature recollection at this juncture. The problem with hearkening back to the halcyon days of basement and mews-lane theatre is that we've moved on — and, if we haven't, we should have. I'm aghast at my own predilection for nostalgia; I'm alarmed by yours. It's just not good enough — this cramming classics into small spaces and coming across all enthusiasm and no resources.

The lack of materials was evident in the appalling scenery. Apart from the tick and tuk-tukking of the SFX to denote the fall of "Timberr!", there wasn't an orchard next nor near to this estate. You placed your cast in a setting which totally undercut their credibility. There was not the slightest hint of the Big House. This was not the decay of the old order; it was a Pound Shop reconstruction. The "place" just did not ring true; the characters were uneasy.

Take the bookshelf that prompted Gaev into eulogy: "Dear, highly esteemed book-case, I salute you. For over a hundred years you have devoted yourself to the glorious ideals of goodness and justice..." Never mind that Gaev is a lovely, silly, useless man (one of Chekhov's endearing creations); there was just no way that your bookcase could persuade us that Gaev was besotted by a piece of furniture. For God's sake, it looked pure War-on-Want.

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The painted walls were depressingly flat, like those of a Rathmines bedsit. The entrances were penny-pinching and made the taller actors look like ungainly giants. I have no problem with a minimalist approach — after all you were working in a tiny playing area — but I felt that the set was not just a neutral background, it was an affront to the acting. I know that more can be achieved, even in cramped circumstances. Go for it — don't let the visuals drag the drama down.

As for the lighting: I was in the front row and I spent too much of the evening either being blinded or shading my eyes. The lights were hitting me all the time and, with the exception of Act Two and the very final scene, very little atmosphere was achieved.

You had a superb cast, and there were many fine performances. I wondered if the age range of your cast was going to be a disadvantage. Yes, there was a partial sense of lamb dressing as mutton, but your management of the narrative thread did much to offset this. Elizabeth Moynihan and Ross Flannery were finely balanced as Gaev and Madame Ranevskaya. At times, Moynihan came closer to Hedda Gabler in the sense of wilful passion that underlay her performance. You could believe in her emotional and sensual draw towards Paris. I remembered Siobhán McKenna's wistfulness and sentimentality over the orchard, whereas Elizabeth Moynihan conveyed enormous *hauteur*. From the front row it was intimidating.

I loved Flannery's underplaying (the New Theatre space lends itself to quietness and he had its measure), particularly his muttering of the billiard lines — "Off the right into a corner! Pot into the middle pocket!" (By the way, whose translation were you using? No credit in

the programme.) It was certainly hard to imagine this Gaev lasting for more than a day in the bank and that was right. I was struck by the sense in which both Gaev and Ranevskaya represented the sad demise of a world that was already *passé* — they were lovely, elegant, useless people! That did work, if only because you allowed the text and characterisation space to breathe.

The younger women — Neilf Conroy, Lisa Sherry-Dobbyn, Lorraine Horgan — were excellently cast. I loved the husky timbre of Conroy's voice. I have never seen her in a role like Anya and I thought she was so fresh and vibrant and just right. Likewise Sherry-Dobbyn conveyed both the nun-like quality and the blighted hopes of Varya. Her timing, especially in the last scene with Lopakhin, was rivetting.

Damien Devaney (as Trofimov, the eternal, outspoken student) and David Murray (as Lopakhin, the harbinger of a new material order) were both intelligent, passionate, wholly credible. I feel they are both on their ways to great things! They brought fire and authenticity to their interpretations. Murray was so good when he took up the keys of the estate — he gave not only the exuberance of his rise in the world ("I can pay for everything!"), but the sense of history — the enslaved generations that had gone before him. Trofimov's dismissal of Lopakhin was superbly delivered. It is such a joy to hear good writing so well interpreted.

I needed to erase the memories of Cyril Cusack and Siobhán McKenna, to reclaim the play. Your production achieved that. I felt that in some ways this was a trial run for more work on the classic repertoire. I hope you can hold your company together, to build on their

strengths. So far your programme has been eclectic. The Chekhov seemed to come out of nowhere in particular: it might have achieved more weight if it was seen in the context of similar work. That was the great power of Deirdre O'Connell's work in the Focus (circa '67-'75): she had a core company that worked its way into Chekhov and Ibsen with superb results. It may be up to you to take on that particular mantle. Good luck if you do.

Derek West is a teacher of theatre and drama.

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

by William Shakespeare

The Royal Shakespeare Company
In repertory; reviewed on 22 Dec. 2000 at
the Barbican Theatre, London

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

WHEN LYNNE PARKER'S PRODUCTION OF *The Comedy Of Errors* opened at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford in April, 2000, my *Financial Times* colleague Alastair Macaulay was rather the ghost at the feast, arguing that Parker had jam-packed an evening with gags and gimmicks which service the word "comedy" in the title but do little for the play. True, Parker's staging is a long way from the play's last RSC production — Tim Supple's thoughtful, even sombre touring version in 1996 — but if anything it's a tad muted compared to the play's last London main-house outing in '92, in which a zoot-suited Desmond Barrit positively rolled as both Antipholi. The bottom line (of this opening paragraph, at least) is that Parker's *Comedy* is a damn good laugh.

As Antipholus of Syracuse

and his manservant Dromio find themselves abroad in an Ephesus where everyone seems to know them (because their respective long-lost twin brothers have lived in the city for twenty years), Shakespeare feels two opposing pulls. On the one hand, there is the strain of musings on selfhood and individuality which manifest not just through the confusion in general but through the domestic tyranny of Antipholus of Ephesus and the near adultery with his wife's gentler sister... or so it seems to her, until her suitor is revealed as the Syracusan twin.

Against this, though, is the simple effervescence of the Plautine comic plot, and the impulse to play with language which shows the flash of the still-typo playwright that Will was at the time. The latter vein wins out. It is principally a gagfest, and Parker treats it as such; several reviews have spoken of its silent-movie homages, especially given that the poster image is a mock-up of the famous "Harold Lloyd hanging from a skyscraper clockface" shot, but the visual references range far wider, from Lloyd to Eisenstein by way of *The Seven Year Itch*, to the Village People and variety-hall sand-dancers Wilson, Keppel, and Betty.

Yet I genuinely don't believe that these numerous injections of fizz overbalance or disrespect the play; they are swift, small gags which allow the natural frenzy of

Shakespeare's tale to continue to build at its own pace. Nor is the darker side of things ignored. Aside from the opening scene and the (admittedly misjudged) treatment of the awkward Dr. Pinch episode in a subterranean prison (with Michael Mears really failing to get a handle on the role of the doctor), the recurring though



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tangential motifs of wells, grilles and gratings in Blaithín Sheerin's design also keep discreetly reminding us that there is more going on beneath the confusions and chases — beneath them in several senses.

David Tennant as Antipholus of Syracuse shows himself much more delightfully attuned to broad comedy here and in the concurrent production of *The Rivals* than to the romantic angst of Romeo elsewhere in this RSC London season, and quite eclipses his surlier Ephesian brother played by Anthony Howell. Ian Hughes and Tom Smith play their respective Dromios as more assured than the usual run of put-upon manservants, although Smith's comedy-foreigner accent is superfluous. Emily Raymond and Jacqueline Deffery provide efficient support as A. of E.'s wife Adriana and her quasi-adulterously tempted sister Luciana; Nina Conti adds to her clutch of Freudian cameos this season (she works quite lasciviously on a butter-churn as Audrey in *As You Like It*) with a brief turn as a no doubt significantly sword-swallowing courtesan. Jack Chissick as First Merchant has plainly been encouraged to steal every scene that isn't nailed down, and takes an infectious sitcom glee in doing so. It's not an evening for chin-stroking; it's a brisk two-and-a-quarter-hour romp, and none the worse for it.

CONVICTIONS

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Crumlin Road Courthouse, Belfast
27 October - 18 November 2000

Reviewed 30 October BY KAREN FRICKER

IN ITS DAY, THE CRUMLIN ROAD Courthouse was one of the most important — and notorious — structures in Northern Ireland. Hundreds of men and women

associated with Troubles violence were tried there, and it was the site of the notorious "Diplock trials" in the 1970s, when trial by jury was suspended and the fate of the accused lay in the hands of a single judge. For many, the Courthouse and its sister structure across the road, the Crumlin Road Gaol, represent not justice but the breakdown of justice — the failure of societal structures to deal with the hatred and violence that have plagued the North for many decades.

Deserted since 1998, the future of the Courthouse is uncertain. Some argue it should be preserved for its historical and architectural significance, while others dispute that the history it contains bears preserving, and say the only thing for it is to tear it down. The genius of Tinderbox Theatre Company's *Convictions* project last autumn was its full exploitation of the Courthouse's metaphoric potential as a symbol of Northern Ireland itself, poised between a difficult but inescapable past and an uncertain future. With *Convictions* the Courthouse became a site for the staging of imagined pasts and futures; it was not a project about answers or solutions, but rather opened up a space for consideration of the issues involved.

The idea behind the project was simple but, one can only imagine, amazingly complex to actualise: Seven Northern Irish writers were invited to write short plays for a room of their choice in the Courthouse. The plays were then staged in their individual rooms by a shared cast; the audience were split into four groups per night and led through the Courthouse, each group viewing the plays in a different order. The logistics boggle: some of the actors performed the same play on a continuous "loop" while others had to scurry behind the scenes to



MAD DOG: Andy Moore in Gary Mitchell's "Holding Room" in *Convictions*

appear in different plays.

The experience of the production was therefore quite different for each viewer, depending on what order he or she saw the plays, and this foregrounding of subjectivity strikes me as one of the fundamental points that *Tinderbox* was trying to make. The evening oscillated between occasions for collective viewing and moments of individual contemplation, as we walked through the dank and creepy hallways from one room to the next, absorbing the playwrights' ideas but also the atmosphere and the messages of the place itself. Given the multiplicity of sensations thus available to the viewer, it struck me as overkill for *Tinderbox* to have also laid on installations (by Amanda Montgomery) in the building's nooks and crannies — enough stimuli already!

And if overall the experience of the evening added up to something quite powerful, the individual plays them-

selves were quite a mixed bag, ranging from the sublimely subtle to the quite off-puttingly bombastic. In their approaches the writers split fairly evenly between darkly satirical imaginings of the building's potential future uses; and more serious, dramatic wranglings with its ghosts.

Given that dichotomy, Nicola McCartney deserves special praise for having gone a different direction with "Jury Room" — an intriguing interaction between a young woman (Lucie McAnespie) and older man (Lalor Roddy) as they wait to be called as jurors. A half-hearted conversation about her aborted study of optometry deepens into an exchange about sight and appearances — what can be known and what can't. An overall point is hard to discern, but the writing is acute and affecting, McAnespie and Roddy are wonderfully individual in their performances, and John Riddell's lighting design is stunning

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— by shining lights through the windows from the outside he manages to create an overwhelmingly convincing impression of daytime, which makes the return to the shadowy Courthouse corridors all the more disconcerting.

Marie Jones, Darragh Carville, and Damian Gorman all went the darkly comic route, each proposing a scenario in which misguided individuals try to claim the building — or the memories it contains — for their own opportunistic purposes. In Jones' "Court No. 2," a corporate executive (Abigail McGibbon) overseeing the building's conversion into a heritage centre locks horns with an enthusiastic deputy (Maria Connolly) and a moody musician (Conor Grimes) who are pitching their differing ideas for an exhibition. Though the premise is credible and potentially humorous, there was an obvious and overstated quality to the piece that emanated from lines like "Keep your beliefs out of it, this is supposed to be for all religions." Zoë Seaton's production also seemed uncertain as to whether to play the material straight or go for a more exaggerated comic tone.

Carville's approach is similar but his "Male Toilets" is more successful, largely because his writing — and Simon Magill's production — hit the right comic tone. Here two journalists, a "words man" (Conor Grimes) and a photographer (Alan McKee), kill time while waiting for a press conference to begin that will announce that the Courthouse is going to be transformed into a Tourist Information Centre. The photographer's got a bigger picture in mind: concerned that, *sans* violence, Northern Ireland will lose its global "brand identity," he's hatching a plan to keep the area in the news by planting "the odd wee bomb" — just in the wintertime, mind; there will still

be "a whole trouble-free summer season for the tourists to enjoy." This is good, solid satire — pointed, funny, and in its basic premise scarily credible.

Gorman's "Judge's Room," too, extends a blackly funny idea about the Courthouse's future: we've come to the chambers of an elderly Judge (J.J. Murphy) to hear him pitch his idea to turn the building into an opera house to stage *Der NordIrischeKriegZyklus — The Ulster War Cycle*: "A kind of Wagnerian Riverdance for the Troubles." Again, this is funny stuff, well staged by Magill and well acted by Murphy, and it adds nice formal texture to the evening to have Murphy address the audience directly. The piece falters, though, when the Judge produces a young woman whose father was killed in Troubles violence and urges her to tell us her story: the Judge's callous opportunism is overstated and the piece lurches into preachiness.

Of the playwrights who take the serious route, only Owen McCafferty comes up trumps, with "Court No. 1," a beautifully understated, very moving piece of near-poetry perfectly performed by Lalor Roddy (and Stella McCusker as an offstage voice) under James Kerr's direction. The piece also best uses the atmospherics of its room: a man (the Victim) sits in the dock, far away from the audience, who are seated in a spectator area divided from the court by a plexiglass wall. The unseen Administrator quietly questions the Victim about his name, age, and occupation; he responds unwillingly, clearly tired of what has become an ongoing ritual. This intriguingly Beckettian situation gradually comes clear: the Victim was killed in random gunfire, and he is condemned to repeat this ritual until his killer is brought to justice. The piece palpably

brings home the sense of futility the random loss of the Troubles provokes.

Gary Mitchell too exploits the environment of his setting, "Holding Room," quite well: his piece takes place in the true bowels of the building, near the infamous subterranean corridor which connects the Courthouse to the Gaol. A prison guard (Vincent Higgins) is taking a convicted prisoner to his cell; along the way he tells the prisoner about the prisoners and guards who died or killed themselves there, while the prisoner hides his fear under bravado and verbal abuse — he's finally shut into his cell and we hear him start to cry. Mitchell's not making any new or particularly subtle points here — the piece really feels like an extended series of ghost stories — but it's well staged by Mick Gordon and well acted.

It's hard to credit, given the overall subtlety and thoughtfulness of the evening, why the producers chose to have all the groups converge to watch Martin Lynch's "Main Hall" as their collective final experience. As the play opens, an angry Ghost (Higgins) harangues the audience from the rafters: "Y'wait until the place closes down... before you set foot in the place,... y'shower of bastards... pile of voyeuristic, theatre-goin', fun-seeking, hedonistic, facile assholes." This might have been construed as clever metatheatrics, but it comes across as self-righteous and self-destructive bullying — what could possibly be gained by insulting and alienating one's audience in this way?

The Ghost goes on to tell his story: born in poverty in Belfast, his only joy came when he married Molly, but when he caught her in another man's arms, he killed her. He was tried in the Courthouse and hung: "the only time I got to wear a tie in my whole life." Lynch's agenda

seems to be to highlight the dire conditions in which Belfast's poor lived, reminding the audience that regardless of what side those tried in the Courthouse were on, they were united by poverty. These are important points, but by choosing such a melodramatic story to frame them, and by making so many assumptions about his audience, Lynch undermines his own effectiveness. Director Jimmy Fay and performer Higgins do what they can to humanise the material, but overall this provides a disappointing ending to what has been, overall, a wonderfully thought-provoking, atmospheric — and brilliantly produced — evening.

CRACKED

Devised and performed by Quare Hawks Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the Glens Centre, Manorhamilton on 2 December 2000

BY EAMONN JORDAN

FOR SOME TIME, I HAVE BEEN VERY conscious of a definite shift in writing and performing practices in Ireland. I wondered what would counter the older dramaturgical models provided by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, and Frank McGuinness. A number of distinctive strands have emerged of late: a glut of monologues; a series of plays inspired by postmodernism's ironic, calculating perspective; the embrace of clowning and the grotesque by companies like Barabbas...the company and Corn Exchange; and a series of plays driven by a metatheatricalised dynamic, a collection that would include Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa*, John Breen's *Alone it Stands*, and Marie Jones' *Stones in his Pockets*. During this emerging period, ritual all too often made way for spectacle and a blurring of pain and pleasure, however complicat-

ed; and innocence as a comforting concept flourished in a gravely nostalgic fashion. These developments left many a little uneasy and feeling a little short-changed during theatrical performances. Clearly, there is a new need to re-imagine and re-frame performance texts, and more importantly, to re-invigorate the relationship between performance and audience. For many years, international writing practices have been moving away from single-authored scripts towards devised texts. But devised work I saw recently in Ireland exhibited neither the expertise nor the confidence to generate a satisfactorily consistent performance standard, and this is not to say that a text written by a single playwright has any head start. Some of the devised work was very good, some occasionally brilliant, but consistency was more often than not absent.

Now things have begun to change rapidly. Increasingly, devised shows are becoming more and more formidable and the process of creation more elaborate, intense, and knowing. *Cracked*, performed by Quare Hawks Theatre Company, is an excellent example of how devised work can be of the highest quality. The play delivers a series of short, interconnected moments that dramatise the lives of women held in Loman's Mental Hospital in Mullingar between the 1940s and 1960s. The dramatic situation is loosely inspired by Hannah Greally's novel *Bird's Nest Soup*, a book that accounts for her own experiences in Loman's Hospital. Performances like *Cracked* expose the horror of the indignities experienced by patients and the callous judgements of an era that is not entirely past, given the appalling conditions that people still live under in some institutions to this very day.

Cracked shares some of the concerns of documentary television that exposed institutional negligence and abuses, and there are some evident similarities to Patricia Burke Grogan's *Eclipsed*, a play set in a Magdalene laundry. But *Cracked* differs from both in that the variables of performance provide the opportunity for new modes of communication in which the gesture, the visual, and the symbolic, rather than a notional realism, become dominant. There is little linear narrative development between the play's incidents, yet it captures the ennui, the savagery of detention, the rage, the sense of sedation, and the helplessness of the patients, who can't access their physical homes, and whose transitory abode cannot offer anything like sanctuary.

The humiliations and the traumas of the inmates are not presented in all their horror; instead the harrowing pain of the situation is eased somewhat by comic moments and by moments in which the characters playfully expose the rigid limits set on their human activities, especially when they engage in a mock evening out, courted by suitors. All of this comes together splendidly in a play partly locked into an alternative reality, as the performers are partly locked into the circular cage-like space designed by Marcus Costello.

There are other counters to the darkness of the piece: the creative amalgam of a musical score (composed specifically by Denis Clohessy for the piece and superbly performed live by the cast), projected images, abstract gesture and energised movement. Ritualised behaviour from bathing to the washing of clothes, and the ironic juxtaposition of a soundtrack that includes everything from Patsy Cline's whimsical romantic fantasising in "Walking after Midnight" to Pope Pius XII and Archbishop

McQuaid's religious orations. Other texts circulate, from Micheal MacLiammoir's broadcast on the death of Maud Gonne; through Eamon de Valera's sentiment of the family as a haven of immaterialism, comfort, and spirituality; and on to the gentle comedy of Maureen Potter and Jimmy O'Dea. The play challenges any simplistic emotional longing for times past. The textualisation of nostalgia found in the collective memory of the O'Dea/Potter partnership is savagely challenged.

De Valera's request for "material wealth as a basis for right living," is not only falsely optimistic for its own time but also disturbingly adroit for its ideological intent, and the incongruity surrounding his idyllic references to "Cosy homesteads," "things of the spirit," "sturdy children," "the laughter of happy maidens" are not lost on the spectator, who cannot evade the harsh, stringent reality of the lives of women, entrapped, abandoned, and held against their will, in institutions like Loman's in the middle years of the previous century, women who have nobody to sign them out and to free them from their ordeals. The spurious iconography and narrative deployments of a controlling, curtailing society, dependent on a strong church/state partnership, are made obvious.

I was reminded of Artaud's comment that we must "first break theatre's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere between gesture and thought," as I encountered the event. The dexterity of the performers, Dawn Fleming, Liz Keller, and Diane O'Keefe, as they switch roles, manipulate the stage space, and use the props in a terrifically constructive way is evident throughout the play. The performers superbly delivered



CORPOREAL PRESENCE: Cracked

everything from a vocal, operatic, orgasmic symphony, to the ritualised mundanity of the washing, wringing, and ironing of clothes, from fine instrumental playing to great physicality and flexibility in their stomping, gestures, and movements, from the dramatisation of electric shock treatment to the pain at the discovery of unsent letters, and from their comic caricature of a chorus of analysts/gossips to the capacity to make an audience alert to a space beyond the immediate reality.

If I have one reservation, it has to be

that the use of repetition could have been thought out a little more and a slightly shorter piece, without an interval, would gain rather than lose in terms of intensity, layering, and interconnection. (I am told the interval will be cut when this play is revived in 2001.)

The skill of the director, Liam Halligan, to bring together a series of unrelated scenes and to mix a number of different theatrical styles and visual requirements speaks volumes for his talent and augurs well for the future development of this theatre company. Good theatre is never easy. Multi-sensory events and multi-disciplinary performers seem to be some of the ways forward for Irish theatre, and more importantly, a vigorous way of developing a demanding and attentive audience.

Eamonn Jordan teaches drama at the Institute of Technology in Sligo.

DIARY OF A HUNGER STRIKE

by Peter Sheridan

Aisling Ghéar

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich
Reviewed 11 November 2000

BY MIKELA FRENCH

IN A NOVEMBER 2000 INTERVIEW, director Gearoid Ó Caireallain told me that Peter Sheridan's play *Diary of A Hunger Strike* is less a factual documentary of the Long Kesh hunger strike of 20 years ago than an account of the emotional experience of the prisoners involved. While it is true that the play is not weighed down with a meticulous record of factual history, Aisling Ghéar's recent production does not deliver any great emotional impact from the stage. What it seems to do instead is give focus to the already charged feelings of many

audience members, leaving others like myself, who had no real direct experience of the 1981 hunger strike, with difficulty connecting to the play.

Of course, traveling to the Falls Road to see a play about the 1981 hunger strike, I sensed there would be intense emotion in the air that I could not fully share. Indeed, before the play, rather than the casual pockets of laughter and chatter I have been accustomed to at other shows, there was a hushed excitement. I continued to notice this air during the play's intermission, when I heard people talking not about the drama on stage and its characters, but about the real people and events surrounding the '81 strike. Again, after the play, as the audience filed out past a display of poster biographies of each of the ten strikers who died, conversation was focused on the events of the past, with little mention of the night's performance.

The biggest barrier for an outside audience member trying to relate to the play is that most of the characters act in only one, exaggerated way. There are a few moments when one character seems to take on the roundness of a real person, allowing everyone in the audience to empathise with him. But beyond this, the ability to enter imaginatively into another's feelings is cut off by characters who seem stock.

Perhaps the lack of fuller characters stems from the fact that the play was written closely on the heels of the traumatic events. It was first produced in 1981, the same year as the strikes, in England, Scotland, and America, but was subsequently turned down by the Abbey Theatre. It had its only Abbey outing in 1985, when it was translated partially into Irish and performed in the Peacock as part of a festival of Celtic lan-

guage plays. Except for one amateur production in 1988, Aisling Ghéar's is the first since that festival.

The play is set in a Northern Irish prison and opens *in medias res* with one prisoner, Liam Staunton (Paul Copland), on hunger strike and close to death. Staunton's strike is part of a campaign for political status (in the form of five specific demands) for Republican prisoners. Lord Rothleigh (Niall Cusack) is a representative of the British government sent in to negotiate with Staunton. Staunton sends



PRISON: Diary of a Hunger Strike

Rothleigh to talk to Pat O'Connor (Daithí Mac Adhamh), a seasoned Republican engaged in blanket dirty protests, who works out a deal with Rothleigh (or so he thinks) that will satisfy the prisoners. Before the deal comes through, however, Staunton's family pulls him off strike, and, without their bargaining chip, the prisoners lose out as the British government goes back on its word.

O'Connor and his cellmate Sean Crawford (Gearóid Mag Aoidh), a new IRA man, face abuse and inhumane treatment at the hands of prison wardens McClay (Ciaran Cunningham) and Maxwell (Sean Mac Seain), with no

means of redress through the head of the prison, the Governor (John Keyes). It is amidst this dire situation that Crawford admits to O'Connor that he does not think he would ever have the will it requires to go on hunger strike, even as O'Connor prepares to do just that.

O'Connor does go on strike, leaving Crawford to negotiate unsuccessfully with Rothleigh, and O'Connor's girlfriend, Bernie Maguire (Norella Ni Laochra), to try to save Pat's life by every means possible short of taking him off strike as she has promised not to do. The play ends as Pat dies and Sean, moments later, takes the oath of a hunger strike.

Although Pat, Sean, and Bernie speak in Irish to each other when they are allowed to (translation head-sets were available for non-Irish speakers), their conversations are not, for the most part, overly intimate. The prison conditions are horrific, yet the two prisoners (who are played by actors who actually spent time "on the blanket" in Long Kesh) seem not to despair nor reflect on their situation, and they do not talk about their fears or hopes or family and loved ones — indeed, one hardly realises O'Connor has a girlfriend until well into the play. Even if it is true that prisoners in Long Kesh refrained from talking about these things in order not to break down, the tension that this must have caused does not register in the performance.

Indeed, O'Connor seems so assured of his actions and without inner turmoil that his character can almost be dismissed as arrogant. The same is true of Maxwell, the prison officer who exhibits drunkenness and bigotry in equal parts, without any signs of ambiguity in his hatred. Rothleigh also seems one-dimensional as a charming but completely insincere man. Such characters serve to

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highlight the fatalistic aspect of the events of the strike, yet do little to draw an audience into understanding and caring about them as real people.

The one character who does seem real is Sean Crawford. He is seen in the beginning of the play as a young man who joined the IRA in reaction to maltreatment by government forces and not simply because of strong Republican convictions. When he talks to O'Connor, he is filled with doubt about his position in the prison ranks and his own resolve to possibly starve himself. Mag Aoidh lends the right facial expression and body language to these scenes to indicate the depth of his character's contemplation of the situation and the amount of stress he is under. This allows the audience room for empathy as Crawford is harassed by officers and by Rothleigh and slowly hardens into the man that takes the oath to strike in the final scene.

Unfortunately, however, these scenes with Crawford are few, and the story involving O'Connor takes centre stage, so that it is difficult to maintain a level of involvement with him. In the end, one real character out of six is not enough to make *Diary of Hunger Strike* a drama that generates its own emotional response from an audience so much as it provides a point of convergence for already existing feeling.

Originally from Idaho, Mikela French is a Mitchell Scholar studying for a Master's degree in Irish Studies at Queen's University.

EDEN by Eugene O'Brien

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin and on tour

Reviewed on 10 February 2001 at the

Peacock BY CLAIRE PRIOR

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE DREARY MIDLANDS that so exercises the minds of young

Irish playwrights? In *Eden*, his first major outing as a writer, Eugene O'Brien, like Marina Carr before him, finds ripe pickings in the mundanities of midlands small-town life for a canvas of well-drawn characters and a beguilingly profane vernacular.

O'Brien presents a portrait of a dysfunctional relationship and one pivotal weekend which might save or condemn it. Billy and Breda are in their thirties and married with two young daughters, yet they inhabit two barely connecting worlds. In alternating monologues they set out the events of a couple of days which tell us everything we could want to know about how a marriage can disintegrate from slow-set romance into dissatisfaction and desolation. Central to the unfolding of the tale is the backdrop of the "Holy Trinity" — the trio of pubs which mark out the social pattern of Billy's life and, to a lesser extent, Breda's.

Eden is an interesting choice for Conor McPherson to direct. With it he would seem to have found a writer who shares his talent for describing the logic of the drunk, and the shite that's uttered when alcohol provides the fuel. In fact it's all too tempting in the opening moments of *Eden*, as would-be wideboy Billy describes his night in the golf links bar, to see parallels with McPherson's own early monologues — *Rum and Vodka*, for example, which so unstintingly describes the art of binge drinking. The same dark comedy and sense of desperation are artfully presented in *Eden*.

The genius of *Eden* is in the details. O'Brien draws the audience in with a number of familiar and recurring elements — the "Holy Trinity," the joys of "talking shorthand" with the lads in the pub, and later the sheer abandon of being "mickeyed." We glimpse Breda's

PAUL McCARTHY

insecurities as she talks of how she's "lost the weight" and speaks gingerly of "the name" (eventually revealed to be "Pigarse") which haunted her through a plump adolescence.

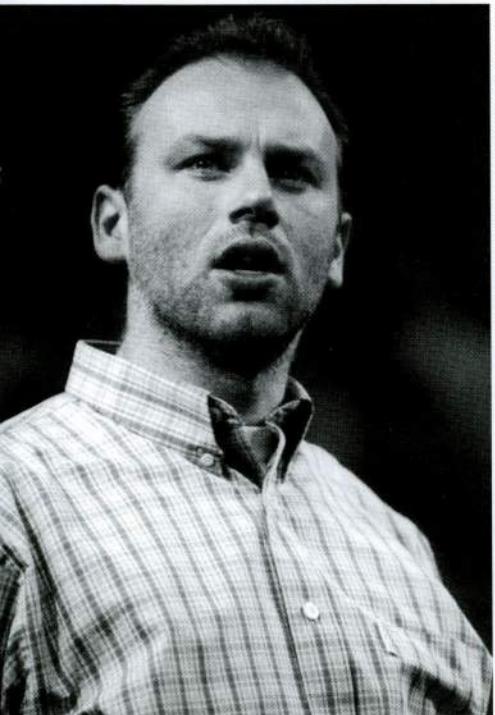
And just as the couple inhabit different worlds in the same house, so too do they each retreat to their own escapist fantasies. Billy's is inspired by a painting of a rural idyll on the wall of a room in his house: his fantasy places him in the field of the painting with the object of his desire, young Imelda Egan, and him "as hard as a rock." In reality, as we learn, Imelda is out of his league... and even

beyond the reach of his friend Tony, who they call "James Galway — the man with the golden flute." Breda finds her escape in "the book" — a selection of female fantasies donated by her friend Eilish, which she keeps hidden in a suitcase under the bed. Her favourite is the one about the harem, where the sultan picks her out of all his women as the object of his desire.

Still, despite the gulf separating the couple, O'Brien teases the audience with the remote possibility of reconciliation and even romance between them. Sunday night in Mac's pub, it briefly seems like Billy might drop his pursuit of Imelda in favour of his wife, who so desperately wants to take him home "so we can be, you know, a proper married couple again." But O'Brien's title hints at no such simplistic rekindling... this is *Eden*, after all, and neither Billy nor Breda can resist the temptation of novelty.

O'Brien's vista is bleak but also humane, a quality replicated in Bláithín Sheerin's curious gallery setting with a painting as centrepiece — a pointed reference to the fantasy worlds which provide the couple's refuge.

The performances are magnetic. Don Wycherly's Billy manages to be entirely self-deluded and swaggering while still earning the audience's sympathies, and Catherine Walsh as Breda delivers a captivating combination of strength and vulnerability as the almost-defeated young wife. McPherson's direction is as full-on as one might expect from a writer so familiar with this form; his staging reinforces the "together but apart" dilemma at the core of O'Brien's clever and vibrant script. In the two hours of *Eden* we are entirely sucked in this self-contained world with its own variation on the pub vernacular. And then we



MAGNETIC: Don Wycherly in *Eden*

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leave the theatre and thank God the weekend's over.

Claire Prior is a reporter at RTÉ and writes about theatre for a number of publications.

THE GALLANT JOHN-JOE

by Tom Mac Intyre

Skehana Productions

On tour; reviewed on 19th January 2001
at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY PAUL HAZE

THE GALLANT JOHN-JOE IS A CONVERSION OF Tom MacIntyre's earlier play *The Chirpaun* into a one-man show for Tom Hickey. As with any adaptation, the question is, does the play stand on its own as a piece of theatre? Here, sadly, the answer is no.

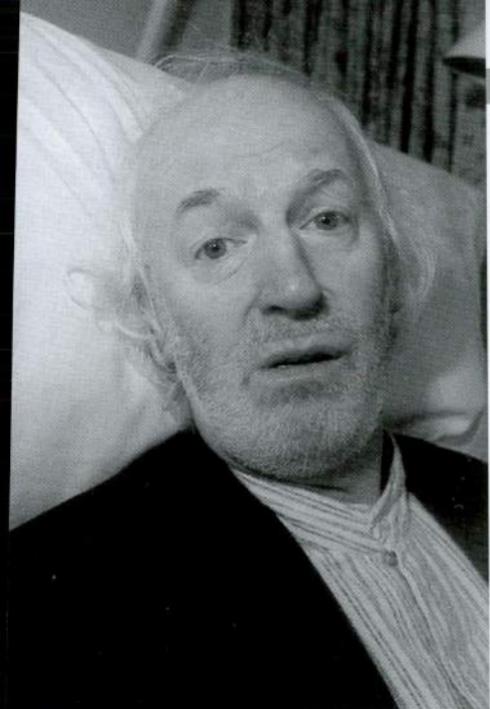
John-Joe sits in his kitchen and decides for no apparent reason to tell the audience his story, which started when his daughter, Jacinta, became pregnant. John-Joe wanted to take revenge on the father, the only problem being that establishing paternity led to a lottery (in John-Joe's mind) between three suspects: his patronising friend Boss-Man, the local hypnotherapist ("hitmatist" in John-Joe's dialect), and "The Chinee" who ran the local chip shop. With rationality nowhere in sight, John-Joe decided the father must be "The Chinee," and drowned him in the lake. By the end of the play John-Joe discovers that Jacinta's was actually a phantom pregnancy and that she is now living in the local mental hospital. John-Joe is alone in his kitchen, an old schizophrenic who cracked up watching his daughter becoming a woman and at the same time drove her around the bend.

The programme note states that Skehana want to "produce theatre that is simple, raw, accessible, and available..."

and to present it in places where the larger theatres seldom travel." This production will certainly fill that brief, as it is travelling to numerous tiny pub venues and community centres around the country; the Town Hall Theatre, where I saw it in its early days, is a larger and more "legitimate" venue than it will normally play. The production is definitely simple, not a lighting change nor sound cue in sight. The stage is all but bare — a white floor that doesn't quite fill the stage of the Town Hall, a couple of chairs placed either side of an old-fashioned clothes-drying mangle. A cheap Chinese lantern hanging from an electric cord illuminates the space. The sparse nature of the set coupled with the surrounding darkness could be a tribute to Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, but the gallant one here, unlike Beckett's character, was not prepared to explore the darkness.

John-Joe is not the most likeable of characters. Bigot, racist, sexist — any or all of these could be his middle name. An uneducated Cavan man, his saving grace is his comic storytelling abilities. Tom Hickey plays the part with skill. He may be the only person who fully understands what MacIntyre is trying to achieve with this piece. To coin a phrase, it was as if the part was written for him, and if one considers how often the pair have worked together, perhaps that is not far from the truth.

It's never really clear what type of monologue we are listening to — one spoken directly to the audience, or one in which the character is really talking to himself, fictively unconscious of being watched by rows of spectators. MacIntyre's play is now one, now the other. John-Joe begins his story by telling the audience in some detail about his recent medical problems. His posture is not aloof; his eye focus comes down to



CAVAN MAN: The Gallant John-Joe

our level, for he is looking at us and not through us. The language is grotesquely comic; it entertains and interests the audience enough to keep us waiting for more. But for the rest of the play John-Joe rarely talks to the audience again. So what is the gallant John-Joe actually doing? Is he playing the role of the seanchai? No, because more often than not he is play-acting for himself and not for the audience. It is more likely that we are looking through the fourth wall into an old man's kitchen as he rants and raves to himself. The asides to the audience seem an after-thought, for comic value only.

What was the significance of the mangle? It is given emphasis because it is the only unusual prop on the stage. John-Joe constantly caresses it before turning its handle and singing of the legendary

Cavan footballer John-Joe Reilly. It is not used to wring water from wet laundry. Is it a symbolic music box? Someone's arm to hold while John-Joe sings his sean nós? Could it embody his dead wife? Or be an acceptable form of allusion to masturbation? In a post-show discussion MacIntyre simply described it as an heirloom, and with that all its potential metaphorical qualities disappeared.

The Gallant John-Joe is a problematic piece of theatre. Many of its jokes depend on the spectator having a rural background, or life experience in Ireland during the 1950s or '60s. Other jokes depend on sharing the bigotry of the speaker. In contemporary society, referring to the owner of a chip shop as "Cunty McFuck The Chinee" is blackly comic — but not if delivered for laughs. Is the play racist or anti-racist? There's a sense that the playwright is not in control of this aspect of his material.

But the main problem with this play lies in the lack of any dramatic action or theatrical spectacle. The whole monologue is in the past tense, meaning that John-Joe can only take a passive role in the action. Bringing action and spectacle to a production is largely a director's job, but here the programme lists no director. It is MacIntyre and Hickey and nobody else that get credit (and discredit) for this play. The notion of a solo MacIntyre play starring Hickey inevitably brought to mind their historic collaborations with Patrick Mason in the 1970s and '80s; there is a profound sense with this production that the eye and the insight of Mason (or indeed another director) could have helped turn this text into an exciting piece of theatre and not the disturbing muddle we saw.

Paul Haze is studying for an MA in Theatre Studies at NUI Galway.

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THE GRAPES OF WRATH

by John Steinbeck,
adapted by Frank Galati

Storytellers Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 8 February 2001
at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

STORYTELLERS THEATRE COMPANY'S production of *The Grapes of Wrath* is an epic undertaking. Frank Galati's adaptation makes a wide range of technical demands on the production team, the performers, and on its audiences. The form chosen by Galati seems to promise an episodic documentary drama, but the dramatic action remains resolutely plot-driven.

The adaptation is thus impaled on a formal contradiction. The story's epic, emblematic qualities are constantly squeezed by the inadequacy of psychological realism to embody such material, and by the imperative to narrative closure of a plot-driven dramatic structure. The contradictions produced by such constriction are acutely felt throughout, and produce extraordinary sensations of "jump-cutting" between scenes, as in the family's non-reaction to the departure of Noah (the excellent Brent Hearne), and in the narrowing of focus to a mundane expository dialogue between Preacher Casey and Tom Joad, after an engaging choric opening.

The play is at its most gripping between halfway through Act 1 and the interval, when the expository awkwardness is out of the way, and the journey to California begins in earnest. Act 2 is dogged throughout by the need to follow up all the loose threads of the narrative weave. The climactic image of Rose of Sharon sucking a starving man is so stark and painful that it remains to haunt the memory, but its impact could be even

greater had it emerged from a more alienated "storytelling" structure, in which the requirement to disclose everything in detail could be dispensed with in favour of choric telling, either in prose, verse or song. In one sense, then, the problems that exist in this production arise from its being the least "Storytellers-like" of recent productions by this company. A question which lingers after the production's end is what kind of play we would have had if the company's artistic director Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy had adapted Steinbeck herself?

The content challenge facing Galati is that of representing, to a contemporary audience, the world in which poor white people found themselves following the coincidence of natural disaster and a series of structured calamities in American capitalism of the late 1920s and



BLEAK: Nick Dunning in *The Grapes of Wrath*

TOM LAWLER

early '30s. It is a merciless world of unrelenting indignity and oppression, in which "the little guy" — so central to sentimental narratives of U.S. political economy before and since — is debased, degraded and deprived of all agency on behalf of himself and his family. The religiosity which surfaces in this narrative to distract people at moments of trial, and the fatalism so central to the Mother's role (well realised here by Stella Madden) — the lens through which the world of the poor is seen — combines with the incoherence of Tom Joad's relationship with his own circumstances to produce a nihilistic narrative quite at odds with the lived history of that desperate time. While Woody Guthrie's songs are expertly realised by the actors, the production choices tended to disadvantage the music's theatrical impact by staging the musicians on the peripheries of Monica Frawley's stark and evocative set. This was particularly evident in the decision to go with just one verse of Guthrie's powerful "Vigilante Man" following Preacher Casey's murder, and to stage it for lone voice and guitar at the dimly-lit upstage apex of the raked stage. It is to the discredit of Galati's enterprise that the most engaging and fully realised musical moment of the night was the hoedown dance to a lively "Turkey in the Straw."

Storytellers is probably the only Irish company with the resources and commitment to produce and tour a work of such scale. Despite the shortcomings of the script, Mark Lambert's production includes a number of telling theatrical moments, including the truck interludes and the desperate final *pietà*. The playing is uneven, however, with strong ensemble giving way to strangely disconnected dialogue scenes. It is important, given the scale of the undertaking, to question how

well work like this can be served by the standard rehearsal period, and the rigours of touring to three diverse venues in three weeks. This is a different kind of theatre, in which the creation of belief makes technical demands on performers different to those experienced week in, week out in mainstream Irish theatre. Apart from individual responsibilities like the creation of appropriate physicalities for multiple role-playing and related vocal challenges, there are the requirements of ensemble. Such requirements are demanding in any circumstances, but are complicated here by the different demands of the stages used, and by the adaptation's pendular swings between the operatic and the confessional.

Victor Merriman lectures in drama at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

THE HACKNEY OFFICE

by Michael Collins

Druid Theatre Company

Druid Lane Theatre, Galway

1-22 Dec. 2000 and 9-13 Jan. 2001;

reviewed 10 Jan. **BY KAREN FRICKER**

YOU COULDN'T HELP BUT HAVE HIGH expectations for the world premiere of Michael Collins' first professionally staged play at Druid Theatre Company. This was an over-the-transom job — Collins sent in the play unsolicited and the company's artistic director Garry Hynes took a shine to it and decided to give it a full production. The last time that happened — well, we all know the punchline: Martin McDonagh became the theatrical sensation of the late '90s, Druid's productions of his plays went to the West End and Broadway, and Hynes came back to Galway toting a Tony Award for directing. Since then Druid have premiered only

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two new plays, both from relatively established writers, Niall Williams and Marina Carr; there was an inevitable sense of excitement and anticipation to see the work of the Druid's next discovery.

The result, if not an earth-shattering work of drama, is nonetheless highly promising, and indicates that Hynes' eye for writing talent (and presumably that of her new writing manager, Charlie McBride) is as keen as ever. *The Hackney Office* reveals Collins to have a solid grasp of plotting, characterisation, and a particularly well-tuned ear for spoken Dublinese. And he couldn't have hoped for a more expertly mounted production than the one he received from Hynes, nor for a better cast: Druid stars Brian F. O'Byrne and Sean McGinley, and relative newcomer Andrew Lovern, who's every bit as good as his more experienced counterparts.

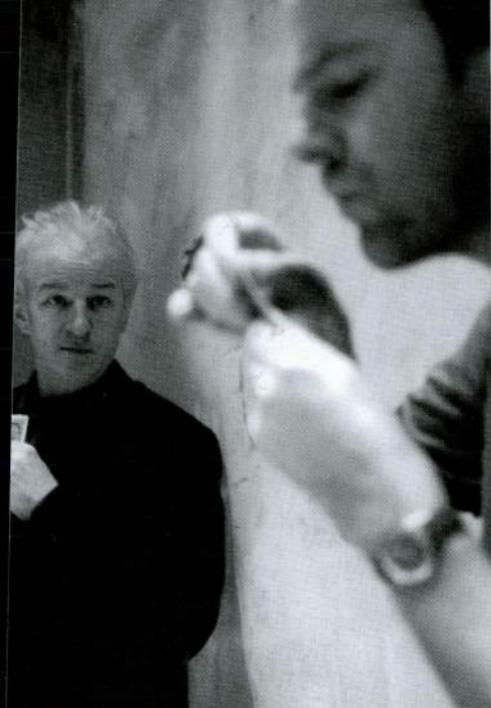
Reservations come in the form of a slight exhaustion with the material: Dublin underworld crime capers gone wrong is ground that is already well-stomped by Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe, and Ken Harmon. But even if we've been here before, Collins handles the genre well, and it's particularly nice to see a young writer creating characters who actually talk to each other (no indulgence in the troubling trend towards monologue-driven plays here).

The play is set in a barren, grotty gypsy cab office run by Christy (O'Byrne) and his young flunky Jude (Lovern). This is the kind of play where every detail matters and appearances are always deceiving, and so it is with character names, for in the end it will be Christy who is the betrayer and Jude who is wronged but eventually triumphant. We soon find out that Handy Hackneys actually doesn't have a single

car on the road: it's a front for a messenger service for an underworld kingpin called The Duke.

Danny (McGinley), an old friend or associate (we're never sure) of Christy's chances by the office, and the plot that will be the central action of the play is hatched: Danny needs some cocaine to placate a business contact, and Christy and Jude happen to have a hefty bag of blow on hand — they've been skimming off the top of The Duke's shipments for years. If it all sounds too tidy — Danny just happening to stop by, the lads just happening to have exactly what he needs — well, of course, it is, and there are crosses and double crosses aplenty before the inevitable blood is spilled and the final twist revealed. The only bit of fat on the script is an unnecessary and not-particularly-credible paternity subplot; otherwise the play is tight, funny, and certainly always felt one step ahead of me.

This is, in fact, a very smart play about very stupid people, and the smartest and riskiest choice that Hynes made for her production is to play up the two elder characters' stupidity, well beyond the point of caricature. These are men who are almost lamed by their misperceptions of themselves and their station in the world. O'Byrne's is a grotesque portrait of a complete and utter loser, from his rooster-like (chest forward, arse back) posture to his handsome face rendered nearly unrecognisable by a dental piece that gives him a fiercely hideous overbite. McGinley looks a bit more normal when he enters, but Hynes takes a few slight textual mentions of a crick in his neck as a cue to have him adopt a grossly exaggerated, bent-over posture — he becomes the Hunchback of Stoneybatter. Lovern, in contrast, is all fresh-faced, smart-arsed verve in his tracksuit and trainers; in ret-



NOICE ONE: The Hackney Office

respect it seems obvious that he will be the one who wins the battle of wits in the end, as he is the only character who appears to have a jot of them.

Liz Cooke's set of stark, bare white walls and Rupert Murray's glaring, almost-too-bright lights create a laboratory-like atmosphere in which we observe these barely human specimens destroy each other. The overall effect is surprisingly unsettling: the play is fun to watch and provides that sense of exhilaration that comes from following a twisty-turny plot as it unfolds, but then you catch yourself laughing at what is really a pathetic example of how low humanity can stoop. So who's the real lowlife here? In the end *The Hackney Office* becomes a mirror and we may not like the reflection we see.

DEREK SPERS

HOWIE THE ROOKIE by Mark O'Rowe

Foyer of the Thalia Theater in Gauss
Strasse, Hamburg, Germany

In repertory; reviewed 18 January 2001

BY HAROLD FISH

THIS PRODUCTION OF *HOWIE THE ROOKIE*, the second in Germany after a 1999 Düsseldorf outing, enjoyed a successful four-month run when it first opened in May last year at the Thalia Theater in the centre of Hamburg. This revival is being staged in the theatre's new second space, the Thalia Theater in Gauss Strasse, which is housed in a renovated ship propeller factory outside the hub of the main city. The Foyer occupies a former loading area complete with ground level bays for large lorries and enormous roller shutters.

Michael Raab's translation has not sought to reproduce a German equivalent of O'Rowe's original Tallaght sociolect. It has, through a use of fragmented German, successfully created a language that can be recognised as marginal, but not a language of the marginalised that can be identified with a particular existing geographical area or even an identifiable social group. In short, the translation has all the edge, the wit, the passion, the energy, and the trauma of Mark O'Rowe's original, yet has universalised the issues in a way that makes them accessible and relevant to a broad German audience.

The story — for the uninitiated — is one of low-level violence and thuggery in contemporary Dublin. Two young men, the Howie Lee and the Rookie Lee, take the stage in successive acts to tell their inter-connected stories in monologue form. Both stories include familiar details of urban youth life — dances, girls, joyriding, parties, and petty crimi-

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nality. But both end in acute tragedy, the first when a temporary arrangement for child-minding goes seriously wrong; and the second when violence breaks out at a party with fatal consequences.

There was no set and minimal lighting. In spite of this apparent bareness, there were several moments when the production offered visual or aural support to the text. Live piano music aimed to help create various atmospheres of calm, serenity, and even humour when, during the dance episode, the pianist, bathed in "dance hall" orange light, stood up to play a few chords on a guitar. Enthusiasts of the ultra-pared-back original Bush production might (as I did) find the music a bit intrusive, but it appeared to go down a treat with the German audience.

The performances of Josef Heynert (Howie) and Dirk Ossig (Rookie) were extremely clear and well timed. There were moments when both performances were a little too energetic, too physical, and to some degree this excess of energy detracted from the brilliance of the translation and from the magic of a successful fusion of acting, storytelling, and stand-up comedy.

But the young audience loved the show. They laughed throughout and were apparently stunned by the tragic twists — moments when the translation and the performances gelled magnificently. These young Germans did not look like what might be called your regular theatregoers, but they nonetheless

seemed at home; the interval-free one-and-a-half-hour playing time phased them not at all.

The production will be revived again later in the year and will tour to schools for performances and workshops; after the performance I attended, actor Heynert



DER LADS: *The Hamburg Howie the Rookie*

said he expected that "there will be plenty of Howies in the audience" on these school tours. The Hamburg production of *Howie the Rookie* has so far proved a great success, a success that has its roots in the high quality of the translation and the imaginative minimal production — and of course in Mark O'Rowe's inspirational script.

Harold Fish is former director of the British Council in Ireland and is currently living in Bonn, Germany.

THE HUNT FOR RED WILLIE

by Ken Bourke

The Peacock Theatre

23 Nov. 2000-13 Jan. 2001;
reviewed 29 Nov. BY SUSAN CONLEY

I'M AN AMERICAN, AND WE DON'T HAVE panto in America — the closest thing we have in our holiday entertainment repertoire is "Disney on Ice," the horror of which I'll leave to the dear reader's imagination. While I had managed to avoid Dustin, Twink, and Socky the Sock Monster during the year 2000's holiday season, *The Hunt for Red Willie* had to be done. Not knowing what to expect, I was not only pleasantly surprised, but downright delighted by its good, clean, laden-with-sexual-innuendo fun. What seems on the surface to be panto for grown-ups dealt with deeper issues of paternity and societal mask-making that begged to be unpacked — if one wanted to take time out from the fast-paced merriment to do so.

Set in Donegal in 1829, the play starts when landlord Harry McMullen is murdered and the crime is laid at the door of Red Willie — the local mythical scary-monster figure. That's the easy part of the plot. The action is set in motion by the dastardly plan of Captain LeBlanc, who with his soldierly sidekick Tanner represented the powers-that-invaded. By ensuring the death of the father of Bessy McMullen, Le Blanc intends to present himself as protector of the lady and avenger of the murder. Bessy herself has other ideas, not the least of which is dressing herself in men's clothing, along with her maid Sally, and going out on the hunt herself. Her Uncle Buck, luckily arriving on the scene just as disaster strikes, admits to being responsible for the loss of the mask of Red Willie, from which all the strife has resulted. Meanwhile, local Irish lasses and lad —

Kathleen McDonnell, Moya Long John, and Q.Pat the Ram Doherty — help stir up the trouble simply by getting in the way.

In typical well-made play fashion, certain pertinent bits of information are expounded upon in drawing rooms, and various twists and turns are interjected, if not with much subtlety, then with a gleeful brio that lets us know that the author and cast are in on the joke. And following that time-honoured dictum that all comedy ends in a wedding, the story careened along to that inevitable conclusion, matching the hunky culchie Fardy McHugh with daughter of the Big House Bessy. On the way, we were treated to numerous references not only to major thematic events in the history of Irish theatre, but to more sly references to tools, boxes, and chests than you could shake a long, solid shaft at.

It is the journey, in addition to the end result, that made this production so delightful. The mighty cast — Dawn Bradfield, Clive Geraghty, Tina Kellegher, David Pearse, and Seán Rocks — doubled up on roles, and played variously the Big House aristos, the English soldiers, and the native Irish. This added an originality to the piece that transcended mere device: it allowed a fluidity between oppressor and oppressed, good guy and bad guy, posh girl and randy girleen, that challenged stereotype even as the actors played each character fully and convincingly. By breaking down each signifier — red coat means Brit, black shawl means peasant — we were left with boundaries broken down and an almost meta-theatrical approach to telling what was seemingly a simple farce: the audience was not allowed to make sweeping generalisations in a show that appeared to be a sweeping generalisation.

And there is, of course, Red Willie him-

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HEY GORGEOUS: Red Willie

self, which turns out to be a mask of dastardly powers, that, when worn, turns the wearer into a demon, a lost soul, an outcast, a danger to society. It is this mask that precipitates much of the play's action, including the revelation of Fardy McHugh's true father as an aristocrat (thereby making him a suitable suitor for upper class Bessy). Red Willie stands in as something mysterious and salacious for the community to project its darker thoughts upon, and it is the power of that societal shadow that ultimately allows for the "all's well that ends well" ending. It is the mask that is ultimately the "bad guy," as opposed to the British soldiers who

have come to pillage the land and marry the women, and as opposed to the native Irish who are illegally brewing poitín and misleading the limeys.

The great energy of the cast was supported on all sides from the production: Mark Lambert's direction was inventive and break-neck, and the live music provided by John O'Brien, Ronan O'Reilly and Fergal Murray added to the festive air. Special mention must be made of Jamie Vartan and Donatella Barbieri's design: the setting hadn't an ounce of fat on it, and the set changes were simply, elegantly, and effortlessly made. It was a joy to watch the stage give up its secrets as furniture rolled in from the wings, and various framing devices came down from the flies — especially entertaining was the use of a kind of shrubbery-on-wheels effect that opened the show. All in all, a grand night, and the perfect, light-hearted way to end a long year of theatre-going.

IT COME UP SUN

by Joe O'Byrne

The Passion Machine

SFX City Theatre, Dublin and on tour

Reviewed at the Black Box Theatre,
Galway, 21 November 2000

BY PAUL HAUGHEY

IT COME UP SUN IS SET IN A WAREHOUSE in the Dublin docklands, re-created to startling effect through Paul Mercier's set of convincingly realistic steel containers. The action starts when Joe, a night watchman (Pat McGrath) discovers a beautiful, young, female asylum seeker inside one of the containers, and must decide whether to report her to the authorities or not. Complicating the situation further is Billy, the night watchman's friend (played by the ever-excellent David Gorry), who keeps him company on his long overnight

KEVIN McFEELEY

shifts. Billy appears to be slightly autistic: his intonation is flat, implying a linear emotional state; he engages in repetitive physical and psychological movement — obsessively opening and closing his jacket zipper, and wishing to hear old stories repeated and relived. Joe adopts a paternal role towards Billy, chastising, cajoling, and comforting him, and occasionally revealing his own problems, particularly his loneliness in the face of a failing marriage.

Essentially O'Byrne has created three refugees of sorts — one from a homeland, one from emotional maturity, and one from an unhappy home life. But this common refugee status weakens rather than strengthens the credibility of the assembled characters. O'Byrne depicts Ania, the young immigrant woman (played by Polish actress Małgorzata Kozuchowska) as an innocent, and Kozuchowska's appearance — blue-eyed, blonde-haired, waif-like — certainly furthers this image of her as childlike and angelic. This effectively disempowers the character, and undermines any potential interaction of substance she might have with the other two characters — and ultimately with the audience.

That a person who has escaped from what one must assume are difficult circumstances could maintain a childlike view of the world is not implausible in itself, nor is it implausible that she should encounter equally innocent individuals. Rather, the failing is that in using such characterisation no real depth or intensity between the three is possible. Had these disparate castaways from community been of grittier stuff they may well have stood up to closer scrutiny; as they were, however, their respective lives did not resonate beyond the theatrical space.

Adding to the difficulties in maintain-



REFUGEES: *It Come Up Sun*

ing credence or audience engagement was the fourth "character," Ania's mother; we discover that the mother is terminally ill and Ania has brought her to Ireland to see her son — Ania's brother — for the last time. But the mother dies inside a container in the course of the play, and in the second act her body, represented by a dummy wrapped in shawls, is brought on stage, around which Ania builds a makeshift home from cardboard boxes, adorning it with photographs and icons she has brought with her. The image is one of quasi-religious and cultural incantation which yet again presents Ania in mystical rather

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than real terms. This is further emphasised in the play's final scene with Ania singing with emotive "native" pathos, becoming an embodiment of universal displacement — but a spiritual and ethereal displacement, not one of wounded flesh, and weary bones.

This, in effect, is the central problem with O'Byrne's script. To reduce the very pressing and immediate reality of refugee/asylum-seeking immigrants into diffused iconography weakens rather than strengthens our engagement and understanding of their very human experiences. Nonetheless, O'Byrne — an acclaimed director but a less experienced writer for the stage — shows significant talent in exploring imagery and subliminal relationships, and in the use of theatrical device — an important quality in the present theatrical environment, which seems to favour TV-style naturalism over any kind of use of metaphor. Should he couple such awareness with subject matter not so inevitably embedded in immediate or societal concerns, he may yet prove to be a writer of stimulating and enticing work.

**LA CHUNGA —
THE WOMAN OF OUR DREAMS**
by Mario Vargas Llosa in a new version
by David Johnston
The Lyric Theatre
3 - 25 November 2000;
reviewed 7 November BY PAUL DEVLIN

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA HAS A DISTINCTLY anti-Brechtian vision of the theatre. His dramatic works aim to destroy the critical distance between the spectator and the spectated. Llosa wants to fully engage his audience, to provoke in them both an emotional and an intellectual response. For all this, however, Llosa's

convictions in what theatre can achieve are closely aligned with those of Brecht. He believes in theatre's ability to effect change, in theatre's inherently political nature, and in its redemptive possibilities. "Old ideas," Llosa said in a public conversation staged as part of the Belfast Festival at Queen's last year, "for young writers are now obsolete."

Unfortunately, the Lyric Theatre's ambitious staging of Llosa's *La Chunga — The Woman of Our Dreams*, in a new version by David Johnston, produced as part of the Belfast Festival's celebration of all things Spanish and Catalan, failed to deliver the desired impact of Llosa's powerful theatrical ideology.

In *La Chunga* there is no final version of the truth; everything is open to a variety of interpretations. Llosa thinks of writing as a "striptease, but in reverse." He layers meaning and psychology into and onto his characters as his play develops. When *La Chunga* begins we may believe that we understand, we recognise, or we even empathise with the characters on stage. But as events unfold, as characters expose themselves through their fantasies and deep-seeded desires, we become increasingly unsure of our original position. While Johnston's script retains Llosa's deliberate layering of ambiguity, and could have successfully engineered the sense of narrative insecurity Llosa hopes for in his audience, the Lyric production of *La Chunga* was convoluted and cluttered in its execution.

While Johnston's script deliberately leaves the location of *La Chunga* undetermined, Stuart Marshall's baked-floor set and earthenware props heavily intimated the play's Peruvian origins. Synan O'Mahony's costumes for the play's female characters were simple and, as a result, successful. The bodiced Chunga,

owner of the bar in which the play is set, looked both strong and sexual, while Meche, "the woman of our dreams," was dressed in a white suit and visible suspenders: simultaneously a virgin and a slut, a blank canvas onto which the male characters project their sexual fantasies as the play progresses.

However, the caricatured costuming of the male characters, the self-professed "Superstuds," as flamboyant, hybrid Latin American dandies — like some of the more colourful extras in an old episode of *Starsky and Hutch* — was miscalculated. The pitch at which O'Mahony's costumes presented the male leads — and the vapid performances of the individual actors themselves — left the Superstuds literally all dressed up with nowhere to go.

The major problem with this production was that it lacked the tension and sexual chemistry required to bring Johnston's version of Llosa's play to life. The words, conflict, and emotion were all there, implicit in every scene of Johnston's script, but, like a first date, just because you have the wine and the company, it doesn't mean you're guaranteed a good night's entertainment. Tessa Wojtczak, as Chunga, struggled to lift the production's flagging spirits and effectively portrayed the female-machismo and tight-fistedness of her character. But she was alone in the battle and the "spellbinding mystery of sexual fantasy," promised in the play's programme notes, never materialised on stage.

Michael Scott's direction was both intrusive and confusing. On top of the mixed signals given out by Marshall's Peruvian setting, Johnston's unidentified geography, and O'Mahony's Latin-American costumes, Scott elected to have his cast speak — or at least try to

speak — in Northern Irish accents. The intention of this multi-cultural theatrical strategy may plausibly have been to urge the audience to consider the universality of *La Chunga*'s themes. But it would have been much more effective if Scott's confidence in the play had extended to permitting Llosa's themes to speak for themselves.

The play revolves on an axis of possible truths and imaginings about what happened to Meche after her own personal Superstud, Mono, loses her in dubious dice game. For this to work on stage, however, *La Chunga*'s play



SUPERSTUD? *La Chunga*

between reality and illusion must be blurred to the extent that everything is equally, simultaneously, plausible. The Superstuds in the Lyric production failed to carry this overriding dramatic intention. Their lacklustre depiction of a group of supposedly volatile and dangerous men exposed their characters as pathetic before their fantasies could put flesh on their bones. Scott's direction never truly established the bleakness and squalor of the lives the characters here are trying to escape, and so the

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effect of their desperate fantasies became drastically diluted.

With such an unconvincing representation of reality, the enactments of fantasy the play presents became little more than meaningless sketches rather than disturbing insights into the minds of their dreamers. In the end the audience as whole may have been left asking, as I was, not what happened to Meche, but what happened to the possibilities of Johnston's script?

Paul Devlin is completing an MA in creative writing at Queen's University.

MADE IN CHINA by Mark O'Rowe

Schauspiel Bochum, Germany
21-29 February 2001; reviewed 23
February BY ROLF C. HEMKE

THE SCHAUSPIEL BOCHUM IS ON A ROLL at the moment. Bochum, located on the very western edge of Germany near Düsseldorf and Cologne, is an old steel mining town, which since the end of the '60s has become an important university city. The Schauspiel is located only a short walk away from Bochum's amusement quarter, and yet all attempts to lure students into the theatre in any significant numbers had failed. That is, until the theatre's new head, director Matthias Hartmann, established a series of late-night productions: Young directors produce only world premieres in the small studio theatre of the playhouse, the "Theater unter Tage." This series has become a

major success and is assisting in the theatre's recovery from a severe artistic and financial crisis. The Schauspiel's latest coup is a major one: Patrick Schlösser, the theatre's gifted house director, scooped up the rights to the world premiere of Irish playwright Mark O'Rowe's sixth play, *Made in China*, before Dublin's Abbey Theatre could grab them. Schlösser was already familiar with O'Rowe, as he had directed the German-language premiere of his *Howie the Rookie* in Düsseldorf.

Made in China leads us into Dublin's corrupt underworld, which is ruled by rigid hierarchies, collaborative agreements between the police and street-gangs, perverted codes of honour, and brutal, pretentious, archaic rites. Hughie, whose mother was severely injured in a car accident she caused herself, holds an upper rank under the command of Puppacat, the gang leader. In order to show his sympathy, Puppacat prepares a murderous surprise for his mourning subject Hughie and Hughie's accomplice Kilby. He tells Hughie to break the legs of the already imprisoned and innocent accident driver....

These, however, are only reported background events which drive the actual plot: Hughie, the smart thug, returns home from Puppacat's surprise party, without having harmed the driver, determined to drop out of this violent milieu. O'Rowe thus deals with enthralling subject matter, which could apply not only to the world of street gangsters but also



the IRA or right-wing militant circles.

The actor Jost Grix performs Hughie's transformation rather coldly, without a break, without giving the spectator a chance to identify with the character. Kilby is played by Johann von Bülow who shows the character's loyalty to Puppacat by displaying an implacable self-confidence, relying on unquestioned obedience to authority. André Meyer plays the simple-minded Paddy, the characters' "punching bag," who is counting on Kilby's promise that he will take over Hughie's place in the gang.

The title *Made in China* refers to the fictitious world the characters identify with: they admire Bruce Lee's combat films, try to teach each other karate, and bolster their images with fake Chinese leather jackets. This is the point where Schlösser's production starts to make ironic clichés out of the figures, which is at first irritating, because in a way he seems to be mocking the characters. But this is eventually what gives depth to the play's rude, breathtaking, fascinating end. Kilby approaches the fridge in the dance-like movement of a Kung-Fu fighter. Paddy, lost in thought, licks at Kilby's jacket which is embroidered with Chinese characters. The sequence is played without dialogue and accompanied by Sinead O'Connor's music; it feels like a playing-out of the feelings lying underneath the characters' actions — their honest feelings, though Schlösser at this point is showing those feelings to be ridiculous.

Schlösser relies on comic elements — the action takes place at a high speed, we're not invited into the characters' psychology, there are some derogatory gags — until the conflict between the three characters starts escalating. At this stage the bitter trash-comedy turns into an Irish

Fight Club and more; suddenly the slow motion choreography of the fighting scenes reveals a sacred struggle of desperate self-preservation. During the fight an animal rage surfaces, the result of self-degradation and humiliation. The production concludes with a shocking cry, and the spectators hold their breath. Kilby and Paddy have destroyed each other, but Hughie doesn't care about them any more, and follows his own path.

Rolf C. Hemke is a freelance journalist and critic working for the newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau and several radio services. Stefan Strasse assisted with the translation of this review.

MAKIN' HITS by Martin Maguire and Darren Thornton

Calipo Theatre Company

Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda and Project Arts Centre, Dublin; reviewed 14 Nov. 2000 at Project BY KAREN FRICKER

THE FIRST ACT OF CALIPO'S *MAKIN' HITS* is some of the best theatre you'll see in Ireland in this or any other year. With their characteristic wit, topicality, and flair for technological innovation the company skewer the cynicism and greed of the contemporary music industry through the story of the creation of a fictional Irish boy-girl band called HITS, who by the interval have a bestselling single and are on their way to stardom. But in the second act the fortunes of HITS plummet and so does the show itself, weighed down by an over-elaborated narrative line and an over-reliance on video rather than live action.

The freshness of Calipo's approach is apparent as soon as audiences enter the theatre: the combination of Terry Loane's

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set of chrome walls adorned with three video screens and loud music playing immediately creates a lively club atmosphere. The show starts out fast and funny: we meet Eugene, a down-on-his-luck music manager, and through video flashbacks we find out how he got that way. 25 years ago, he was on top of the world managing a hugely successful showband, the Starlights, but the band fell apart when the band's heart-throb lead singer was "outed" as gay.

Fast-forward to the present (via a phenomenally well-produced video montage of contemporary Irish life): Eugene now supports himself by DJ-ing in his local pub on Dublin's northside; the live-action scenes where Eugene interacts with the regulars in the pub are among the show's best-written and wittiest. Egged on by his pub friends — and by his "guardian angel" Tony Champagne, a cheesy Elvis-lookalike complete with fawning groupies who appears on the video screens above Eugene's head whenever he has a weak or introspective moment — Eugene decides to get back into the game by creating a pop music act.

By this point the formal "language" of the production is well established and ticking away beautifully: live scenes are intercut with video clips which advance the action or comment ironically on it, as with the auditions for the band: the auditioners (most of whom are horrendous) are pre-recorded on video, and we see them and Eugene's live reaction to them

simultaneously, which makes the scene all the funnier. Another of the show's formal gestures — the playing of all the roles other than Eugene by the same four actors (Yasmine Akram, Maclean Burke, Conor Byrne, and Anne-Marie McAuley) — doesn't work nearly as well, mostly because the actors seem under-rehearsed and under-directed in the live scenes. Scene changes, as well, take way too long and start to dog the show's other-



POPSTARS? Makin' Hits

wise cracking pace; there's a sense that this team are more comfortable and skilled working on screen than on stage.

But the story continues: Eugene finally pieces HITS together and manages to get their first single into the Irish charts; a rapacious English management company spots potential in the group and takes them on, repackaging them as — in one of writers Martin Maguire and Darren Thornton's masterstrokes of cynicism — the world's first eco-friendly pop act, despite the fact that the dopey,

opportunistic band members clearly wouldn't know a bottle bank from a hole in the wall. Their rise to fame is charted through appearances in a very credible chat show hosted by real-life media personality Ray D'Arcy, and the show's peak comes at the end of the first act with HITS' live performance of their soon-to-be-hit single, "Stop! Care for Each Other!"

But the believability of the story soon starts to wear thin because the company don't have the resources to represent the band's transformation credibly. It's funny at first that only one of the band members can actually sing, but in order for the story to really work they'd need to become a much slicker unit than the rag-tag bunch they remain. Such inconsistencies climax when the band exits offstage to be poshed up for the MTV European Music Awards — and then appears at the Awards wearing the same t-shirts and trainers they've been wearing all along.

The band's inevitable downfall — which comes when one of the members is caught torturing birds with his mates at home and the story ends up all over the press — is as clever and blackly amusing as everything else in the show, but by the time it comes the show already feels over-long. And the final twist — that the management company create a new band out of the Glen of the Downs eco-warriors — simply doesn't make much sense; why would such a savvy company package two eco-themed groups in a row?

For a show about slickness, then, *Makin' Hits* ends up showing far too many ragged edges. Akram, Burke, Byrne, and McAuley work terrifically hard as the four band members (and everyone else), but Tony Lenihan is too

pathetic by half as Eugene — his performance is so limp that it almost feels like the show is happening around him. Blocking often feels too basic: Thornton probably bit off more than he could chew by opting to direct the live and video sequences as well as co-write.

But too much ambition is in many ways an admirable thing: Calipo show here, as they have in their past multimedia theatre pieces *Love is the Drug* and *Xaviers*, that they have good material, energy, and innovative formal ideas aplenty, just not enough resources and time to realise them. There's a sense, particularly in that troubled second act, that we are seeing a draft version of what could be a much better show.

MOLLOY and MALONE DIES

by Samuel Beckett

Gare St. Lazare Players

On tour; reviewed at the Everyman Palace, Cork on 2 March 2001

BY DEREK WEST

BECKETT'S NOVELS, ADAPTED HERE BY Gare St. Lazare Players, offer a bleakly amusing vision of life. Man is a solitary figure with a deeply impaired capacity for communion with his fellow humans. The brute necessities of physical function and decomposition predominate. Molloy and Malone blunder through existence, coping resignedly with lameness, impotence, and incontinence.

The potential for the gloom to be unremitting is frustrated by wit. The evening gains, as well, from the current theatrical focus on the monologue. Beckett was no slouch in this regard, but with *Faith Healer*, with Conor McPherson's growing repertoire, and with the recent regional variation from Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*, a generation of play-goers is becoming accustomed

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to the sharp no-frills focus on the individual voice and the individual narrative.

It is a form that can be brilliant: artifice shorn of all but essentials, the unrelenting gaze on the human-as-specimen. Events are integrated into narrative rather than enactment, for visualisation in the inner

sis. Language becomes a most insecure conduit to understanding and articulation.

The text of the Beckett novels is akin to that of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* — in each the narrator is doggedly determined to log the precise nature of each moment of experience. Linear progress is neither achievable nor desirable — the end is inevitable so there is no great point in rushing towards it. This approach puts a strain on the poor reader ("poor" in two senses: "inadequate" and "unfortunate"). It is difficult to hear the voice that speaks and to stay with the threads of thought.

This is where the adaptation of the work for the stage is totally vindicated. The interplay between character and audience frees up the wit of the writing in a manner which is not readily available to the silent, solitary reader. The ironies and absurdities blossomed —

even in the sparsely-filled auditorium of the Everyman Palace the night I saw the production.

Beckett's prose is well served by Lovett, who appropriates the text to his own persona and renders it freshly, vividly entertaining. Lovett's delivery has a contemporary ring. He looks young (he is young), but with shorn head and fine facial features he is ageless. His composite Malone/Molloy is a lugubrious stand-up comic. Apart from a rimless trilby for Malone, his costume is unremarkable (an extra layer of overcoat and docs in good order). On a bare stage, under stark lighting he takes the audi-

LONELY RACONTEUR: Conor Lovett in *Malone Dies*

eye of the spectator's imagination. There are no distracting attempts at verisimilitude: this is man as poor, bare forked animal. In Gare St Lazare's stagings, Molloy/Malone can contemplate the absurdity of his testicles, while sparing our blushes; he can evoke the image of a crippled man conspiring to rest (standing up) with his crutches and his bicycle, through the power of words and gesture.

In the case of Beckett, the monologue admits the immediacy of experience as well as a philosophical interrogation. In the text language itself is an object of vivisection — each vision being subject to instantaneous revision, definition, analy-

ence into his confidence in a conspiratorial monologue of memory and questioning. It is deadpan with just a touch of a Munster lilt. It does not have the manic ribaldry of a Billy Connolly; it is closer to surreal musings of Kevin McAleer, alert to the oddities of existence.

Lovett and his director, Judy Hegarty, have taken on the challenge of rendering intelligible a text which defies all but the most assiduous and imaginative of readers. The reward for them and for the audience is the discovery that Beckett's prose piece is so suited to dramatic presentation. The very existence of an audience allows the wit of the "fatuous callopy" to surface in a manner which is simply not available to the silent reader in his/her lonely tower.

1900: THE PIANIST ON THE OCEAN
by Alessandro Barrico, adapted for the
stage by Marella Boschi

The Civic Theatre, Tallaght in association with Common Currency Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed at the Civic Theatre on

6 November 2000 BY SUSAN CONLEY

IN *1900: THE PIANIST ON THE OCEAN*, Donal O'Kelly plays an ordinary man telling the story of the life of an extraordinary man — whose most extraordinary act turns out to be choosing not to take what is built up to be the most decisive action of his life. As this heavily mediated story ends up at what is in essence a massive anticlimax, therefore, the telling had better be pretty spectacular for the piece to work overall. The combination of a well-paced, colloquial script, a confident actor, and a jazz band ensure that our attention is captured and our sympathy is with our unlikely hero.

This is a translation into English of Alessandro Barrico's 1998 play (originally

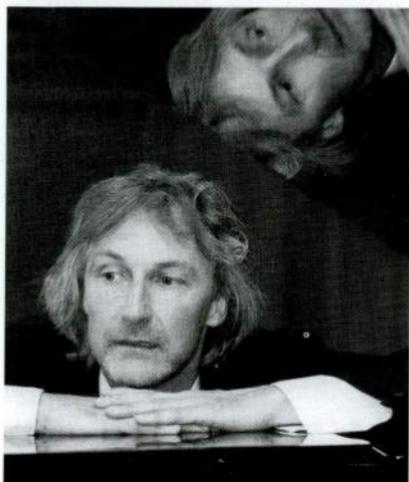
written in Italian) about the life story of the uniquely named "Danny Boodman T.D. Lemon 1900," as retold by one of his musical colleagues. 1900 — as his fellow crew members christen him — was abandoned as an infant on a transatlantic ocean liner called the Virginian at the turn of the last century. He grows up in a world unto itself, a world familiar to us only through films like *Titanic*: ships like the Virginian had their own levels of hierarchy, from the captain to the passengers, and these veritable floating cities were incredibly self-contained. 1900 was a uniquely talented, self-taught pianist, and he gained a reputation as something of a star, and something of a maverick. Music was his only way of travelling, via his imagination, beyond the confines of the ship, of experiencing land-locked cities and countries he had never seen but that he heard about from the passengers that brought their experiences onto the ship.

His life had little enough drama, except for the odd waltz with a piano during a rollicking sea storm or a symphonic duel with the great Jelly Roll Morton. His greatest moment occurs when he finally makes the decision to leave the boat, after having never, in his entire life, set foot on shore. The momentous day arrives, and as he takes his third step down the gangplank, he hesitates... and turns around for home. This is a different sort of courage than one expects from dramatic heroes, who are generally expected — perhaps with the exception of Hamlet — to do something dramatic, to answer the call of fate, and drive the action forward. 1900's heroism knows its own limits and recognises not so much that the world is not enough, but that it is, perhaps, too much for some.

The narrator has his own story to tell as well. He is a freelance trumpeter who

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signed on to the Virginian, then left it behind after six years, a regular guy who knew who he was and where he'd come from, a guy not without talent but without that spark of genius that often comes across as quirkiness or downright oddness. He is fascinated by his friend's life story, and faithful to it, and absorbed by it, and at the same time provides a real



JAZZY: Donal O'Kelly in 1900

relief from the fantastical aspects of 1900's saga with straightforward wit and a down-to-earth attitude.

The tale rolls along in the capable hands of Donal O'Kelly, known to audiences from previous solo shows including *Catalpa* and *Bat the Father, Rabbit the Son*. He treats the text as if it were a score, a musical — his intonations and textural flourishes caress the words in true virtuoso style. However, some confusion resulted from his choice of accent for the principal narrator character. He uses many different voices to add variety

to the monologue, but this main dialect is erratic, fluctuating between Noo Yawk harsh vowels and a more Celtic softening of consonants.

Accompanying O'Kelly was a stellar five piece band led by composer Justin Carroll on piano: their precision was outstanding, and like true professionals, they never could be seen to be showing off. Their unity was a matter of course, and as an ensemble they were true to the texture of the piece's jazz-like approach to storytelling. The story wove in and over and through itself, and like jazz, sometimes one felt like one had lost the thread. But also like jazz, the listener/viewer was free to tune back in when she heard a note that caught her fancy.

With this production Common Currency continue to expand their policy of bringing the works of European artists to Irish audiences, and their partnership with the Civic Theatre paid off in top-of-the-line production values. Whilst Civic's mainstage sometimes felt too large for the story at hand, it was a yarn worth its (sea) salt, worth telling and hearing, and the added layer of the live music contributed to a feeling of revelling in storytelling from a bygone era.

RAP ÉIRE

by Des Bishop and Arthur Riordan

Bickerstaffe Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 12 Feb. 2001 at Project Arts Centre, Dublin BY MIC MORONEY

BACK IN THE LATE '80S AND EARLY '90S, when writers and actors were killing each other to get new satirical sketches onto RTÉ's *Nighthawks*, Arthur Riordan hit on a masterstroke with his absurd, hip-hop, rapping impersonation of Eamon de Valera, the bespectacled psychosexual misery who dominated Ireland

from his first election victory as head of Fiána Fail in 1932, to way beyond his open-coffined funeral in 1975. There was something topical yet brilliantly timeless in Riordan's take on de Valera, whose mark upon Irish history was so prevalent that, in Riordan's world, you would find him wherever you looked — in the bedroom, even in the fridge.

In the early '90s, Riordan worked it all into an excellent stage show, *The Emergency Session*. After a long gap, he was back in his Dev guise at Project recently in *Rap Éire*, a short, sharp 75-minute show of new material — apart from the reprise of his classic "Ooh, Aah, Beal na Blath." This time, Riordan joined forces with US-born stand-up Des Bishop, a supporting cast, and a loud, sumptuous hip-hop groove from live mixer DJ Lee.

In between the choreographed rap numbers rambled a thin enough plot. A young American (Bishop) visits a hokey Irish town called Cadgemore (geddit?), is lured into an election race by the niece of a reinvented local FF politician, Mick Og Ó Vickillane (also played by Riordan), until, in a ludicrous twist of deception, the Yank (as indeed Dev was, originally) is liberally shat upon by all the "cute hoors" around him.

These days Riordan's caricature of the Ghost of de Valera lacks the daft bite it had a decade ago — which, when you think about it, came before the watershed of the ceasefires; Gerry Adams doing the Michael Collins shuffle at Westminster (during the Troubles, any discussion of the "national question" made for very charged material); or indeed before the courts unfrocked the priests and bishops for their indiscretions and paedophilic scandals. But Riordan was still very, very funny, in his stovepipe hat and mortician's weeds, as the rosary-beads revolu-

tionary inhaling the moral vacuum of the Celtic Tiger and the ingrained corruption of the deathless Fiána Fail party he founded in the 1920s.

There was considerable sass to Renee Weldon's strutting Madonna-style Ciarogin (the TD's niece who lures the hapless American boy) and her dance routines, but there was still something actory-theatre about Myles Breen's choreography, which lacked the true flail and anarchy of rock 'n' roll.

Bishop and Riordan chewed off plenty of topical material — the endless scandals uncovered by State tribunals; the seriously dodgy pronouncements on asylum-seekers by Bertie Ahern and his ministers; EU hand-outs; the triumph of PR and *Riverdance* over substance; the continuing fall-out of corruption in the Irish livestock industry; and of course, social amnesia, accentuated by the unprecedented economic boom in what is often laughably called the "new Ireland."

Bickerstaffe, who also run the Cat Laughs festival, ploughed excellent production values into the show: video projections of once-sacrosanct footage of the creation myths of the Irish state; face- and radio-mikes; DJ Lee's big mini-rig; and heaps of costumes, even for just sight-gags.

For a honky, Bishop got admirable kick-ass into his rapping. Fiona Condon put across some fine rural B & B stereotypes while Joe Hanley produced some very queasy caricatures such as the Greencorpse Meats boss (to say nothing of his relish in a toga-clad C.J. Haughey); while Riordan demonstrated his Gary Larsonesque sense of visual humour, e.g., his Celtic-spangled Ku Klux Klan man raising the Irish tricolour.

Jimmy Fay put knuckles into the direction, but there was no energising the come-down from hard technological

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HIP HONKYS: Rap Éire

hip-hop into uneven comedy drama. Apart from one running gag about the "Celtic Tiger" as a virus of redundant information interjected into every contemporary Irish conversation, a great deal of the show fell into the elementary pitfalls of satirical production — all loaded with topicality while not necessarily inherently funny. As a result, the show was rather hit and miss, delivering plenty of golden belly laughs, although you often had to wait around for them.

Mic Moroney writes about music, theatre, and culture for The Irish Times.

TARTUFFE

by Molière, in a new version

by Declan Hughes

The Abbey Theatre

20 Dec. 2000 – 3 Feb. 2001;

reviewed on 20 Jan. BY BRIAN SINGLETON

ON INITIAL CONSIDERATION, THE ABBEY'S choice of a 17th-century French indict-

ment of religious hypocrisy for Christmastime fare can only be described as bizarre. *Tartuffe* was banned in its own time because it was a play with teeth. Molière steered away from ordaining the eponymous central figure in his play, but presented to what, in all intents and purposes, is a priest. He enters the house of the bourgeois Orgons, and through the naïveté, bigotry, and myopia of the head of the family, threatens to bring the house down as he has his eyes on both Orgon's wealth and wife.

Tartuffe uses his fundamentalism to mask his lasciviousness and greed. The comedy lies in the dramatic irony of his host's failure to see behind the mask. And Molière brings the family to the brink of destruction at the hands of this religious man, a gesture that was considered a slap in the teeth of the church in the 1660s, which was vehement in its condemnation of the lampoon.

Religious fundamentalism, hypocrisy, social climbing: this is the stuff of 20th-century Ireland, and thus Declan Hughes takes the liberty to relocate the play in 1970s Dublin, at a time when the country was beginning to chafe at the bit of its theocracy, having been ruled with a rod of iron for so long by Archbishop McQuaid. Why the 1970s, one might ask, other than the latest retro vogue in popular fashion for the platform shoe, the flare, and a *Late Late Show* with an accusing finger pointed at a nation which seemed like a sarcophagus of morality? The '70s, perhaps, were chosen as contemporary Ireland has already been exposed to ridicule in high-profile mediatized scandals, the hypocrisy of religious institutions masquerading as moral arbiters but covering up their own abuse. Taking aim at the Church these

days might be construed as a cheap shot, but the play's exposure and indictment of political corruption carries potentially much more weight. Four centuries on, *Tartuffe* is relevant still.

But for a Christmas show? Concessions to the festive season came in the form of a gigantic Christmas tree, (whose descent was a real *coup de théâtre*), to act as backdrop for most of Tartuffe's plotting. The tree added a Dickensian touch to the imminent destitution of a family made all the more poignant by the time of year chosen. But otherwise, the tinsel and presents appeared gratuitously decorative. And a 1970s Christmas? Like the tree, much of the comic marvel felt by this reviewer was to recognise my own bad taste as an adolescent in the costumes of these characters, as memories of velveteen, chokers, and loons were paraded in front of me. Here we were in the world of retro camp, of Abbaesque and Björn Again.

Lynne Parker directed her cast in an artificial, exaggerated, and at times, cartoon style, making the whole period seem unreal and thankfully over. They moved from one stylised pose to another, adopting attitudes of the comic strip, and treating us to a host of gapes, and drop-jawed incredulity at the flattery and vanity which threatened to destroy them.

And upstage behind a transparent scrim, a trio of musicians provided a continuous live baroque soundtrack (by Hélène Montague) which punctuated the action, and, at times, motivated it, turning the comic strip into a silent movie, with all its melodrama and character exaggeration of villains and heroes.

The fun of the show for me lay in that very exaggeration. Andrew Bennett as Tartuffe, with his sidekick Laurence (Patrick Leech) were wheeled on in freeze-frame on top of the family dining

table, in clerical garb, smoking sacrilegiously. Bennett's portrayal of Tartuffe's lasciviousness, at times though, was too one-dimensional, for we should surely be duped by him at the outset in the same way as he dupes the family. Oscar, the father, (Owen Roe) revelled in his fawning adoration of his religious pet, and swung violently into the mode of villain to enforce his family's compliance with his wishes. Roe dashed about the stage in time to the music, holding the pose of cocksure laughter, inciting our animosity with aplomb. The servant Doreen (Eleanor Methven) played the omnipresent stage-manager of the action, adopting a thousand faces of cunning to match the convolutions of the plot. The evicted son David (Michael Devaney), hopelessly trying to be macho, spoke in an affectedly posh nasal south Dublin twang that was comic genius in its own right.

But the real joy of all this comic invention was the director's decision to allow Oscar's wife Emily (Cathy Belton) to enjoy enormously some oral sex performed by Tartuffe, before she finally exposed him as a fraud to her husband.

Hilarious as all this sounds, and was, there is a nagging feeling that the range of styles (from pantomime to comic strip to melodrama) created a surface pleasure which masked any real exposure of society's ills. At the end the text slipped unashamedly into pantomime mode with its reference to building corruption scandals and the jailing of politicians. And since pantomime traditionally switches periods and locations at the drop of a hat, so Hughes heavy-handedly shifted his text from the 1970s to 1990s, and left us in no doubt as to the relevance of this revival. But it was all played, like the potential rape of Emily, as an innocuous

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TV sketch, so that any satirical intention had no teeth. Distancing the action to the 1970s, of what is clearly a play for today, contributed to the production's harmlessness. Satirical and comically inventive it may have been, but this production had as much political bite as a tribunal.

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

THÉRÈSE RAQUIN by Emile Zola, adapted by Nicholas Wright

The Gate Theatre

13 February – 17 March 2001; reviewed
on 16 February BY JOSEPH LONG

MICHAEL CAVEN'S RECENT PRODUCTION of *Thérèse Raquin*, with a strong cast headed by Donna Dent in the title role, revives a play which has never sat quite comfortably on the stage, and adds substantial theatrical interest to it.

Zola wrote *Thérèse Raquin* as a novel in 1867, when he was 24, and it created his first major scandal. Not only did the novel document the squalour of life meticulously, but it ruthlessly stripped off the then-current moral presuppositions about human behaviour and the sentimental reassurances which went with them. Human actions were shown to be driven by impulses close to the bestial, and human relationships were analysed against a theory of "temperaments," borrowed from the medical literature of the time. Zola's ambition was to introduce the scientific spirit of his age into art and literature. The new sciences of sociology and anthropology, and theories of evolution and historical determinism were to reshape the very concept of literature and art, and the role of the writer and the artist.

Here perhaps is the crux of the problem. Zola developed his system, which

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came to be labelled "naturalism," into a major re-invention of the novel, where the power of his prose writing produced a result which went far beyond the limits of his theories. When he attempted to bring his system to bear on the theatre, it did not work. His adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin* for the stage, in 1873, was not successful. Perhaps the screen, as a narrative form, is a better medium: the novel has been adapted four times for the cinema, and the basic plot recurs, for example, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

The cast of this production struggle well enough with a difficult original. In the first act, Dent, as Thérèse, has to cope with lengthy passages in which she explains their shared past life to her lover Laurent, robustly played by Phelim Drew. She manages to infuse some life into these self-narrations, but without lifting them to the level of credible exchanges. The determination to drown the unwanted (and odiously self-regarding) husband Camille, as played with camp arrogance in a strong performance by Mark O'Halloran, is no more compelling than the twist of an Agatha Christie plot. Later, Laurent's account of his search through the Paris morgue for the corpse of the drowned Camille comes over as weak dramatic writing, whereas in the novel it is an example of the powerful "social document" prose at which Zola excelled.

Michael Caven, in this production, tries to lend a psychological twist to the triangular relationship by suggesting a homosexual attraction between the mother-obsessed Camille and the would-be painter Laurent, with the corollary that Camille finally gains perverse control over the object of his desire by the obsession of guilt which he posthumously inspires, and which finally leads to the

double suicide of the adulterous pair. Dent's elegant Thérèse owes more to *Madame Bovary* than to Zola's interplay of heredity and environment, which presents an African father, an oppressed childhood in provincial Poitiers, the transposition to working-class Paris, and the tyranny of an obsessive mother-in-law. These shifts, perhaps interesting in themselves, move the play away from Zola's naturalist thesis towards the genre of the psychological thriller. The overall result is something of a hybrid.

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of this production emerge from the handling of set design and stage directing. The set, unchanged for the four acts, represents a dingy space over a draper's shop, which serves as bedroom, dining room, and parlour. Here, instead of the alcove "in which can be seen a bed and a window looking out on a blank wall," designer Joe Vanek has imagined a north-facing glazed structure at the back, suggestive of a studio or workshop. The facing blank wall, oppressively close across the narrow lane, blocks the entire horizon and signals the stifling social environment which shapes the lives of the human specimens within. A greyish curtain is hung on a wire at a height of eight feet, again running the width of the stage and blocking off the upstage area in which the bed is set. The curtain is closed at start, but can be partly drawn to reveal areas left, right, or centre, or fully drawn aside. Furthermore, the cloth is, in fact, a theatrical gauze, so that shifts in Peter Mumford's careful and expressive lighting can make it appear solid or transparent.

The result is a flexible space, which expands or contracts according to the scene, and supports the symbolic visual language which Caven chooses to develop. Thus Thérèse is given a space of her own, to which she returns for her more

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significant moments — a chair set facing a side window, where she sits bathed in the brilliance of the setting sun, fixed upon a sense of impossible fulfillment, her back to the rest of the room and the fussy social group around the table.

Between the first and second act, the drowning of Camille by Thérèse and her lover is enacted in an expressionistic dumbshow, performed with virtuosity by O'Halloran, standing on the marriage bed. The production returns several times to this idiom, drawing out the macabre, almost gothic, themes which are present in the novel more strongly than in the play-text. For the disturbing painted portrait of the drowned victim, which drives Laurent into a paranoid state, Vanek has not resisted the temptation to use a bit of his gauze, so that the face of the victim can appear through the painted representation and shaft the guilty lover with a baleful, Banquo stare.

Madame Raquin, rendered paralytic in the second half of the play, is played with due possessiveness and ferocity by Susan Fitzgerald as another symbol of guilty consciousness. The young cousin Suzanne, played by Fidelma Keogh, is a naïve fledgling, as yet unaware of the stranglehold which society will place upon her as a woman. Grivet and Michaud, as played by Barry McGovern and Des Cave, are souls desiccated by their social and material environment: they maintain a finely controlled balance between rather threadbare thriller suspense and welcome moments of comic relief. In these respects Caven's production is thoughtful and inventive, and marks him out as a director of talent.

Joseph Long is director of the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin.

THREE DAYS OF RAIN

by Richard Greenberg

Rough Magic Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed on 22 Nov. 2000 at
Project, Dublin BY MIC MORONEY

VERY MUCH A PLAY IN TWO HALVES, Richard Greenberg's story of two generations of wealthy New York 30-somethings, with all its laconic, glinting dialogue, is in many ways prime Rough Magic material. It's a cerebral, hyper-literate riff, really, on the meanness and competition which can exist behind life-long friends — here over issues of love and the recognition of genius amongst overprivileged and overcultured white Manhattanites. But while the concerns of the material and the erudition of the writing fall directly into the trajectory of Rough Magic's work, the play itself suffers from frustratingly uneven construction, which Lynne Parker's production does not confront or overcome in any significant way.

I can imagine that Greenberg's play fits naturally into the milieu of the subsidised American theatre scene that fostered it; but here in Ireland it takes a while to get used to the characters' elite world and concerns. There's Walker (Peter Hanly), evidently hothoused like a delicate plant, a preposterous, childlike, spiteful aesthete who constantly emits quasi-Wildean epigrams. His elder sister, Nan (Anne Byrne), a seemingly fulfilled mother-of-three — but more of a sounding-board than a full character — tracks him to his dingy Manhattan loft a year after the death of their father, a millionaire architect.

Then enters Pip (Darragh Kelly), son of their father's best friend and late business partner, and a long-adopted part of the family. But all hell breaks loose when

it transpires that Pip has inherited the Long Island house which made their fathers famous. But who was the real genius behind it? This question still festers among the progeny.

This first act is virtually a set-piece on its own, and Parker's direction has both style and considerable substance as she divines her way through the unfinished nuances of caution, dishonesty, and sexuality. The pacing is exquisite as, playing in the three-quarter round, the actors nervously circle each other on Brien Vahey's vast, open, wood-frame set.

Byrne's Nan is all pursed disapproval and reserve, yet thaws generously when moved to memory by Pip. Hanly's Walker is a mix of chilly, impetuous dissembling and damaged self-obsession, while, as Pip, the impossibly well-adjusted T.V. actor, Kelly's comic, heart-warming cascade of tension-puncturing revelations is a real tonic.

The second act lurches back to the 1960s, with the same actors now playing their parents at even younger ages, in the same loft. The language doesn't particularly change pitch or period; it's an initially befuddling conceit which aims to explore how unfinished business can pass down through generations.

Here we go deeper into the psychodrama of the design of the family house, with Hanly now playing Walker's father, the stammering, incommunicative Ned. Kelly now embodies Theo, father of Pip, who at first seems to be the genius behind the partnership. But this is the earliest days, when they were faced with the commission of the house that would later make them famous — a commission which came from Ned's indulgent parents. Ned at first acts like a tyrannical taste-filter while Theo does all the work and engages in all the spiritual agony.



BRITTLE BELLE: Anne Byrne in *Three Days of Rain*

But as events grind confusingly on, the real reason why Ned later bequeaths the house to Pip is revealed.

Once again, the female character is a weaker than the male ones, with Anne Byrne now playing Lena, a hyper-educated Southern belle, which plays rather distractingly like a reinvented Tennessee Williams "intertext." Feeling less than valued by her boyfriend Theo, she tumbles happily into the arms and sheets of Ned (we remember from the first act, that Lena will drink a lot and, eventually, lose her sanity), and provides him with key sexual and creative encouragement.

The psychological grip of the first act is utterly dissipated in the labyrinthine denouement of the second. Although the play makes sense if you study it, on first run it lacks any real sense of narrative or dramatic closure. The second act certainly

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does not seem as "lived" a piece of writing as the first; and ultimately, the characters seem little more than mouthpieces for the dramatist's own high-brow drawl.

Perhaps it might have helped if, contrary to the author's intentions, a new set of actors played the second half. Surprisingly, Parker does not even manage to clarify such a problematic piece, let alone give it any telling psychological depth. Also, in the vast, chilly new upstairs space at Project, Hanly and Byrne don't clamber down convincingly from the glittering dialogue into Lena and Ned's sudden physical intimacy.

The overall effect is very much on the forebrain rather than the heart, and the up-ended conceit of a structure — a tough one to play — becomes mired in the endless, leaden thespian citations (from *Oedipus* to *Hedda Gabler*); a self-referential world into which uncomfortable emotions intrude, yet which are never quite captured in the elaborate scaffolding of the time-fractured melodrama.

THREE TALL WOMEN

by Edward Albee

Prime Cut Productions

On tour; reviewed on 22 February 2001 at
the Hawk's Well Theatre, Sligo

BY PAUL HAZE

THE THREE WOMEN IN THE TITLE OF Edward Albee's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning play are in fact the same woman at different periods of her life. There is the 92-year-old (called "A" and played by Helen Ryan), whose stroke is the catalyst for this journey of remembrance; the slightly bitter woman somewhere in her 50s ("B," Kate O'Toole); and "C," (Ginevra Benedetti) the bright and fresh-faced 20-something.

Albee has acknowledged that the play is highly autobiographical; in a pro-

gramme note for the original New York production he wrote, "I know that I got her out of my system by writing this play." "Her" is Albee's adoptive mother, who apparently made his life miserable (and he hers) for some 60 years. Such a strong connection to material could, in lesser hands, have created a play so personal and bitter that it alienated the audience. But Albee here succeeds in creating autobiography that is neither sentimental nor petty. Albee certainly does not privilege his stand-in on stage; the role of the Son, who appears in Act 2, is one of those "third spear carrier from the left" roles, challenging less for the demands that it makes on an actor's skills than on his patience — the actor (Stephen Cavanagh) appears on stage only to hold a mannequin's hand for half an hour and to weep twice.

Both acts are set in the interior of the old lady's bedroom, the walls of which form the shape of a half-octagon. There are no corners for the characters to hide in; this is a play about emotional exposure. The furnishings are slightly ornate; we realise the owner is a woman of some wealth. The only ways in and out of the room are two open doorways at the back, through which B and C enter; the message is that their paths will ultimately only arrive at this bedroom and this woman.

The first act introduces us to the three characters. Their lives are explained in such a way that no suspicions are aroused: A is an elderly lady of some wealth, B looks after her, and C works for the old dear's accountant. But the naturalism of the first act is shattered very early on in the second. A has a stroke in the last moments before the interval, and as the second act begins we think that the body in an onstage bed is the actress playing the old woman — until that actress walks onstage, and we realise



TWO OUT OF THREE AIN'T BAD: Three Tall Women

that the body in the bed is a dummy. Soon another truth reveals itself — that the women on stage are all the same woman.

Such unexpected shifts in what we've accepted as the play's reality raise questions about the cohesion of the piece: If B and C are actually A, then why were they pretending to be otherwise in the first act? Were they just play-acting? How could the Son see the ghost of his mother whilst actually holding the dying lady's hand?

This is a play with little physical action. The old lady breaks the conversation twice in the first act by hobbling to the toilet, and the intense dialogue in Act 2 is only interrupted by the weeping Son. In fact the real activity in the play takes place in the audience's imaginations, as they try to sort out what exactly it's trying to say. It's like watching *The Sixth Sense* for the first time — exciting and perplexing.

And the play's meaning, in the end, is not totally clear; ultimately one will leave the theatre wondering just what Albee — and Prime Cut — are trying to say by pre-

senting us with this disconcerting, strange, and oddly opaque piece. It could be about fate — that in life we are always going forward because we cannot find reverse. Or it could be saying that this is a cruel world and the older one gets the crueler one must get to survive. The lack of explication in Albee's script is one of the many aspects that make this production interesting and yet at the same time exceedingly frustrating.

But director Jackie Doyle and her cast do a wonderful job of bringing it to life. The acting is the highlight of the evening, especially Helen Ryan whose portrayal of the old lady is both strong and yet has an underlying sense of weakness. Prime Cut, who are based in Belfast, were founded to bring significant international drama to Northern and Republic audiences, and judging from *Three Tall Women*, the professionalism they bring to their productions is to be admired, even if in this case the play itself left most audience members scratching their heads.

TRANSLATIONS by Brian Friel

Abbey Theatre

2 Nov. - 9 Dec. 2000; reviewed 8 Nov.

BY STEPHEN DI BENEDETTO

AHH, BAILE BEAG IN 1833 — WHERE the peasants are beautiful and its old folk speak Greek as fluently as their native tongue. If only we could hearken back to those purer days of poverty and starvation,

opinions & overviews

because at least we had our language...

Ben Barnes' production of Brian Friel's *Translations* is a nostalgic evocation of a pastoral Ireland in the process of being stripped of its history and language. The action of the play takes place at the local hedge-school run by Hugh (Garrett Keogh) and his lame son Manus (Andrew Bennett). They teach a cross-section of the local population, from the semi-literate young farmer, Doolty (Don Wycherley) and a local farm-girl Máire (Fiona McGeown), to the elderly Jimmy Jack (Brendan Conroy) who reads and quotes Homer in the original.

A detachment of the Royal Engineers are camped nearby to carry out the first Ordnance Survey of Ireland. For the purposes of their cartography the Gaelic place names must be transliterated, or translated, into English; the translation team includes a young, idealistic British soldier, Yolland (Damien Matthews) and, significantly, Hugh's younger son Owen (Frank McCusker). Eventually they come to question what effect their actions are having on the local community. Friel crafts this simple situation to examine how a process of change that seems administrative and inconsequential can bring monumental cultural change. The play poses the central question of how much responsibility a population must take in preserving or changing its ways of living and interacting with the world.

A production of the play could pose sensitive questions to the audience about their own complicity in the changes that are sweeping across contemporary culture (in Ireland but indeed anywhere). As Hugh and Jimmy Jack look to Greek and Roman history for answers, so too can the population of the Irish nation look to its own history to ask how they want to

participate in the shaping of their future.

That's an ideal, but what does Barnes' current production actually accomplish? Monica Frawley's set is superb: a large barn space with a giant tree breaking through the left wall. The wood beams and bricks and mortar became a microcosm of the world outside of the hedge school. It evoked nostalgia for pastoral settings — the grime was there, but oh, the lasses were beautiful and the poverty was oh, so charming. Conroy and Keogh's performances were the production's most powerful, signalling the way a successful staging of this play could hit its mark. The modulation of their performances evoked real people shaped by their poverty, intellect, and environment.

The supporting cast serve their function well — even if they do suffer from excessive health. Máire is a strong girl with her bosom and legs accentuated; Andrew Bennett's head is shaved and he is made to look a bit dishevelled — yet they are both still strong and vibrant. Healthy bodies shining through applied grime diverts attention away from the centre of the play and takes away from its subtlety. For example, Manus and Sarah (Pauline Hutton) share many characteristics in the playtext: they are around the same age and are both slightly disabled (she has a speech impediment, he a limp); they are thus tied to the community because of their awkwardnesses and share a unique intimacy. Yet in this production, I wonder why hearty Manus is still in Baile Baig and cannot stand up to Hugh, and why Sarah was made to look like a teenager, rather than a woman who could be Manus' equal.

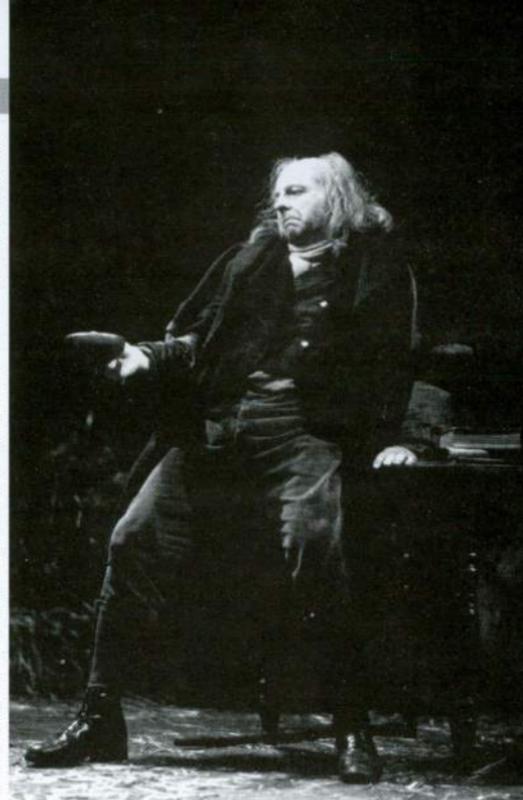
Barnes makes a major change in the rhythm of the production by having Yolland and Máire's love scene open the second act rather than finish the first, as

is usually the case. This moves the focus away from the growing tensions of the Irish/English relations to love. There is a major shift in the play after the love scene: Yolland is transformed from collaborator to rebel; and Manus, heartbroken when he discovers that Máire (whom he secretly adores) has given herself to someone else, transforms from dutiful son to fugitive. The act break in its usual place gives the audience a certain amount of space to digest and wonder what will happen next; the choice to shift it here contributes to an overall romanticising of the world of the play.

The play feels relevant for production now because its content can relate to Ireland's new economy; it can address the repercussions of changing a country's ways and traditions. The greed and superficial dreams of fame and fortune which dominate contemporary Ireland could change the fabric of Irish society forever. The play's message is a salient one: it ultimately says that we must adapt to new ways — Hugh agrees, in the end, to teach Máire English — but we also must take responsibility for the ways in which those changes affect the totality of the culture. We need to find ways to manipulate change for our own betterment with the traditions and stories of our heritage in mind.

This is a good enough reason to perform the play now — but why the beautiful actors, why the romanticised spin? Is this not actually a successful casting of a play with a different project, the creation of a product to seduce foreign audiences with beautiful voices and rustic beauty that amounts to eye and ear candy?

To whom, in the end, was this production directed? Not, apparently, to the Irish nation as was the original Field Day production in 1980. This feels like a



POWERFUL: Garrett Keogh in *Translations*

production geared for American tourists and foreign audiences abroad — and indeed it is touring to numerous European venues later this year. Perhaps this piece is not created to question the role of the audience in the future of Ireland, but created to take advantage of the current international popularity of Irish goods to sell an image of pastoral purity to future tourists and investors. But a muddied and prettified version of the play seems to parallel the very action the play condemns — Owen selling out to the British military.

Stephen Di Benedetto lectures in the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin.

THE LIT MAN (AND WOMAN) COMETH

continued from page 26
extending their role. The Dublin Fringe, long a context for young companies to try out new work, is now working on Seeds with Rough Magic. And this year, UnFringed took on a new role as producer, commissioning and producing Ursula Rani Sarma's new play *Gift*. Sarma has been a success of the non-Dublin commissioning scene, with a previous plays commissioned by Cork Opera House among others. Having seen *Gift*, one can't help but think that Sarma — who emerged from the ISDA festival a few years ago — is a far better writer than director. And UnFringed was unable to provide either the dramaturgical or directorial assistance that might have brought out the play's full potential. However, as a practice for the future, UnFringed's role as a crucible for new writing is an exciting departure, with many possibilities.

The Dublin Theatre Festival, as well, is extending its commitment to new writing by moving into producing new work itself and commissioning; last year the Festival produced the world premiere of Enda Walsh's *bedbound*, and this year the Festival have commissioned a new one-man show from Donal O'Kelly. Festival director Fergus Linehan's aim with these commissions is to allow writers or directors to create the work they want to create, which might not fit within "a theatre-company context." He wants to give "the writer a bit more freedom and control" without being constrained by worries about box office.

The structure of Irish theatre is changing dramatically. The Arts Council's new funding strategies alongside the removal of the hidden subsidy of the dole and Fás

means it is essential that the larger theatrical institutions look to the future by nurturing the younger sector. Competitions and initiatives are one way of doing this, and make positive additions to the theatre scene. But such schemes — on their own — cannot be a substitute for direct subsidy and *productions*.

In the light of companies redefining themselves, Kostick entertainingly describes people who have previously had "a worm's eye view of Irish theatre" emerging, blinking, into the world "surveying a bit, looking around" with the passion to produce good work, but "not sure how to do it."

Kostick's image acts as a beautiful metaphor for Irish theatre itself — emerging worm-like into the light of new funding strategies. Those companies in receipt of multi-annual funding have suddenly been given the opportunity to plan concretely a few years down the line, with many able to take a proper look around them for the first time. With this chance to develop material over a longer period of time, more and more companies seem to be turning to new writing initiatives, competitions and installing literary managers in the expectation that these fundamental building blocks are what will create more — and better — product. The passion certainly seems to be there: the question is are these methods the best, and the only things needed to create a healthy, happening and, more importantly, a *diverse* theatre scene?

Rosy Barnes is a writer/critic and reporter. Her article in Issue 9 of itm will further address questions of the role of literary management in Irish theatre. Do initiatives and competitions really provide a long-term answer to developing new talent? What is the role of the writer within Irish theatre? And, indeed, is there really a need for an endless supply of new plays?



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Arts Plan Review Forum

<http://www.artscouncil.ie/artsplan/artsplanreview>

The review of the Arts Council's second Arts Plan 1999 - 2001 and the preparation of the third plan is now under way. The Council wants to involve as many people as possible in the process. We had planned to hold a series of sectoral meetings and workshops throughout the country over the coming weeks, but we have cancelled these because of the ongoing Foot and Mouth Crisis.

Instead we have created a set of alternative consultative mechanisms, including a web-based resource centre to help discussion and debate to take place. Visit <http://www.artscouncil.ie/artsplan/artsplanreview> to read up on the issues involved and take part in a discussion forum. We'll be posting issues papers and work in progress throughout the process and will be asking you to respond.

You can also submit your views on the second Arts Plan and your ideas about what should be in the third Arts Plan by email, to evaluation@artscouncil.ie or by post to: Arts Plan Review, The Arts Council, 70 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.

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