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MAGAZINE

TWO JUNOS



**MICHAEL
BILLINGTON
WEIGHS IN**

EXCLUSIVE! Excerpt
from *Made in China*,
Mark O'Rowe's
latest play

16 PAGES of Dublin
Theatre Festival and
Fringe coverage

PLUS NEWS, COLUMNS, REVIEWS AND MORE!

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ON THE COVER: *Photograph of Michael Gambon by Derek Speirs/Report; Photograph of Colm Meaney by Pau Ros*

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The Arts Council
An Chomhairle Ealaíon

Discourse, of Course

WE USUALLY DEVOTE THIS SPACE to grousing, but this time we're here to celebrate. The subject of our celebrations is discourse, and its role in creating a healthier and more vibrant life for theatre in Ireland. We'd like to acknowledge how much the Irish theatre sector has matured over the last ten years in its internal discourse — the way in which the people and organisations in it talk about themselves, each other, and the sector itself.

Think back to the beginning of this decade. Discourse in and around theatre didn't really exist (save for the late lamented *Theatre Ireland* and for informal rounds of Abbey-bashing in hostels around the island) nor did the theatre sector really have a conception of itself as an entity. As the economy picked up and the eyes of the world started to turn towards Ireland, so did the sector itself experience an unprecedented growth spurt — and so did a number of visionary individuals and organisations realise that economic and numeric growth must be accompanied by an expansion of thought, and of dialogue, in order for the boom to have a lasting effect.

The annual Theatre Shop started the sector talking amongst itself, and made us smarten up for our international visitors at Dublin Festival time. Michael D. Higgins' enlightened Ministry over the Department of Arts, Culture, and the Gaeltacht furthered and deepened the national dialogue about culture and resulted in the first Arts Plan and the *Theatre Review 1995-96*.

In particular, we'd like here to salute Patrick Mason and the signal role he's played in advancing the way we think and talk about theatre in Ireland. When he took over as the Abbey's artistic director in 1994, Mason opened up dialogue through the

publication of policy documents and the convening of talking shops where the role of the Abbey could be hashed out. His goal was nothing less than a revolution in thought, a re-assertion of the National Theatre's place in a fast-changing nation.

As he leaves the artistic director position, is it not clear that Mason has gone a long way towards achieving this "high ambition"? By taking a leadership role in many organisational ventures — the latest being the Theatre Forum, a newly-formed umbrella organisation whose presence we heartily welcome; by inviting exciting, emerging artists and companies from the sector to do their work within the Abbey; and by using his position to advocate for the sector at large at government level, Mason has not only changed the way we *think* about the mutual dependence of the National Theatre and the theatre of the nation — he has decisively changed the relationship *itself*.

Debate in and around Irish theatre still has a lot of room to grow, particularly in the area of written and broadcast criticism. This magazine was founded to heighten the level of dialogue about theatre; we welcome the new Arts Plan's attention to strengthening critical discourse as one of its 12 foundational principles. We must, however, decry RTÉ's decision to axe its only dialogue-based television arts and media programme — "Later with John Kelly" — and to "re-evaluate" its other arts programme, "Cúrsai Éalaíne." The wind through Donnybrook these days is blowing pro-documentary, anti-discourse, and the only question we can ask is why?

But we're grousing again. We close by wishing a happy new year to our readers, and happy sails to Patrick Mason.

KONICI WA, YOUTH OF WATERFORD! LITTLE RED KETTLE have been invited to represent Ireland at the World Festival of Children's Theatre in Toyama, Japan next summer. LRK's production of **THE FOUR EUCLIDS OF SQUID AND THE FESTIVAL OF IMAGINATION AND WILD FANCY** (wonder how *that* will translate into Japanese!), featuring a cast of 20 young Waterfordians, is scheduled to play in Toyama in the first days of August 2000. Ireland was one of 22 countries selected from 76 applicant countries to participate in the Fest.

SON OF IRISH THEATRE HANDBOOK: Our second favourite theatre publication has spawned offspring. As part of their activities this year, Theatre Shop published **Update '99**, a companion volume to last year's ingenious sourcebook of information about Irish theatre companies, festivals, funding opportunities, et al. To order a copy send £5 to Theatre Shop c/o Rough Magic Films, 7 South Great Georges Street, Dublin 2; or e-mail an order to admin@theatreshop.ie.

RESIDENCY OFFERED: Elms College in western Massachusetts invite applications from Irish playwrights for a two-week residency in the Spring of 2000. The college will stage a reading of a play by the writer, and organise meetings between the writer and students, faculty, as well as theatre professionals in New York, Boston, and elsewhere. Transportation and private accommodation are provided as well as a \$2,000 stipend. Among the panel reviewing applications is former Abbey artistic director **Vincent Dowling**, who is now resident in Massachusetts and is founder of the local Miniature Theatre of Chester. Ideally, a full production at the Miniature Theatre will follow the residency. Applicants should send a play to: Professor Robert L. King, English Department, Elms College,



THIS MAN WANTS YOUR PLAY: VINCENT DOWLING

Chicopee, MA 01013; e-mail
 rlking@map.com.

JAMES JOYCE: THE MUSICAL? You think we're joking. An early hit of the 1999-2000 New York theatre season is *The Dead*, a musical adaptation of the "Dubliners" story with music by Irishman Shaun Davey and book by American playwright Richard Nelson. The production, which featuring Christopher Walken, Blair Brown, Stephen Spinella, and Daisy Eagen, premiered at off-Broadway's Playwrights Horizons in October and transfers to Broadway's Belasco Theatre this month.

Look for a review in Issue Five of *itm*.

THE TROUBLES SOCCER MUSICAL? You really think we're joking. But it's true: Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Group are currently developing *The Beautiful Game*, a musical based on the true story of a promising teenage soccer team thwarted by the Troubles in 1960s Belfast. Ben Elton wrote the book and lyrics and Lloyd Webber the music; the piece is being workshopped in February 2000 in London with Robert Carsen as director and Meryl Tankard as choreographer. Auditions for the workshop production were held recently in Dublin and Belfast.

COURT IS RESUMED:
 London's Royal Court

Theatre is celebrating its return to its newly renovated Sloane Square headquarters with a bumper season of new writing. Among its impressive lineup are two noteworthy Irish openings: *A Dublin Carol*, Conor McPherson's latest since

Irish Inflected Musicals Abound

Irish playwright Sebastian Barry is writing a musical in collaboration with the innovative American director Martha Clarke — a stage version of the film *Hans Christian Andersen*. The project will retain the beloved Frank Loesser score ("Copenhagen," "Thumelina"). Barry has been in New York participating in workshops in recent months; representatives of Dodger Endemol, the New York-based producers, say the show is intended for Broadway, hopefully premiering late in 2000.

The Weir, opens January 7 and plays through February 25; Ian Rickson directs a three-person cast led by Brian Cox. And in *The Force of Change*, Gary Mitchell weighs in on the topical and controversial subject of the RUC; it plays from 11 February - 4 March. This follows on the success of Mitchell's *Trust* at the Royal Court last year, which (we note with interest) was recently produced by the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, marking Mitchell's US debut.



GARY MITCHELL

A SUBSCRIBER SUBMISSION: "Setting up a Dublin-based theatre company that must take risks. Need a director . . . have nothing but great scripts! Please contact Echo Management at (01) 288-3700."

STONES IN THE WEST END: Producer Pat Moylan has confirmed that the Lyric's acclaimed production of Marie Jones' *Stones in his Pockets*, featuring the double act of the moment, **Seán Campion** and **Conleth Hill**, is heading to the West End in Spring 2000 following several successful runs in Ireland including at Moylan's own Andrews Lane in Dublin.

DRAMA LEAGUE OF IRELAND UPDATE: The DLI is now the sole authorised agent in Ireland for Samuel French Ltd., Warner Chappell, and the Society of Authors. All licenses, performing rights, and scripts will be issued through the DLI office for amateur productions of plays and musicals handled by these publishers. Any unsubsidised company that's thinking of producing a play and is unsure about the rights is advised to ring the DLI on 01-809-0478 or e-mail dli@tinet.ie... the win-



ELIZABETH
KUTTI

ners of the AIB-sponsored All-Ireland One Act Finals, held at Kilkenny's Watergate, were the Moate Club, Naas' **Bench at the Edge** and City Limits Productions' **Lords of Love**.

NEWS FROM THE WEST: As we might expect, **Macnas** are up to some serious hijinks at the New Year,

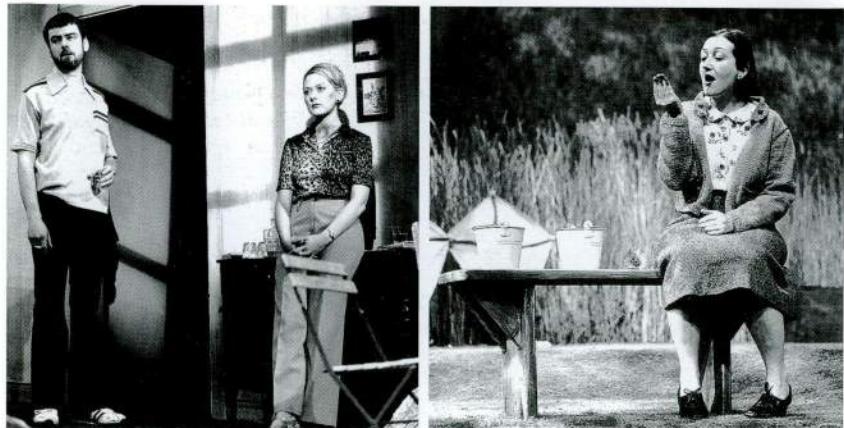
organising both a Childrens' Parade in Galway and celebrations in Dublin for the National Millennium Committee. (Declan Gibbons is quick to point out that Ireland will also be a major presence in Times Square at the turn of the millennium, as this year's dropping ball is an "only massive" Waterford crystal ball.) Macnas are also conducting in-house workshops with choreographer David Bolger, as part of an as-yet-untitled major touring promenade production for Autumn 2000. And set your dials: Macnas' p.r. manager Gary McMahon is currently presenting a weekly Arts Show on Galway Bay FM (Fridays 7-9p.m.)

An Archive For Us

Ever needed historical information about Irish theatre and didn't know where to turn? You obviously didn't know about the IRISH THEATRE ARCHIVE, which contains some 40,000 items — including texts, artifacts, programmes, posters, and correspondence. The IT Archive's long-term goal is a dedicated building in Dublin, but at the moment the collection is housed in the City Hall Archives. For more information about the Archive, contact David Lass: fax 01-671-9003 or e-mail dllass@tcd.ie. If you have materials to donate to the collection, they can be sent to Mary Clarke, Archivist, at Dublin Corporation.

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS:

Tinderbox are producing a new play by Joseph Crilly, whose *Second-Hand Thunder* was co-winner of the Stewart Parker award last year. **On McQuillan's Hill** runs from 8-26 February the Lyric and then tours around the island through 8 April. The company are also gearing for their annual **April Sundays** festival of new work which they co-produce with Prime Cut, and



RETURNING: Living Quarters and Dancing at Lughnasa

are dusting off **The Green Shoot**, Ian McElhinney's one-man show about John Hewitt which has been invited to the Washington Festival of the Arts from Ireland, at the Kennedy Centre in April.

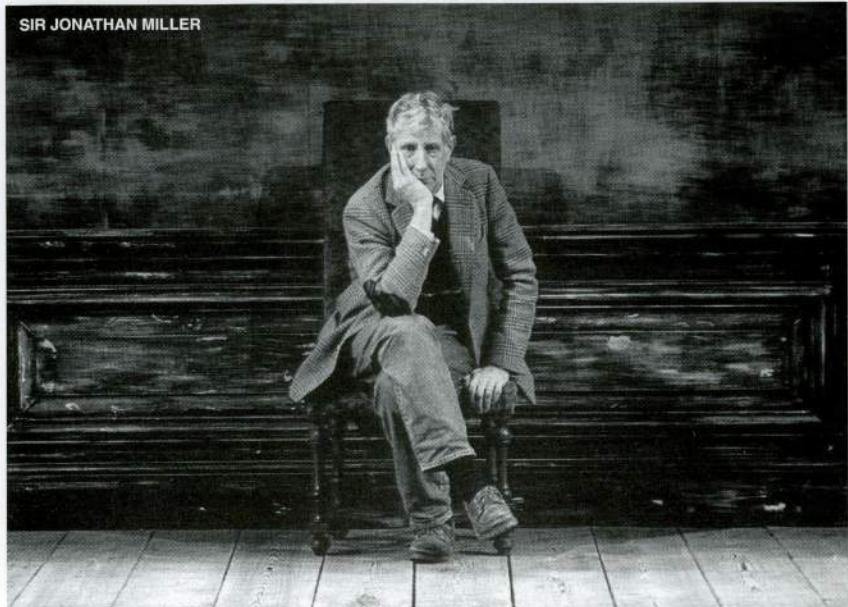
Fishamble welcome the new millennium with the **Y2K Festival** — six commissioned short plays about the times in which we live, playing at the Civic Theatre in Tallaght. Plays by Nicholas Kelly, Gavin Kostick, and Jennifer Johnston run from 7-12 February and by Deirdre Hines, Gina Moxley, and Dermot Bolger from 14-19 February... also coming up at the **Civic** is a Tim Murphy-directed production of J.B. Keane's **Sive** from Cork's Brown Penny (21-26 February), and a return run of Colm Ó Briain's acclaimed production of Beckett's **Happy Days** (29 February - 4 March.)

Prime Cut are busy these days — they're producing two plays by the Canadian playwright George F. Walker back-to-back; **Criminal Genius** plays at the Old Museum arts centre from 1-18 December

followed by **Problem Child**, which plays the OMAC from 12-19 January and then goes on an all-Ireland tour. Prime Cut will then present Patrick Marber's **Dealer's Choice** at the Lyric from 1-18 March (Tim Loane directs) and then on tour throughout Northern Ireland.

The National Theatre are taking to the road with Jason Byrne's acclaimed summertime production of Brian Friel's **Living Quarters**. Following a return run at the Peacock from 7 December to 22 January, the production will tour to 10 venues, starting at An Grianan in Letterkenny from 25 January... Patrick Mason's revival of **Dancing at Lughnasa** returns to the Abbey from 4 February to 1 April, and will be followed by a Tom Murphy world premiere, **A Little Love, A Little Kiss**, directed by Conall Morrison... A Jimmy Murphy world premiere, **The Muesli Belt**, plays in the Peacock from 14 February, directed by Jimmy Fay; Elizabeth Kuti's **Tree Houses**, a world

SIR JONATHAN MILLER

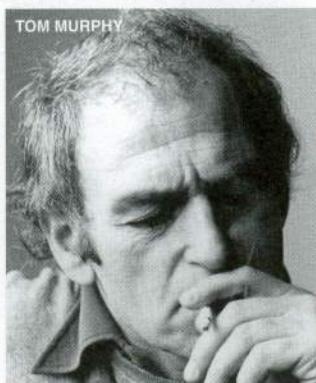


premiere directed by Jason Byrne, follows in mid-April.

The Gate are presenting Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, directed by **Sir Jonathan Miller** with sets and costumes by Bruno Schwengl, starting performances 10 February. Their production of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, directed by Robin Lefevre and featuring **John Hurt**, is returning to London following the critical and popular success of the Gate's Beckett Festival at the Barbican this past autumn. *Krapp* opens 26 January and runs through March at the

New Ambassador's Theatre... The **Lyric's** season in the new year includes the world premiere of *The Butterfly of Killybegs* by **Brian Foster**, directed by former Lyric a.d. Roland Jaquarello, running 28 March - 15 April. Simon Magill then directs

Frank McGuinness' award-winning version of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, running 21 April - 20 May. Next up is a new **Gary Mitchell**, *Marching On*, running 13 June - 1 July... **Bedrock's** latest venture is a **Ken Harmon** commission, *The Decline of Break Dancing*, to be directed by Jimmy Fay in April or May at a to-be-named venue.



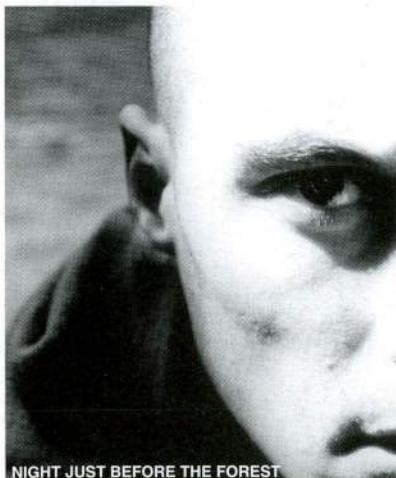
Opera Theatre Company's latest is Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, directed by Brian Brady, which kicks off a tour at the Rialto, Derry on 4 February and plays 14 additional venues through March 11. OTC's other plans for 2000 include a new chamber version of Donizetti's *The Love Potion* together with a revival of the children's opera *Cinderella*, and the premiere of *Alexandra's House*, a new children's opera by Stephen Deazley. Their production of *Rodelinda* has an extensive UK tour in the summer and the company are launching a two-year apprenticeship program for 12 young Irish singers. For further info ring 01-679-4962 or email otc@imn.ie.



BEAUTY QUEEN

Barnstorm's new production is *One, Two, Three O'Leary* by Bernard Farrell, a play for 6-to-10-year-olds that opens in Kilkenny on 31 January and tours to 14 Republic venues through 18 April... Druid are touring Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* around Britain and Ireland in February-May 2000; the tour visits Cork, Dublin, Galway, Letterkenny, Malvern,

Bath, Brighton, Oxford, Coventry, and Belfast... Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy has written a new adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus* for Storytellers; the Alan Stanford-directed production plays at Cork Opera House 1-5 February and at the Gaiety from 7-19 February.

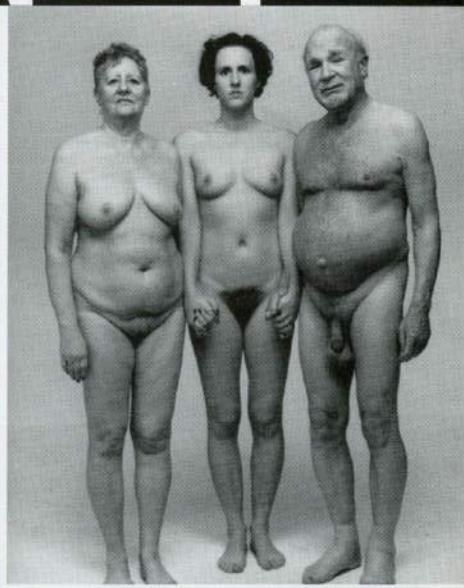


NIGHT JUST BEFORE THE FOREST

Irish Theatre Down Under

Bedrock are heading back to Australia's Adelaide Fringe, where their production of *DEEP SPACE* played two years ago. This time they're bringing Jimmy Fay's production of Koltés' *NIGHT JUST BEFORE THE FOREST* to the Lion Arts Centre, which is also hosting Ridiculusmus' *EXHIBITIONISTS* and *STANDOFFISH*, a new play by Gavin Quinn from Pan Pan Theatre Company. All this Irishness will run in rotating rep from 25 Feb-19 March 2000... Barabbas are heading to that part of the world as well; their *WHITEHEADED BOY* plays at the Wellington Festival in New Zealand from 3-6 March.

FESTIVAL FALL



OUT

THE AUSSIES ROCKED THE HOUSE, IRISH DRAMATURGY BOTTOMED OUT, AND THE FRINGE CHALLENGED THE NATURE OF "FRINGENESS." *ITM*'S CRITICS ASSESS THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF THIS YEAR'S DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL SEASON.

NOT-SO-STRANGE FRUIT

THE BASKET OF INTERNATIONAL THEATRE PRODUCE AT THIS YEAR'S DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL WAS TOO FULL OF RECOGNISABLE FARE, ARGUES BRIAN SINGLETON.

PROGRAMME SHOPPING ON THE INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL CIRCUIT DEPENDS as much on credit managers and the cultural sponsors of overseas government agencies as on the desires and tastes of festival organisers. Choice for programmers is determined by factors other than the aesthetic which usually guides spectator choice. Compromises have to be made according to the financial viability of importing overseas products, the availability of productions on the tour circuit, as well as the likelihood of commercial success in the competitive environment of a festival programme. The productions' appeal to the corporate market is also crucial as the ranks

PHOTOGRAPHS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): JANE EYRE, A FAMILY OUTING, JOURNEYMAN, DOLLY WEST'S KITCHEN (PHOTO BY AMELIA STEIN)

FESTIVAL

of spectators are swelled at this time by members of sponsoring organisations who are not necessarily theatre connoisseurs.

No festival, of course, can truly reflect the leading current practices of world theatre no more than it can import the cutting edge of the international avant-garde. Several factors prevent such importation. First, the dislocation of such practices from their cultural and social contexts is highly questionable. What might work in, say, Dakar will have a totally different set of connotations, significations, and degrees of success in a Dublin context. Thus the productions which tend to tour globally are either the works of major international directors already known to theatre aficionados (such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Sellars, Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage), or those whose form and structure, despite the specificity of their texts, can cross easily national and language boundaries. What we end up with then is not so much a glimpse of the state of theatre's art, but a "consensus" snapshot of theatre's global appeal.

At this year's Dublin Theatre Festival, the British Council's contribution to celebrate 10 years of funding commitment skewed UK representation on the already ultra-slim programme to its highest level ever, all the while lending an insight to the work of some of Britain's active independents, The Wrestling School, the Young Vic and Shared Experience. From beyond these islands were brought, from our own diasporic realm, *Hot Mouth* and Mabou Mines (USA) and a co-production of the Australian Company B Belvoir and Black Swan Theatres. Israel provided us with the only non-English language production of the festival, Joshua Sobol's epic 1940s tale of an Israeli *Village*. Foreign-language shows have languished in the popularity

stakes of recent festivals as the swell of spectators whose annual experience of theatre is solely within the festival fortnight demands the instantly accessible. Such pandering to the popular in respect of the English language testifies to the transnationalism of the festival market. But the provenance of these foreign productions is less interesting than the dominant generic trend which, with a few exceptions, they all shared.

The genre in question — the stage adaptation of novels — was so dominant this year that it made me think of a tale told by

CLOUDSTREET



Trevor Nunn in relation to his famous 1981 production of *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. On a tour to Moscow he learnt that theatre there, during the Brezhnev era, fought austerity and censorship by adapting Dickens' novels. It was a sign then of troubled times when Dickens' indictments of the administration and social conditions of Victorian England were dramatised as scathing attacks on the Western capitalist system. Perhaps this current generic trend of novel adaptation in our festival is an attempt to resist the technological march of global capitalism with its website culture of competing narratives, subjects, and linear disruptions. However, it is more likely to be a nostalgic hankering for the old stories, the old style,

the old times, with familiar figures from our lost days of childhood innocence.

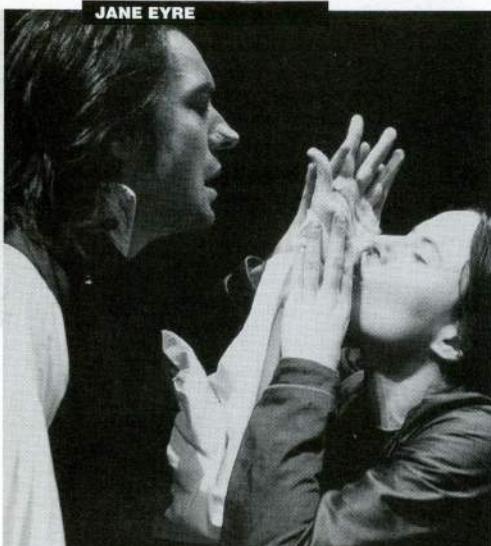
Shared Experience's romp through *Jane Eyre* at breakneck speed teetered on, but pulled back from, the brink of mawkish melodrama, setting up Rochester's wife Bertha as Jane's suppressed passion. That embodiment of the psyche as well as the extraordinary physicality of a company playing a panoply of characters including a dog and a horse almost made the mock-Gothic set (reminiscent of the old children's board game, "Haunted House") an unnecessary piece of stage clutter. The company's greatest triumphs so far on

and pantomime and even to our mother's knee, in *Peter and Wendy*, an adaptation of J. M. Barrie's novel *Peter Pan*. In Lee Breuer's gorgeous spectacle, Karen Kandel provided us with a one-woman display of vocal artistry giving voice to every character embodied by puppets. But layered on top uncomfortably was a live "Celtic" soundtrack which might have been signally Barrie's Scottish origins, or simply pandering to popular taste for Enya and *Riverdance*.

The Young Vic's adaptation of tales from the Arabian Nights was another visual and largely "plastic" spectacular replete with illusions, circus tricks, puppetry, and acrobatics. Removed from its original in-the-round format and played in a proscenium at night-time, this potentially exciting children's experience was reframed in an inappropriately adult world. Consequently it satisfied neither constituency of spectators; its spectacular nature and physical distance from the auditorium seemed to alienate children while its familiar stories from childhood remained too locked in the adult spectator's memory to be truly engaging. Children's theatre research shows how often the child will write him- or herself into the narrative unlike the adult who will attempt to deny any such engagement unless the children's text is interrogated critically from an adult's perspective.

So although both the *Arabian Nights* and the Barrie adaptations came across as marvellous pieces of nostalgic escapism, neither managed to interrogate the texts in any critical way, particularly their underlying ideological assumptions. Barrie's text presents a very unhealthy relationship between the boy and the mother, and over the years the *Arabian Nights* tales have been layered with 19th-century encrustations of orientalism, as British theatres relentlessly have used them in pantomime

JANE EYRE



home turf have been with Helen Edmundsen's glorious adaptations of novels (seen in Dublin recently in Theatreworks' production of *Anna Karenina*). Edmundsen's taut dramaturgy was absent, however, in this relentlessly linear approach, but nevertheless it was a ripping yarn told passionately.

Mabou Mines took us back to fairy tale

FESTIVAL

FALLOUT

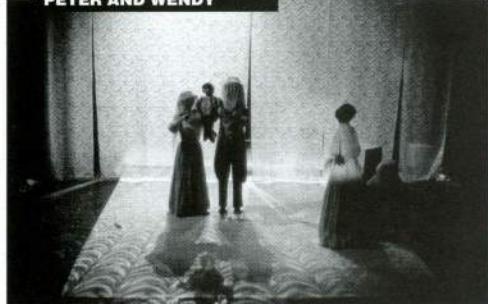
and musical comedy to assert Victorian colonial values, and to naturalise empire. By not acknowledging these inherent ideologies, the producing companies seem ignorant of them. Are these companies and their directors operating in a political vacuum?

Ideologically questionable, too, was the Australian co-production of *Cloudstreet* (adapted from Tim Winton's novel), an epic tale of two families united through economic hardship, but dichotomised by their competing value systems. The god-fearing Lambs and the ne'er-do-well Pickles are united eventually in marriage by a prodigal Lamb and an industrious though bulimic Pickle. Good triumphs over evil in this heart-warming saga as the Lambs embrace and subsume, literally, the profligate Pickles. This five-hour show manipulated our emotions gloriously with the help of a continuous soundtrack in the manner of a TV mini-series. Part One brought the families under the same roof but set them against a backdrop of momentous world events such as the bombing of Hiroshima, juxtaposing the narration of its horrors with a stage image of a burning effigy of Guy Fawkes.

But once the historical backdrop was eliminated by the author as the text turned its attentions solely to the personal histories of the two families, I was able to suspend my ideological reservations about good "naturally" triumphing over evil, and deviant behaviour being neutralised by "family values," and I succumbed totally to the gripping storyline. Despite myself, I cared for these folk, especially the brain-damaged Fish Lamb who challenged pomposity and insincerity with his disarming child-like inquisitiveness. Most interesting of all was a "Black Man" narrator with a prescience and omniscience which cut through action and time and

provided us with a social and political context for the European Australian experience. But the fact that he could not and did not intervene in this "white" story appeared to me as dramaturgical apartheid, presented uncritically as "natural." Is the absence of political awareness a trait of the transnational narrative aiming at the greatest number of international spectators? But certainly, this was engaging storytelling from a fine, athletic and committed ensemble whose storytelling skills made it

PETER AND WENDY



the popular hit of the festival.

Escaping the narrative trap and most critical attention were two extraordinary shows at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght. *Hot Mouth* presented us with an 80-minute *a capella* soundscape of voices which deconstructed familiar racist and sexist songs with a quality and sophistication which separated meaning from words sung, and had us reheat them as sounds uttered. Howard Barker's own version of his play *Scenes From an Execution* demonstrated clearly how his plays mistakenly have been layered with a gravitas which has kept at bay his wicked sense of humour. The play, to be sure, gives vent to the political (ir)responsibility of the artist as well as the artistry of the politician in equal measure, but was directed at times as arch-

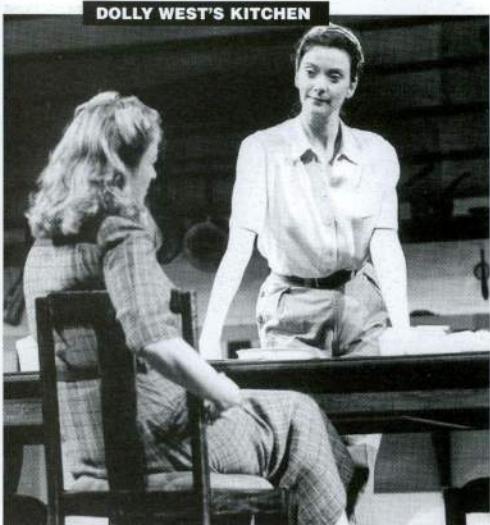
camp which added a new dimension to the debate. Barker's texts are notoriously difficult for an actor to master but his actors of the Wrestling School gave us a lesson in the musculature of text in a virtuoso display of skill rarely seen in this country. Both shows were exotic fruit in the Festival basket.

And what of our own Irish produce? Which of our native talents will be brought by festivals abroad? Most of the innovation happened on the Fringe where storytelling techniques were challenged and pushed to new forms unseen in the main festival. Blue

base-comic *Boontown*. The scaffolding arena specially constructed for it in Meeting House Square, Temple Bar may leave no traces after its dismantling, but the play's sordid, Viz-comic style will take longer to be eradicated from our memories.

Only one Irish play stood out as readily exportable to foreign markets, a view validated by regular standing ovations as its run continues, despite its mauling by newspaper critics. *Dolly West's Kitchen* by Frank McGuinness, Patrick Mason's swan-song production as artistic director of the Abbey, will need time in this country to have its broken taboos and form accepted and embraced. It is a challenging play on many levels (nationalism, patriotism, sexuality), exposing the impotence of a mythological patriarchal nationalism, questioning Ireland's neutrality in the Second World War, permitting a gay man to wear the uniform of the Irish army — and kiss another soldier on stage, and permitting an English soldier to sing in a Donegal setting, "I Vow to Thee my Country" on the very stage which has been linked culturally, inextricably, to the creation of a national identity.

McGuinness' matriarch, Rima West, will surely one day rank alongside Juno and Bessie. She is an irreverent mother who seeks her offspring's happiness and binds their disparate desires and troubled relationships with wicked humour. When she dies in Act Two, the play's form breaks down into character pairings mirroring the breakdown of family cohesion. In Rima's absence we are left with a legacy of "coping" with sexuality, marriage and post-traumatic stress. Some day we may be able to accept the troubling dramaturgical shift in form as these paired characters engage in processes of peace, but it might take the accolades of foreign presses and the international festival circuit to help us understand that this play is not only a hit,



Raincoat's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* showed how far the company had moved away from Decroux along the road of Anne Bogart's "Viewpoints" system, and gave us, in Fiona McGeown's Alice, one of the most memorable performances of the year. Here was a young Irish company, unlicensed on the Fringe, which was not restricted to the notion of narration as vocal expression. Home fare in the main Festival, however, plummeted to new depths as evidenced in Rough Magic's

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but singularly the most courageous and highly politicised Irish play to be staged at the Abbey in a generation.

And that is precisely where the foreign festival can do good: the external validation of a product which challenges the dominant expectations of form and content of its home culture. The DTF brought us this year, on the whole, safe, nostalgic, politically benign, feel-good theatre from abroad with its linear narratives and cohesive forms. Fortunately, Frank McGuinness kicked all that into touch.

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THE FRINGE AT FIVE COLIN MURPHY PONDERS THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE DUBLIN FRINGE.

"The Fringe needs to guard against the dangers of anyone capable of sitting, standing and opening a mouth getting a hearing."

EMER O'KELLY, THE SUNDAY INDEPENDENT, 10/10/99

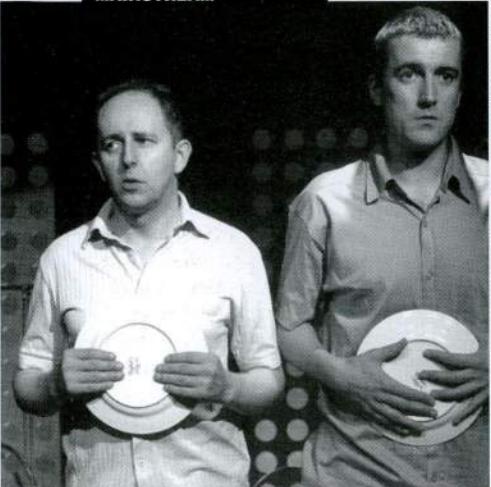
DANGERS? WHAT IS A FRINGE Festival about? Quality control, and the implicit conservatism that accompanies it, are not terms readily associated with a "fringe." Surely, the Fringe is the open-mike session of professional theatre, the chance for anyone capable of opening a mouth to shout it off, and see if anyone wants to know. It is inherently dangerous, in the double-edged sense that what you go to see might be appallingly bad, or might rock your world.

But might the five-year-old Dublin Fringe be heading down the direction O'Kelly suggests? Unlike Edinburgh, the

Dublin Fringe has always operated a selective policy in a deliberate attempt to maximise as-yet limited resources and audiences. But like it or not, it was Edinburgh that first defined "the fringe" some 50 years ago, and it did so in the hotly-defended-ever-since context of the "anti-festival" — if you weren't in the official Festival, you were on the Fringe; audience or performer, you took your chances. It is this that brings the weird, wonderful and truly awful to Edinburgh every year. This celebration of eclecticism is Edinburgh's legacy to the theatre word. This is the heart of the genre "fringe."

In the office of a quite different Fringe in a bigger and booming city, Dublin Fringe Festival director Ali Curran speaks authoritatively of her vision for Dublin's Fringe: the audience she sees is "sophisticated" and "very open to experimentation"; the Fringe should be seen as a "professional arts festival." Edinburgh, she seems to be saying, is an orgy of populist entertainment; Dublin can neither support that nor wants it.

The argument here is that by selecting and therefore supervising participants in the Fringe, a certain consistency of quality — typical of a professional arts festival — can be guaranteed, and that this serves as a base for selling the Fringe as a coherent package to the public (and sponsors). The problem is that such packaging is invariably a conservative force; and the question is whether such selectivity is even necessary in the first place. Every show increases the cross-fertilisation of ideas and audiences in the Fringe; audiences can surely be given the responsibility to choose what they see themselves; and a decent reviewing policy — which is, admittedly, as yet absent — could provide credibility and exposure for those sleeper shows which mightn't otherwise get noticed.

MAINSTREAM**A RED DAY**

For the record: this Fringe I saw 23 shows, and more often sat through pretty mainstream fare surrounded by ordinary, appreciative audiences than witnessed experimentation in the company of sophisticates; I saw both established and emerging companies err towards conservatism, most often in choice of script; and I missed the rawness and socio-political edge that might be associated with an organic, evolving Fringe scene. Ultimately, unknown and emerging companies were at least as successful as the more established in producing the edgy, genre-breaking work that is Fringe at its best, and these would be the first and greatest loss to a more established "professional arts festival."

My search for edgy, genre-breaking work did result in a few delectable discoveries. Ursula Martinez' *A Family Outing* was ultimately less revealing than its publicity still, which featured the actress and her non-actor parents holding hands, and naked. There was little of either the self-exploitation nor the Freudian self-psychoanalysis that one might have

expected in a humorous look at family and self; nonetheless, it was quite unique, exactly the kind of self-confident curiosity that Edinburgh attracts and makes room for. In the normal, year-round theatre scene in Dublin, this show would be an anomaly, for we simply do not celebrate this kind of diversity as a matter of course.

Similarly quirky was Roger Gregg's witty and frenetic beatnik satyr play, *Marsyas, The Hippest Satyr*, a sumptuous cabaret-style entertainment perfectly programmed into a late-night Andrews Lane slot. Phillip Jeck's layered soundscapes and Laurie Booth's striking martial arts-inspired movement made up the enigmatic but ultimately satisfying *Yip Yip Mix in the 21st Century*. Rondo Theatre Company's elegant and inventive fusion of text and movement, *Stone Ghosts*, was, quite simply, a lovely piece of theatre.

Whether through radical intent, sheer artistry or simple originality, these were shows to break down conventions and fuse genres and disciplines. Though there were difficulties getting crowds to the Big, Cold Tent for *A Family Outing*, each was a critical and audience success, indicating the presence of an open-minded and, indeed, sophisticated audience. Overall, however, there was surprisingly little of such unconventional Fringe material. This presents a question: are our performers

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more conservative than our audiences?

Within the more conventional constraints of the scripted play, there were moments to savour and others to be happily forgotten by the interval of the next show. There was a barrage of populist classics, there were a few Becketts, including some lesser-known short pieces and there was, inevitably, a host of New (mostly) Irish Plays, of mixed quality.

A pleasant surprise for this reviewer was Frank Shouldice's snappily written monologue, *Journeyman*, which received a well-deserved post-Fringe run in the Focus Theatre. The story of a down-but-not-quite-out American boxer is hardly fresh thematic territory, but Shouldice and actor Ger Carey nimbly side-stepped the pitfalls of such a seemingly cliched subject and produced a sensitive and compelling piece of theatre. It was the acting and not the script that stood out in The Gare St. Lazare Players' *The Three-Legged Fool*. Anthony Ryan's script was quietly entertaining, if derivative, but he does write to the company's strength, creating lives that will be tangibly lived by the actors in performance. Fused with a greater sensitivity to story, or simply more concessions to action, Ryan could yet be someone to make an impact.

Winners of the Best Overall Production award at the 1997 Dublin Fringe, *Theatr y Byd* returned to this Fringe garlanded with rave reviews from the Welsh press for their latest, *New South Wales*. Yet, sensitive acting and elegant staging could not save Ian Rowlands' story of a taxi ride from London to Cardiff from moments of unintentional farce. Rowlands had some interesting things to say about Welsh nationalism but ultimately sacrificed his credibility with overwrought lines like: "As soon as I walk through the front door, the prodigal son will turn into the fatted calf and I'll be

skewered on a spit of derision."

Start-up local theatre company Quare Hawks' stated focus is on "challenging conventions, prejudices and perceptions," yet their Fringe entry, Philip Osment's *The Undertaking* was curiously mainstream, a gentle, conventional homecoming tale with urban life and dislocation much stronger themes than homosexuality or bigotry. Perhaps challenging the received notion that a company doing gay work has to be overtly political was exactly their intent.

Less mainstream, and dealing more adventurously with familiar ideas about

XAVIERS



modern life, was Suspect Culture's *Mainstream*, a piece that managed to be challenging in form while deceptively banal in content, exposing both the routines and imposed disciplines within which we live, and the life-affirming plurality and diversity that exists despite them. In the relative absence of wholesale socio-political concerns in this Festival and Fringe, *Mainstream*'s reflections on work, relation-

ships, anonymity, and conformity in modern society were pertinent and provocative. The sensitive fusion of David Greig's script with the production's music and design was remarkable, and an excellent cast of four completed a virtuoso ensemble.

Mark Fisher suggested that "Ireland has yet to find a facility for physical theatre to equal its famed linguistic dexterity" in the last issue of this magazine. Bearing this in mind, it was interesting to note that physical theatre was the dominant trend in this year's Fringe, with no less than nine shows displaying considerable physical dexterity. In

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



the context of a national drama sourced in the text, this is an energising and exciting development, but — as this Fringe clearly showed — not one without its pitfalls.

KAOS, who had one of last year's big Fringe hits with *The Master and Margarita*, returned to the City Arts Centre this year with a version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Bulgakov's sprawling classic and KAOS' trademark physical and choral style were an inspired match, but Wilde proved less malleable, and the director's stated love/hate relationship with the play showed through too much in a production that ultimately lost Wilde's wit within the company's own, chiefly physical, brand of comedy.

If KAOS sacrificed Wilde, Shibboleth/Sinaquanon simply pillaged Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, taking full advantage of any opportunities it offered for dramatic or acrobatic staging while making little apparent attempt to reflect the depth, complexity and, crucially, the story of the original. In *Blood Pudding*, the sole American company in the Fringe, the Deep Ellum Ensemble, imaginatively took on the story of Typhoid Mary, the Tyrone-born chef who came to turn-of-the-century America and proceeded to kill off a great number of its inhabitants through her unhygienic culinary habits. Deep Ellum provided some of the best moments of the Fringe with their inventive and skilled ensemble playing, but could have used some rigorous editing in the self-indulgent second half.

Ishka are a very welcome addition to Ireland's burgeoning physical theatre scene, but similarly had trouble finding a dramatic focus for their startling and beautiful full-body mask work in the Picasso-inspired *A Red Day*. Ishka would do well next time to either throw off the constraint of story altogether, or bring a writer or dramaturg into their ensemble; that said, *A Red Day* was one of my Fringe highlights for its daring and originality.

Perhaps anticipating the textual looseness that often accompanies physically-based work, Blue Raincoat brought critic/dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke on board to adapt *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But, unlike SITI's *Bob* in last year's Fringe, which Clarke also wrote, *Alice* was disappointingly conventional. Despite Clarke's innovative inclusion of Lewis Carroll on stage, as both a character in and narrator of the play, this ultimately amounted to a fairly straight retelling of the Wonderland adventure, albeit an excellently choreographed one.

A common thread, therefore, was a lack

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of "linguistic dexterity," or general sensitivity to text, in

works that put new focus on the physical. Perhaps this is a consequence of ensemble work, in which the shaping perspective provided by a director or dramaturg can often be lost. But it's exciting to see artists questioning the relationship between text and movement; would that we saw more of this boundary-pushing in the Fringe.

This Fringe offered surprisingly little comment on politics or society. The suits worn by the cast of You'll Be Sorry When We're Famous Theatre Company's *Angels in America* may have specifically referenced our Tiger economy, but their well-realised production of both parts of Tony Kushner's contemporary classic nevertheless served as a reminder of the power of good political writing. Amongst the shows I saw, only Calipo's *Xaviers* and TEAM Educational Theatre Company's production of Frances Kay's *Burning Dreams* raised serious socio-political questions. And both did so with no small measure of style or skill.

While Cinematic Theatre Company seem to have pursued their desire to stage classic films up an artistic cul-de-sac (as evidenced this year by their flat production of Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*), Calipo have matured considerably from their days of staging Hollywood blockbusters like *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Crow*. In *Xaviers*, the story of an video-and-drama outreach project gone wrong, they seamlessly alternated between live performance and video footage, communicating through the mix of media that has become the lingua franca of today's youth. Ironically it was some of the basics of theatre that caught Calipo up; the production suffered from some amateurish acting and awkward staging.

What was perhaps most interesting about *Xaviers* was how ably it crossed the

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boundaries between the different "worlds" of Irish theatre; the material in the production came from and specifically referenced the young company's experiences working in youth and community drama. TEAM's presence in the Fringe was another such crossover; through a one-day performance/workshop they opened up the fine work they do in primary and sec-

NEW SOUTH WALES



ondary schools to adult audiences. And what does it say about this year's Fringe that the play TEAM chose to showcase, *Burning Dreams*, delved boldly into topical issues like moral responsibility, idealism, poverty, and the refugee situation that nearly all the other companies didn't seem interested in touching?

Is this lack of social engagement the state of play across the board in Irish theatre today, or is there something about the Fringe that's keeping socially committed work away? That's one of the questions that's presented itself as the Fringe turned five, and the time seems ripe for further discussion about what kind of showcase and sounding board the Fringe can be for Irish theatre. Let the debate begin.

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OBSERVE THE IRISH PLAYWRIGHTS MARCHING TOWARDS THE SCREEN

DOROTHY LOUISE **QUESTIONS THE FILM-INFLUENCED DRAMATURGY OF THREE DTF IRISH PREMIERES.**

For the last several years — let's say ten — playwrights have increasingly used cinematic techniques and television formats to shape their plays. These techniques have informed and even fostered work that proceeds by juxtaposition, jumps, and dissolves that alternatively freeze and thaw the frame.

In absorbing camera techniques, some playwrights have also adopted the more novelistic, as opposed to dramatic, storytelling approach of the majority of movies. Film does not often use the narrator, but the novel does, and examples abound of

the playwright's choice of, or capitulation to, the narrator, who usually addresses the audience directly. Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Carr's *The Mai*, and the last two winners of America's Pulitzer Prize for drama, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned To Drive* and Margaret Edson's *Wit* come immediately to mind as relatively recent examples. Further, like the 19-century English novelists piecing out their books first in serial form for magazines, today's dramatists are surrounded by examples of the loose form of the serial.

All of these currently common practices contribute to loosely constructed, some-

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FALLOUT

times jerrybuilt plays. No doubt the cinema, the novel, and the mini-series have given playwrights many helpful tools that nurture variety and further economy. I am not arguing the right or wrong way, but the more effective and powerful way. As Morag says in *The Map Maker's Sorrow*, "Fragmentation defeats empathy." This year's Dublin Theatre Festival showed evidence that Irish playwrights have succumbed to the lures of filmic form; loose, filmic dramaturgy significantly weakened the three major single-authored Irish premieres of this DTF: Pat Kinevane's *The Plains of Enna* (produced by Fishamble Theatre Company at the Tivoli Theatre), and the National Theatre's two DTF offerings, Chris Lee's *The Map Maker's Sorrow* in the Peacock and Frank McGuinness' *Dolly West's Kitchen* in the Abbey.

Kinevane's *The Plains of Enna* sets its action in 1967 against the background of a family feud: years ago one man sold his land to another, not knowing that it concealed a pyrites hoard, which the devious buyer then sold to the steelworks at a great profit. The son of the buyer, Hady, and the daughter of the seller, Kora, meet by chance and fall in love, but must conceal their trysting because Kora's mother, Nina, would vigorously oppose any future match. By the end of the first half, Kora has escaped her mother's proscriptions by moving in with Hady.

Two secondary strands weave through this main action: Kora's friend, Hundred, works as a potter and herbalist, inadvertently providing Kora with a cover for her clandestine dates; and Kora's sister Julia, training as an opera singer in Italy, rehearses and performs arias from a new opera, *Proserpina*, an activity implying a partial and unconvincing parallel between the Persephone myth and the main action. For

all its attempts to suggest a classic, the play's long narrative line and melodramatic events recall daytime soap. Cathy Leeney writes in her programme note that the play "is no mere retelling of an old tale." Would that it were.

Central to the problem of this reduction is the playwright's heavy-handed manipulation of Hady's character. In the first act, Hundred warns Kora against getting entangled with her family's enemy, whom Hun describes as a philanderer involved with thugs, a brute and sadist devoted to dastardly ends. Neither Kora nor we have any independent evidence of this villainous version until the second half of the play, when Hady beats Kora, orders his thugs to beat her weakling brother Seamar, drinks excessively, and pursues any passing skirt.

Nothing except Hun's caution prepares us for this, and thus Hady seems only the manipulated creature of the dramatist, a character who must emerge as a blackguard in order that a chain of soap operatic incidents may ensue. Why Hady has allowed Kora to move in, why he courts her in the first place when he is truly only a monster are questions that remain unanswered. But why he must turn monster we all too easily understand: so that the play may propel itself via a series of violent incidents, numerous enough to sustain a soap for a few weeks. The events occur in about three-quarters of an hour, far too short a time for us to accept their reality: a pregnancy, beatings, abortion, Nina's poisoning of the well that waters Hady's land, Hady's murder, and Kora's convulsive contractions in electro-shock therapy.

Perhaps realizing he may be overestimating the elasticity of our credulity, Kinevane allow one event simply to be recalled. Hundred tells us of her rape by Hady's brother years ago, and we are spared the stretch of having this happen in

such a crowded present. Added to the dizzying effect of witnessing such tormented lives are such incisive exchanges as "Are you blackmailin' me?" followed by "Like the movies, isn't it?" Would that it were not.

The Map Maker's Sorrow, a far more sophisticated work, nevertheless shares some of the limitations of Kinevane's long narrative line. Chief among these is the

prostitution — and the larger world. Morag's and Henry's relation to their son Jason, and to one another; Jason's connection to prostitute, heroin addict, and fellow runaway Jess; politician Lucien's connection to Henry as therapist; Lucien's connection to Jess as a quick fix for his sadism, and to Oliver, Jess's pimp — all of these weave in and out of the emerging fabric of the play. In addition, because we are focused from the opening second on Jason's suicide, and are later presented with Jess's murder and Lucien's death from insomnia, Death participates as a character, explaining various mysteries beyond the grave (we learn that she is the "best kisser in the universe"), simultaneously demolishing her credibility and our willing suspension.

Few of these relationships are clearly or compellingly played out, as if the several plot lines need more episodes to bear fruit. Once again, we need a mini-series. Instead of showing the nature of the relationship between Jason and his parents, Lee has time only for other characters' remarks, the truth of which we are never sure of

THE MAP MAKER'S SORROW



number of scenes — 28 spread over only two hours. Some must, given the arithmetic, play only seconds. Although every scene has its point, like a sound-bite, few last long enough to develop into something probing or revealing, and many end with punch lines that effectively abort what might otherwise have moved into more complicated terrain.

The play centers on a series of relationships, usually of couples, and, to a lesser extent, on the connection between professions — mapping, sleep therapy, politics,

because we will not be permitted to see for ourselves. When, for example, Morag asks Jess if Jason hated her, Jess replies: "He didn't hate you. He was hurt by you. He couldn't bear the weight of expectation. That's why he cut himself off." This is feeble, because we never see Morag pressuring Jason, so we have to wonder about Jason's accuracy in reporting the causes of his feelings. And why could he not just as well have been spurred to accomplishment by his mother's ambition for him, assuming she harboured such a prospect?

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In another instance, when Death asks Jason about the people who loved him, he answers: "They deserve to suffer." Yet we remain in the dark about what his parents have done, and so are prevented from knowing what the relevant issues really are. The fish always eludes the hook. As Jason bathes Jess's bruised cheek, for instance, he lists his reasons for suicide, which include: "I was... pretty majorly fucked up by my parents. They were absent, distant, permanently squabbling and they always ignored me... My suicide would be the only meaningful communication I could make to them, about what it has been like to be me." Ending his list with "life is shit," Jason describes watching an old woman pulling a shopping trolley against the wind for an hour to prove his point. "Then I had to look away. That's how hard life is." Can we help wondering why it apparently never occurs to him, over the course of that hour, to offer the woman a hand?

Jess overlooks this, but she does point out that he is blaming his parents for the failure of his own life. They discuss therapy, and Jason presents a very cool negative appraisal that includes therapeutic explanations of motivation, guilt and hostility. But just when we are moving along toward something substantive, the scene ends with what has by now become a trademark rhythm:

JESS: Are you asking me to fuck for my rent?

Pause.

JASON: Look, I'll be dead before you learn to hate me.

End scene.

We ache for more of the relationship between parents and son — hints at first tantalise, then irritate, as we realise that we

will never get closer to any insights on why these relationships have developed as they have. Henry tells Lucien as he approaches Morag's threshold that he is "building up to the climax of arrival." Unfortunately, the audience is never allowed to participate in such an effort, even supposing that the playwright is making it.

As for work and the larger world, here, too, the play suggests without completing, skirting ideas without delivering. Lucien speaks of politics to Henry as they straddle a seesaw, both exhausted with the rigors of sleep therapy: "Yes, we cut the albatross of utopia from our necks so that we could be free to live in the present, to be realistic, to be pragmatic. And it worked. Of course I still get a bit misty-eyed about beliefs now and then. The romantic residue." At this, Henry completely breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably. At last, we think, we are getting somewhere. Lucien's reaction? "How about some more drugs?" End scene.

Morag has become a cartographer "to save the world," but expresses her disappointment to Jess: "The painful truth is that geography only looked so interesting because history had failed. We couldn't change the world with time, so we pretended we could change it with space." This scene actually continues for a few seconds, but because Jess cannot understand what Morag is saying, the idea cannot be explored. We never really witness through Morag the mapmaker's sorrow, but must be satisfied with remarks such as these to substitute for the presentation of feeling.

The metaphor of mapping itself is also limited to description, except in those scenes when the landscape (in scenes entitled "Snow," "River," and "Canal," for instance) intersects with revelation of character. In her opening lecture, Morag qualifies cartography: Maps are political tools.

They embody scientific knowledge and progress, and represent complex data simply, spanning the gamut from the microscopic to the cosmic. Further, Morag goes on, maps chart ownership and measure property rights. "So maps have always been about... struggle and power and resistance." Later, Morag says: "I believe that we've become trapped into a certain way of thinking about the world. A way of thinking that looks only at time, at how things happen one after another. But maps tell you everything at once,... have... a simultaneous, spatial logic."

Since the dramatist alerts us to expect something of this metaphor, we expect him to follow through, but have difficulty discerning just how the metaphor applies. These confused characters confuse us as to their dramatic purpose, and the dramatist's intention. Like their son, Morag and, even more so, Henry, adopt an ironic stance toward themselves and their experience that keeps the audience as well at a distance. They seem to enjoy being clever about their failings even as their potential for confrontation dwindles into comment. Finally, not only the fragmentation, but also the muddled metaphor, and this detachment, defeat empathy.

Frank McGuinness, by far the most accomplished and best known of this trio, has nevertheless unintentionally proved a related dramaturgical point in *Dolly West's Kitchen*: after carving out, for the first three-quarters of the play, a clearly marked territory near the Derry border, McGuinness then picks up the action several years later, and, for the last 15 minutes, journeys to a whole clutch of new places that he has no time to explore before the final fade to black. This choice — and not the overall attempt to parallel military and domestic hostilities, nor the death of the central character and lifeblood of the action, Rima, well before the play ends —

accounts for the play's deflected force.

In these last minutes, suddenly we are in Kinevane territory of serial soap, set out in half-a-dozen short scenes, primarily duologues: a fractured marriage has been mended, with a baby to boot; returning shellshocked soldiers Marco and Alec fight fear and despair and try to express the inexpressible to their lovers Justin and Dolly; Jamie, the rival to the pram-pushing father Ned, forces a confrontation with the resolute mother, Esther, before slugging it out with Ned and settling for the maid Anna; and Dolly joins what's left of the extended family in her kitchen to toast the hope that the war is over.

Given what has preceded, all of these outcomes are possible, but none except the shellshock seems inevitable. We could just as well be watching six other short duologues, and thus the last effects of the play feel arbitrary. The work seems to want to have a second part that resumes after the war, and perhaps needs either a play of its own, or a reduced prelude to a second half in a revised version.

McGuinness has shown his mastery of structure and resultant coherence, both as an adaptor, and in such powerful plays as *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and *Carthaginians*. So such a hash surely reflects work pressured by the rehearsal clock, which must have denied him the leisure to pursue organic evolution, and forced him to clutch at rather arbitrary developments to established lines of action. The arbitrariness, like Kinevane's melodramatic sensibility and Lee's snapshot scenes, leaves us deeply unsatisfied and disappointed, almost regretting the day that competing genres engendered hybrid drama.

Dorothy Louise is a playwright, and Professor of Theatre at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



Ready, Set... Schmooze!

At Theatre Shop, the Irish theatre sector meets international promoters and presenters for some unabashed self-salesmanship.

KAREN FRICKER watched this year's Shop from the sidelines.

PHOTOS BY HUGH MC ELVEEN

NOW IN ITS SIXTH YEAR, THE THEATRE SHOP HAS BECOME A focal date in the Dublin theatre calendar, still the only organised opportunity for the whole of the sector to meet with international promoters and presenters and to network internally. Some 160 Irish and 30 international representatives met at this

year's Theatre Shop, which took place on 15 October at the Dublin Writers' Museum.

The focal point of the Theatre Shop is the one-on-one meetings, at which companies meet with international and Irish venue and festival managers, promoters, and presenters. All the meetings took place this year in a single room, with company representatives moving from table to table to keep up with a fast-paced schedule of up to nine meetings in one and a half hours. With only 15 minutes to get their message across, subtlety tended to fall by the wayside, and directness and downright aggressive pitching seemed the order of the day.

Other features of this year's Theatre Shop included a morning panel discussion on "Interpretations of Internationalism," chaired by the Abbey's Richard Wakely and featuring presentation from Mark Dobson, director of customer relations of the Northern Stage Company (Newcastle, England); Sally Cowling, head of Drama and Dance at the British Council; Fiach MacConghail, cultural director of the Irish programme for Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany; and Christian Sciaretti of the Comedie de Reims in Reims, France.

Theatre Shop participants then had their choice of three parallel informational sessions: James Hickey, solicitor with Matheson Ormsby Prentice and chairman of the Abbey Theatre's board, introduced the new copyright act and outlined its ramifications for the theatre sector; the Arts Council's acting drama officer Jane Daly chaired a session about starting a theatre company; and Marie Redmond introduced the notion of e-commerce and discussed its possible benefits to the theatre community. The day ended with an open mike session at



IN CHARGE: The Abbey's Richard Wakely and Theatre Shop coordinator Maura O'Keeffe

which such topics as the EU's Culture 2000 Context funding programme, the European Working Time Agreement, and the Theatre Forum were introduced and discussed.

That Theatre Shop, when founded, was ahead of its time seems clear; its "organised schmoozing" format has been imitated at Festivals as far afield as Edinburgh and Toronto. And in its early years it was just about the only place where the Irish theatre sector met together and thus served as a vital site for information sharing and was a catalyst for consolidation. Now that other



BEGINNERS' GUIDE: The "Starting a Theatre Company" panel

sites for interchange have begun to develop, does Theatre Shop need to shift its focus or alter its format?

While the event still draws a refreshingly diverse and widespread attendance from the sector — from the National Theatre to tiny-start ups — there were conspicuous absences this year from several major mid-range companies, including some of the Shop's oft-mentioned "success stories," that is, companies who've made connections towards booking touring dates while at the Shop. And while a random sampling of this year's participants all said they valued the event, there was a general sense that the Shop might do well to expand and play up the one-on-one meetings — which remain unique to the

Shop — while leaving the other information and community-building activities aside. Such questions will be taken on board as Theatre Shop begins an in-depth evaluation process in the winter months.



OPEN-MIKE: The Abbey's Martin Fahy and Theatre Shop director Siobhán Bourke

Chinese Takeaway

Dublin-born and -based playwright MARK O'ROWE offers an excerpt from his latest play, Made in China.

MARK O'ROWE: Unlike *Howie the Rookie*, *Made in China* isn't a monologue, but like *Howie* it's story-driven and densely plotted. It's a hugely physical play, almost a theatrical cartoon, and contains many scenes of mayhem (including a running martial arts battle). The setup is this: Hughie is a lowlife thug, a legbreaker for a local criminal. He's been asked to meet someone to give them a beating, but because he's in a personal crisis he is delaying the job. ¶ Paddy is Hughie's best friend. He'd love dearly to be part of the world of crime but has never been taken seriously. Because Hughie has delayed his assignment so long, Kilby, a reviled, nasty-fuck martial arts freak has been sent over to make sure he makes the hit tonight. In the ensuing conflict, Paddy sees an opening, maybe, to prove himself. ¶ The scene is set in Hughie's apartment and falls about halfway through the first of two acts. Paddy's been drenched in the rain on his way over and is sitting in his underwear. ¶ I love the idea of publishing a piece of in-progress or just-finished work. It's like a trailer for a new film. "Coming soon . . . *Made in China*."



KILBY (short black leather jacket, umbrella, blonde perm) Hughie? (to Paddy) Where is he? (calling) Hughie! (to Paddy) Fuckin' hack of this place! (Hughie enters with two cups of tea, stops in the doorway. To Hughie) The fuck are you doin'? (to Paddy) Story, fuckhead?

PADDY What's the jack?

KILBY Give that a shakin', will you? (hands umbrella to Paddy. To Hughie) The fuck're you doin'?

HUGHIE (putting tea on table) What're

you talkin' about?

KILBY I'm after comin' all the way down here in a blazin' fuckin'... in a monsoon, man. Hadn't got me an umbrella, I'd be fuckin' drenched, I would. (to Paddy) That right, Paddy? Shake the fuckin' thing. (Paddy shakes the umbrella) Drowned, I'd'a been. (looks at Paddy's boxers) The fuck were youse fagots up to? (to Hughie) What am I after walkin' in on? Is this a fuckin'... Is this one of them rendez-vous or somethin'?

PADDY Me pants are wet.

KILBY Your fuckin' pants?!!

HUGHIE His trousers.

KILBY I... (*to Hughie*) Right. (*beat. To Paddy*) They're wet?!

PADDY The rain, man.

KILBY Oh. Had you no umbrella? Will you *shake the fuckin' thing?*! (*Paddy shakes the umbrella*) I thought youse were suckin' each other's cocks or somethin'. (*to Hughie*) Here, fuckhead. The fuck's wrong with you you can't answer your beeper, huh? Have me out there bravin' the hurricane.

HUGHIE (*short pause*) I was waitin' 'til it dried off a bit, man.

KILBY You were...

HUGHIE The rain, like.

KILBY Have you no sense of manhood about yourself a'tall, no? No sense of the machiz, you couldn't go round the corner? It's only a shower, the name of fuck. (*To Paddy*) Should be dry, man. (*Paddy continues to shake umbrella*) Paddy! (*Paddy stops*) Should be dry. (*Paddy leans umbrella against wall, sits back down*) (*to Hughie*) It's only a fuckin' drizzle. D'you know what I mean? Have you no sense of bravin' elements an' all? Tell him, Paddy.

PADDY Ah... well...

KILBY What?

PADDY Have to say, now. Disagree, Kilby. It's peltin' a *bit*.

KILBY Peltin'?

PADDY Have to say, now, I've *been* there. Me pants, you know? Been there an' experienced a bit more than a shower.

KILBY What did you experience?

PADDY I don't know, but . . .

KILBY Well, then. (*short pause. To Hughie*) Hughie...

PADDY... A deluge or somethin'.

KILBY (*pause*) You wouldn't know a

deluge if it hit you on the fuckin' head, you prick. (*to Hughie*) An' that's why you didn't answer?

HUGHIE Yeah.

KILBY That's bad. (*to Paddy*) You smart prick, you, Paddy. (*to Hughie*) That's bad, now. If that winchy measure of respect's all Kilby commands, you know? If this is the new business, maybe I'll have to (*mimes action of taking a badge from his chest and throwing it down*) throw down the tin badge, give up me deputyhood, you know what I'm sayin', Paddy? Step outside the law.

PADDY What law?

KILBY Law that prevents me from dispensin' swift justice... (*miming*) Just below the ribcage. Fuckin' rupture you. Would you like that? Don't think you would. (*short pause. To Hughie*) Would you?

HUGHIE Like it?

KILBY Yeah.

HUGHIE No.

KILBY Didn't think you would. Think you'd like getting wet better, wouldn't you? Think you'd face the deluge as your man says, quicker than a (*miming*) phoenix eye fist below the ribcage from Kilby.

HUGHIE Think I would.

KILBY All right, Paddy?

PADDY All right.

KILBY What's your cock doin' on your lap?

PADDY (*looking down*) Fuckin'... Agh!! (*puts his cock away*)

KILBY You notice *he* wouldn't tell you? Could've been restin' there all night, he wouldn't open his mouth. But you'd notice his *eyes* lingerin' all right. Be lickin' his chops, he would. (*to Hughie*) Wouldn't you, man?

HUGHIE I would.

KILBY I know you would. Don't need to fuckin' tell me. (*to Paddy*) Moistenin' his lips, he'd be an' fidgetin'. Adjustin' his crotch an' all.

HUGHIE D'you want tae, Kilby?

KILBY Tae?

HUGHIE Cup of tea.

KILBY No, I don't.

HUGHIE Coffee?

KILBY Maybe it's a fuckin' coffee I want. Are you not supposed to be pin breakin'?

HUGHIE I'm doin' it.

KILBY You can no more pin break than I can fuckin'... stroke me twat, man. When are you doin' it?

HUGHIE In a while.

KILBY Don't give me this obscure shit, man.

HUGHIE 'Bout an hour.

KILBY ... Don't Mister Miyagi me. An hour?!

HUGHIE Yeah.

KILBY You've to do it sooner.

HUGHIE Why?

KILBY 'Cos he's at home now. What happens you call up, he's not in?

HUGHIE I don't know.

KILBY ... Huh?

HUGHIE I do it tomorrow?

KILBY But the Beak's payin' you to do it today. May not pay you a'tall, may get rancorous instead, man, have to be a puppy, you know? Send Kilby down to (*miming*) break your kneecap with a foot-stomp. Now I'm after ringin' the cunt, all right? That's one of the 'vantages of havin' a phone.

HUGHIE I had a phone.

KILBY Axe-kick, Paddy.

PADDY Yeah?

KILBY Booze an' karate, man. (*to*

Hughie) Rang the cunt, he's in, Hughie. (*to Paddy*) Destructive combo. (*to Hughie*) He's in, he's the prime of health. Get up there an' break his pins 'fore he splits out an' you can't. Okay?

HUGHIE Right. I'll just...

KILBY Just finish your tea, get your fuckin' arse up there. (*picks up Paddy's video cassette*) This yours, Paddy?

PADDY Yeah.

KILBY (*reading label*) This the one with the bit... ? Which is it?

PADDY Which?

KILBY Fights the fat fucker?

PADDY Yeah.

KILBY Wouldn't mind seein' that now. Could I watch this with youse?

HUGHIE I've to do this, Kilby.

KILBY How long d'you think it takes? You're not fixin' the fuck, you're breakin' him. Paddy'll still be here when you get back. (*to Paddy*) Won't you? (*to Hughie*) In his cacks. (*to Paddy*) That right Paddy?

PADDY Yeah.

KILBY (*to Hughie*) With his cock hangin' out all steamy. What are you gonna use?

HUGHIE Baseball bat?

KILBY Use a hammerfist meself, you know? (*miming*) Straight down, Bam! Skin on skin, tension at the point of impact, shatter it. But that's me. Baseball bat's fine. Take you 15, 20 minutes. Come back, we'll watch Bruce do it proper. Yeah? Watch him break more than pins. (*to Paddy*) Bit in this where he breaks your man's neck?

PADDY Whose?

KILBY Some fuck's.

PADDY He breaks a couple.

KILBY Does he?

PADDY Breaks a few.

KILBY Lookin' forward, then.

BRAVE NEW WORLD?

IN MAY OF THIS YEAR, THE ARTS COUNCIL / AN CHOMHAIRLE Ealaíon published *The Arts Plan 1999-2001*, its policy document for the arts in the Republic of Ireland in the upcoming years. In the announcement of the budget for the coming year in December, the arts grant totaled £34.5 million, a 20% increase over the previous year — surely an indication that the new Plan met the approval of the current Government. What are the ramifications of the new Plan for the theatre sector? *itm* asked three individuals and organisations to give us their reading.

A Welcome, with Concerns

The Theatre Forum has drafted a response to the Arts Plan for submission to the Arts Council; what follows is a synopsis of its views.

1. The Theatre Forum broadly welcomes *The Arts Plan 1999 - 2001* and congratulates the Arts Council on securing much-needed additional financial support for the arts in Ireland.
2. The Forum has some specific concerns about the delivery and implementation of the Arts Plan, given the numerical limitations of the current staff in Merrion Square.
3. The Forum welcomes the invitation for dialogue between the sector and the Arts Council and is prepared to engage in dialogue on a meaningful basis. We believe that Arts Plan's success will depend on practitioners' acceptance of it, and on mutual commitment to dialogue that will

12 STEP PROGRAMME

inform the development of arts policy and funding decisions.

4. The diverse membership of the Theatre Forum recognises its ability as a maturing sector to promote self-development. We commend the Arts Council for providing ways and means of achieving this through the Arts Plan.

The following are a selection of our specific suggestions about and comments on the Arts Plan's 12 strategies:

• The Theatre Forum wishes to enter into direct and continued dialogue with the Arts Council to develop appropriate methodologies and strategies for appraising artistic excellence and innovation.

• The Forum feels the need for clarification of the process of evaluation. We would hope to promote continued dialogue with the Arts Council during this evaluation of the artistic aims and achievements of individual theatre companies.

• The Forum finds great value in the setting of clear artistic objectives to assist in the evaluation process. We feel these objectives should be viewed in tandem with the actual achievements of the theatre company.

The foundational principles of the new Arts Plan.

To promote artistic excellence and innovation, the Arts Council will

1. Improve the professional formation, practice, and career development of artists.

2. Direct funding towards excellence and innovation in the promotion of the arts.

3. Support artists working through Irish and in indigenous arts to achieve their full potential and increase audiences.

4. Foster more recognition, acknowledgement, critical assessment, and documentation of the arts.

To develop participation in and audiences for the arts, the Arts Council will

5. Support more public participation in the arts.

6. Increase children's and young people's engagement with the arts.

7. Encourage arts organisations and promoters to develop audiences.

8. Develop international audiences for Irish arts and bring international arts to Irish audiences.

To build capacity in the arts sector, the Arts Council will

9. Improve dialogue with Government.

10. Improve local structures for the arts

11. Help arts organisations plan and manage better.

12. Rationalise financial supports and improve the application process.

• The Arts Council should create clear criteria and strategies for theatre companies to move, if and when appropriate, from project funding to revenue funding over a period of years.

• Funding applications by theatre companies should be assessed neither just on the basis of policy nor on a program or product basis.

• The Forum acknowledges the difficulty with regard to Irish language theatre, as Irish is a minority language and as there is only one funded professional theatre company currently working on a full-time basis in Irish in the Republic.

• The Forum would hope that the definition of traditional arts performance would be sufficiently broad so as to encompass theatre presentations which reflect folk traditions.

• The Arts Council should ensure that there is a quality theatre publication and that there is documentation and dissemination

of performance works through video, CD-rom, and photography.

• The Forum acknowledges the diversity of local authorities — that some are very active in the arts, whilst some are unfortunately less so. We would ask for

some clarification on how the Council is going to respond to this challenge.

► The Forum welcomes and celebrates the inclusion of young people and children as one of the 12 strategies. We feel that a key issue in this area is the relationship between the Council and the Department of Education, and feel that it is critical that the development work in arts education takes place at a senior level.

► The Forum suggests that funding for touring be increased rather than merely maintained. Touring addresses several of the other strategies, specifically children, indigenous arts/Irish language, and audience development; touring also aids in the development of local authorities and venues.

► The Forum welcomes the Arts Plan's focus on internationalism. We would suggest that, as a long term strategy, there will be a need for an agency to facilitate tours and international exchange. We note that the British Council is a very successful model in this area.

► The theatre sector believes that it is in the artist's interest to encourage self-assessment of his/her own artistic vision and that this represents a valid form of evaluation.

► The Forum suggests setting up advisory panels of practitioners which might work with the sub-committees in the Arts Council. This would ensure a greater degree of transparency and practitioner involvement in policy development and assessment.

► In relation to capital, despite the proper concerns identified in the Consultative Review which accompanies the Arts Plan, the Theatre Forum was disappointed to note that the Arts Plan did not include a detailed strategy for capital development and maintenance of arts buildings. Such a strategy is vital given the growing number of performance

venues around the country and the concerns of practitioners regarding the "acutely felt absence of a 300 - 450 seat, subsidised flexible space in Dublin" (page 15, Consultative Review).

A Revolutionary Shift

Victor Merriman casts a critical eye on the new Plan.

THE ARTS PLAN 1999-2001 IS PUBLISHED in three separate slim volumes: a Planning Framework, an Executive Summary of that framework, and the Consultative Review, a summary of concerns raised during the public consultations which informed the Arts Council's work on the Plan. The Planning Framework is short on specifics, and will only begin to make real sense in the light of the budgetary decisions to be made during its period of application. This is something of an irony, as the Plan announces on page 6 a major strategic change from the Council's own role as "simply a funding agency" to one which addresses "a developmental approach to the needs of the arts." The implication is that the grand design of budgeting is of greater significance than the details of amounts given, to whom, and for what purposes. The tone of the Planning Framework is rather managerialist and technocratic, and stands in contrast to the priorities of the contributors to its companion document, the Consultative Review.

This Review records strong support for values such as "cultural self-determination" (page 9) and cultural rights as fundamentals of citizenship. It is particularly sharply focused on the lived realities of making and exhibiting artworks in this

country now. On page 4 we learn that "One priority, which characterised all submissions and much of the oral debate, was that of resources" [my emphasis]. In other words, the concerns of arts practitioners around what *The Arts Plan 1995-1997* identified as "the hidden subsidy" — that is, low or no pay to arts workers — remain.

In relation to theatre, the Planning Framework has this to say:

The Arts Council is committed to fostering the wider theatre culture, enhancing the sustainability of theatre organisations, encouraging excellence and innovation in theatre, especially as regards repertoire, and to building audiences, including young audiences for drama in Ireland.

This is positive and encouraging in itself, but it does not stand alone in this documentation. It needs to be read against the material differences between the "Statement of Intent" of *The Arts Plan 1995-1997* and the "Statement of Purpose" of *The Arts Plan 1999-2001*. The first Arts Plan declared that:

everyone in Ireland has an entitlement to meaningful access to and participation in the arts. The Council understands that it has a primary responsibility to encourage and maintain high standards in all art forms, especially in the living contemporary arts. It also understands that it has a clear responsibility to foster the those structures which assist and develop dialogue between artists, the arts and the communities from which they emerge.

The new Arts Plan sees the Council's "purpose" not in terms of responsibilities to citizens, but in terms of its "role" and "values." It states,

Our role is to enhance the quality of people's experience of the arts, to advocate the unique value of the arts in society, and to recognise



both promise and achievement in the making of art... We value excellence, innovation and diversity. We support the expression of these values through policies and programmes for the development of the arts, alone or in partnership with others.

The blandness of the language cannot entirely conceal a significant change in philosophy towards the notion of the non-interventionist "arm's length principle," crucial in relations between government and the Arts Council and even more so in those between the Arts Council and artists. The second Arts Plan signals a significant shift towards a more paternalistic, interventionist role for the Arts Council. On page 28 of the Planning Framework, we encounter something quite revolutionary:

The budgetary priorities are not analysed according to artform categories, as they have been in the past, because expenditure within individual artform areas will vary according to financial need, competitive circumstances, and the extent to which arts practitioners respond to the Council's strategic priorities. [emphasis mine]

This is extraordinary. The final criterion is a direct challenge to artistic freedom. Given that the "Council's strategic priorities" are at least challenged — if not contradicted — by the submissions recorded in its own Consultative Review, one can only assume that there may be problems ahead.

I would like to offer an example of possible practical consequences for theatre arising out of the application of the value systems of the two Arts Plans. Take the examples of Bickerstaffe Theatre Company's *True Lines* and Calypso Productions' *Farawayan*. *True Lines* saw the light of day as a result of a risk taken by Bickerstaffe in inviting a young director, John Crowley, to devise a piece of work with a

Mary Coll's Diary . . .

... with no apologies to Bridget Jones

Day 1. New Arts Plan came in the post today... four copies actually, two addressed to me, and one each for the two previous directors of the Belltable... must make time to read it, soon, should read the old one first though... you know, compare, contrast etc.

Day 2. *Irish Times* did a feature on the new Arts Plan today... great to see all the old familiar faces again... hmmmm... thought he'd left there to become a Consultant... lots of soft focus, wonder who took the photos.

Day 3. At last... started to read the new Arts Plan today... but got to the Table of Contents when I was interrupted by a call from the Bank Manager... seems our overdraft now equals the deficit of a Third World country... never got back to reading, had to go around with the posters for an incoming show, after I got them back from the rubbish bins around town — Fás, who needs it.

Day 4. Went to a Tostal meeting on the new Arts Plan... brought it with me to read on the train but fell asleep, exhausted after all the walking I did yesterday... interesting new Facilitator at the meeting, seen him somewhere before, amazing technology, beamed him in by satellite from New York... must reapply for that computerisation grant again... hands up anyone who read the last Arts Plan from cover to cover... ok ... now hands up any of you who are still working in the Arts... ok... now, would either of you like to comment on the new Arts Plan... right... well, did you even read the Executive Summary...

Day 5. Yahoo... had forgotten all about the Executive Summary, brilliant... only 12 pages, its like getting the Cole's notes... Fás called, bad news — looks like they won't be giving us another scheme, take back everything I ever said about them... never got time to read the Executive Summary as had to cover the Box Office for a few hours instead, after I finished a get-in.

Day 6. Have given up all hope of reading anything to do with the new Arts Plan, ever, no time to spare in between giving the dance workshops and hanging the exhibitions... should get away with it though, not likely to meet any Council members over the next 12 months, and my Board won't even know that a new Arts Plan exists.

Day 7. Cornered! Revenue Funding application forms for 2000 have just arrived containing 12 multiple choice questions on the Arts Plan... panicked... thought of calling a voice mail but our phones have been disconnected... nothing for it now... am compelled to read the new Arts Plan... must remember to buy something new and stylish on the way home, something with an international flavour to wear to the current round of going-away parties... at least it's Friday... 25 pages of jobs in Ireland's largest recruitment section...

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company of four actors in Kilkenny. At the time, Bickerstaffe was in receipt of some £10,000 per annum of revenue funding. *True Lines*, a formally innovative work about the experiences of young Irish people negotiating a new identity in which the virtual is as powerful as the actual, went on to win the Stewart Parker Award for new writing, and travelled internationally. From opening night in Kilkenny, it attracted audiences composed largely of young people.

Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum! Asylum!* was staged in the Peacock Theatre in 1994. It depicted the plight of a Ugandan struggling to achieve refugee status in Ireland. The brutality of his treatment during deportation was received with some bemusement by audiences unprepared to believe that "it could happen here." In 1998, with the country in the grip of a refugee crisis, O'Kelly returned to his material. This time, under the aegis of Calypso he worked with performers from diverse backgrounds to create *Farawayan*, an innovative production which drew capacity crowds to Dublin's Olympic Ballroom and captivated many young people.

Neither of these examples owe much to centralised planning. They were not driven by the imperative to respond to any organisation's strategic objective. They provide examples of artists who are specifically engaged with content, with aesthetics, and with communities both local and international as the very centre of what they do. If in the carrying through of the managerialist mindset of the Arts Plan, a particular set of practices with perceived market potential should be privileged, then work like this will simply cease to emerge.

Under the new criteria, and the abandonment of publicly accountable artform expenditure lists, it is quite possible that audiences for "performances" will become more important as a criterion than protecting and growing the Drama budget. If, for

example, an opera or dance company appears to respond more closely to new "strategic priorities" than most theatre companies, there is a rationale available for a raid on the (invisible) drama budget.

The further application of strategic priorities of this Plan which are heavily weighted toward research, market development, and the like would have grave consequences for the theatre sector. The new Planning Framework is characterised by appeals to concepts including change, development, and strategic planning. But the Arts Council makes change, and artists experience their perceived social value most specifically by means of the Arts Council's budgetary strategy. It is unlikely that artists' confidence in the notion of policy change would survive a budget driven by strict adherence to the broad criteria for funding as published in the Planning Framework.

There is nothing new in the tension between aspiration and the need to prioritise resources. The separation at the birth of *The Arts Plan 1999-2001* into statements of need and aspiration and statements of means may not signify anything other than the carrying through of a design concept. However, the future health of Irish theatre will depend on the Council's continuing to listen to and respect the imperatives driving artists to make art and publics to engage with it. Such a commitment needs not to serve a strategy, but to function as its critical "other": to keep it honest.

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TIME OF A DOG

As part of an ongoing Québec-Ireland playwright exchange, ALEX JOHNSTON travelled to Canada this past summer to have his play Melonfarmer translated into Québécois. Here's a diary of his cross-cultural adventures.

EN OF US WERE GOING UP TO TADOUSSAC, FOUR PLAYWRIGHTS, four playwright-translators, Linda Gaboriau from the Centre des Auteurs Dramatiques who was in charge of the whole project, and Yvan, who was going to cook for us. Tadoussac is a small village about six hours north-east of

Montréal, full of gift shops, a tourist information centres, and wealthy artistic people. The house we were to be staying in was a largish, low, wooden affair, built in 1873 by a rich English logging family, full of beautiful hangings and samplers and antique plates standing on shelves. This was the place where I was going to do my best to help a young Québec writer, Emmanuelle Roy, translate a play set in Dublin flatland, the action of which revolves around a guy who gets so numb about life that he literally shoots himself in the foot.

We all gathered together for the first of many *cinq à sept* (five-to-sevens), a two-hour period before dinner, devoted to having a drink and discussing the day's work, or anything else that you wanted to talk about. Over the next two weeks,

one subject kept recurring: the difficulty of translating Hiberno-English swearwords into Québec French. Quebecers speak a French that the French find variously eccentric, incomprehensible, or hilarious. It's loosely based on the seventeenth-century dialect spoken by the early French settlers, with a strong leavening of American English. Like any language, it all depends on the class and habits of the speaker – but a Quebecer who wants to say "now" might well use *astheure* instead of *maintenant*. *Oui* is often spelled *Ouais*, or even *Ouin*, and is pronounced kind of like a dark "Wha," with an almost silent "n" at the end.

With swearwords it starts to get seriously odd. In Ireland we have the all-purpose "fuck," as often as not used for mere mild emphasis ("What's the fuckin'

**TWENTYSOMETHING ANGST:** the original Peacock Theatre production of Melonfarmer

name of that film we saw?"') as for execration. In Québec, swearwords speak of one's relationship to the Almighty. They use "fuck," as in *Fuck, mon gars, c'était un paquet de marde* ("Fuck, man, that was a load of shite"), but they don't use "fucking." Instead, a whole host of blasphemous terms come forward. *Ostie* ("host," as in communion wafer, and pronounced 'stee), *tabarnak* ("tabernacle"), *ciboire* ("ciborium"), and various injunctions to the Messiah are used in place of the f-adjective. One of my favourites was *Décrissez!*, a request for the addressee to leave one's presence, literally translatable as "Christ off!"

Of course, all these words are easily permutatable, so that you end up with

constructions like *Fuck, mon gars, c'était un ostie de paquet de marde de Christ, hein* ("Fuck, man, wasn't that a fuckin load of fuckin shite"). The strange thing is that most people in Québec are not really all that religious anymore. Church attendance has plummeted this century, yet these words are not regarded as silly or lightweight, the way we would feel about "Jesus Mary and Joseph!" or "Holy God!" They're all pretty strong, and indeed have a daytime existence in milder versions, formed along the same lines as "Sugar!" or "Oh fudge!"

I really liked the Québec dialect. Partly because they use a lot of English words, so it was easy to make myself understood, but also because it's my kind of

language; it has a shameless capacity to absorb foreign words and there's a slangy, percussive clatter to it. When the cultured French speak, they sound like a flute quintet; Quebecers sound like a bunch of drummers.

Emmanuelle and I spent the best part of the first week sitting down with the script and going through it line by line. The first problem was the title. *Melonfarmer*, as I never tire of telling people, is not a reference to the cultivation of fruit. It's the word dubbing editors use to replace "motherfucker" when dubbing films for bad language. (I verified this personally when I saw *Die Hard with a Vengeance* on TV in San Francisco.) Emmanuelle's job was to find a French equivalent for this word, a job complicated by the fact that the title is spoken in the play — indeed, there's a whole scene that turns on the joke of these funny little dubbing euphemisms. She explained to me apologetically that in Québec, films aren't dubbed for bad language, so the scene wouldn't necessarily be as funny.

She nevertheless applied herself and came up with *Unpandesarobe*. This literally means "a part of her dress," but it sounds sort of like *enfant de salope* — roughly translated, "son of a bitch." I was happy enough with this, but she wasn't, and spent several days walking around muttering various obscenities to herself before deciding on *Untempsdechien*. This was a lot better. Not only did it sound like *enfant de chienne* (literally "son of a bitch"), but the phrase *un temps de chien* ("time of a dog") means both "bad weather" and "a difficult period in one's life." I realised with pleasure and chagrin that the French title worked on more levels than the English one.

This sort of thing happened more than once. One scene in the play depicts a cou-

ple of actors performing in a TV soap opera. The dialogue is deliberately awful — there are a lot of lines like "What's that supposed to mean?," "Whatever you want it to mean!" and so on. The parting line, meant to convey the epigrammatic terribleness of Irish TV soap dialogue, is "Don't ask for what you want, cause you might just get it" — kitchen-sink Nietzsche, if you like, but a line that needs the proper thundering delivery to be really funny. The French *télé-roman* writer has the liberty to be a bit more poetic, so that this line in French became the genuinely toe-curling *Rêve pas en couleurs, ma belle. Tes rêves pourraient bien devenir réalité.* ("Don't dream in colours, babe. Your dreams might just come true.")

At another point, a character explains that she left her flat because she got a card asking to see her TV licence. This used to get a laugh of recognition in Dublin, but they don't have TV licences in Québec (indeed they were horrified when I explained the concept.) We consulted Linda Gaboriau, who apart from being a sort of Den Mother for the whole project, is herself an extremely experienced translator from French into English. She told us a story that was so bizarrely icky that I decided it should become the line, which now reads *Et puis le fils du propriétaire arrêtait pas de mettre des cornichons dans ma boîte à lettres, alors je me suis dit c'était le temps d'y aller.* ("And then the landlord's son started putting pickles through my letterbox, so I told myself it was time to go.")

But we still had to finish tackling the main problem: how is X going to speak compared to Y? All of the characters in *Melonfarmer*, with one exception, speak various levels of middle-class Dublin English. It's become fashionable to attack this mode of speech as pretentiously

rootless, addicted to mid-Atlanticisms and lacking the full rich Irish savour, but the fact remains that it has the primary characteristic of any living language — it does the job for the people who speak it — and its relative colourlessness has the virtue of being very easy to translate, as equivalent tongues are spoken in the cafés of any big city around the world. However, my character Martina had a

A company was assembling in Montréal to give the play a reading, and after Emmanuelle had put the finishing touches on the translation, we left Tadoussac and joined them in the city for rehearsals. The director, Benoît Vermeulen, had put together an excellent young cast, enthusiastic and friendly. Benoît didn't have much English, but he had a repertoire of shrugs, nods, and hand-wobbles that I soon learned. He'd also recently given up smoking and spent much of rehearsal sucking on cinnamon sticks. (The concept of the Fag Break is unfamiliar to Montréalers; they light up whilst working.) Whenever we got to the immortal line "A good cigarette is nearly as good as a good shite, which is a lot better than a bad fuck" (*Une bonne cigarette, c'est presque aussi bon que de bien chier, ce qui est bien mieux qu'une mauvaise baise*), Benoît would give me a hard stare, and slowly shake his head: You bastard, was the message.

AMELIA STEIN



THE LADS: Tony Flynn and Charlie Bonner in the Peacock production of *Melonfarmer*.

strong Inner City thing going on, so she was the one who qualified for the full québécoise monty. Thus it was that "You are so thick" became not *Tu es vraiment bêtise*, which would have been good classical French, but *T'es tellement épais*, and "Jesus I'm fuckin slaughtered" was not *Mon dieu, je suis fatigué* but *Fuck, je suis faite, ostie*.

Mag Uidhir, who also took part in the residency, writes in Irish and then translates himself into English; he read this bit of the play and looked at me with a mixture of sorrow and pity.) It was decided that the actors would have to learn the lines phonetically, so I taped myself reading them. But one of them either never got the tape or didn't listen closely enough,



ALEX JOHNSTON

because every time he struggled with "Chaith Sean an gunna" it came out as "Chatch shawn anne goona," and I sunk a little lower in my seat.

If that part was always going to be lost in translation, we made up for it in hard work on the rest of the play. A 7-8 p.m. session would extend until 10 p.m. If we finished late enough in the evening, we'd go to a bar, something I'd been missing after two weeks with non-smoking, margarita-sipping friends in the U.S.A. I soon learned the phrases essential to having a good time in Montréal: *Boréale Blonde*, *draft*, *s'il-vous plaît* ("Pint of Boréale Blonde, please" – this local brew had a bit more zip than the more famous national brands, like Labatt's or Molson); *La même chose* ("Same again"), and of course *Export "A" Ultra-Légère* (*Export "A"* Ultra Lights being the least vicious of all the murderously strong Canadian cigarettes).

The reading of *Untempsdechien* took place in a little theatre on the corner of Mont-Royal and Papineau. Emmanuelle was fluttering with nerves; I only got

LES GARS: *The Québec cast of Untempsdechien, including director Benoît Vermeulen (front far right).*

stomach cramps 30 seconds before the house lights went down. But it worked. Scenes which had been puzzled over in rehearsal made perfect sense in front of an audience. Actors who had sometimes worried me in rehearsal found, miraculously, the right pitch. Afterwards we sat in the bar and drank lots of *Blondes*. (*Blonde* is also, perhaps by no coincidence, local slang for "girlfriend.") I wore the earrings the cast had given me for my birthday. We had a group photo taken on my camera. We all agreed that the play should go on in Montréal. And at two in the morning, I said goodbye to Benoît, Jacques, Stéphane, Julie, Mireille, Annick, Normand, Philippe and Sophie for hopefully not the last time, and went home.

Alex Johnston is a playwright and is literary manager of Bedrock Productions.

We Are the Champions

MARK FISHER oversaw the battle for national domination of this year's Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, and declares Ireland the knockout winner.

DEAR READER, ACCEPT MY APOLOGIES. IN THE LAST ISSUE of this magazine, I inadvertently gave the impression that Irish theatre was a poor second cousin to the great theatre of Scotland, and that the prospect of a glut of your native drama in my home town of Edinburgh was about as tantalising as a wet

Sunday in an Irish theme pub. Because of a technical glitch at *itm*, the phrases "blind indifference," "ho-hum," and "tell us another one" accidentally appeared in the article in place of "compelling," "thrilling" and "more of that please." You'll appreciate how easy such typographical slips can be. [*eds: No comment.*]

In the days when the late lamented comedy trio The Doug Anthony Allstars paid annual visits to the Edinburgh Fringe, they would return to their native Australia claiming to be "Winners of the Edinburgh Festival." Their compatriots weren't to know that no such accolade ever existed. And it looked good on the posters. But if the award did exist, the winner of the 1999 Edinburgh Festival would certainly have been Ireland. It is true that in terms of quantity, Ireland had a head start by fielding so much theatre, but in terms of quality, its hit rate was

disproportionate.

To re-cap the Irish lineup: we got Tom Murphy's *The Wake* in the Edinburgh International Festival, then on the Fringe there was Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* from London's Bush Theatre, Ridiculousmus' *Yes Yes Yes* and a revival of *The Exhibitionists*, the Lyric's *Stones in his Pockets*, Rough Magic's *The Whisperers*, Kabosh's *Mojo-Mickybo*, the Granary's *Touched*, Michael Smiley's *The Parting Glass*, and a theatrical double-bill by Sean Hughes and Owen O'Neill called *Dehydrated and Travelling Light*. Among those I missed and heard good things about were Tall Tales Theatre Company's *Be Carna* and Jason Byrne's sell-out stand-up set.

From this list there is some weeding to be done. Although Hughes and O'Neill won a Fringe First from *The Scotsman*, they suffered from a problem common to comedians who turn playwrights: their

"plays" were neither as funny as their stand-up acts nor as convincing as the work of dedicated dramatists. They had a lot of fun sending up the images of traditional Irish drama (simple-minded country folk, poor diet and wakes), but the material had the quality of an improvised sketch by two people who had no real interest in theatre. At least I did laugh; Michael Smiley's show, a maudlin account of a Belfast upbringing, was like stand-up without the jokes, and uncomfortably self-pitying at that.

Clearly neither of these comes from the mainstream of Irish theatre practice. Perhaps you'd also want to knock the Belfast-based Ridiculusmus off the list, seeing as founder members Jon Hough and David Woods were never from Ireland in the first place, and now have plans to decamp (one to London, one to Scotland). But, rooted in the surrealism of Flann O'Brien, their work owes at least some of its eccentric aesthetic to a strain

of Irish humour and there's surely no country where this pair of oddballs would fit in any better.

My newspaper, *The Herald*, gave Ridiculusmus an Angel award for presenting a true original, an accolade later backed up by the Total Theatre Awards. Despite my enthusiasm, I am stuck to know how to describe Yes Yes Yes. The company says it's a comedy about two psychiatric patients who try to explain the meaning of life in an evening of philosophical discussion. That's kind of it, but it doesn't account for the Stanley Unwin-like blurring of speech, the non-sequiturs, the bad jokes, the audience interaction, the home movies, the terrible mess, and the slide projector made from a bucket and an ironing board. It's as much funny-peculiar as funny-ha-ha, and if you don't find yourself laughing inexplicably (as I did), you'll probably hate it.

I dwell on this because it was the only show that stood out for originality in a Fringe that was low on innovation. Good



GORDAN MUNRO

FUNNY-PECULIAR: Ridiculusmus' 'The Exhibitionists'

as the Irish work was, it didn't break down any barriers. *Howie the Rookie*, two monologues of urban poetry set in lowlife Dublin, was the closest the Fringe came to a runaway hit. It won a *Herald Angel* for the beauty of its language and power of its performances (Aidan Kelly and Karl Shiels), but it was a case of brilliant execution rather than exceptional ambition. The other standout show was Marie Jones's *Stones in his Pockets* in which Séan Campion and Conleth Hill gave dexterous performances as every resident of a village in County Kerry as well as the cast and crew of a visiting Hollywood movie. It was a very funny play, the more so for its satirical bite, but even had they spent more money on the low-budget set, I don't think they'd have quite hit that pitch of dizzy uniqueness that you look for in a festival.

Although Enda Walsh couldn't make it (his *Misterman* was cancelled at the last minute), he was in Edinburgh in spirit; the influence of his past Fringe hit *Disco Pigs* was keenly felt. Everyone seemed to be doing highly physical, small-cast, linguistically exuberant theatre. Whether it was the adolescent adventures of Ursula Rani Arma's *Touched*, a play about a brother and sister who escape from an abusive background in search of the bright lights of Dublin (with a notable performance by Paula O'Donohue, an actor with tremendous emotional honesty), or the Belfast battles of Owen McCafferty's *Mojo-Mickybo*, two boys learning how to be sectarians the hard way (with high-octane performances by Fergal McElherron and Niall Shanahan), each production recognised that the actor



JILL JENNINGS

DOUBLE ACT: Stones in his Pockets

was its chief resource and the immediacy of the story was its chief purpose. The distinctive Irish qualities were physical engagement, direct audience contact, and the burning desire to tell a story. Naturalism was out, playfulness and lyricism were in.

Although these two and three-handers must be an unrepresentative cross-section of Irish theatre (few can afford to bring anything bigger to the Edinburgh Fringe), they do seem to be where most energy is. Neither of the bigger Irish plays caught the imagination in the same way. Rough Magic's *The Whispersers*, started in 1764 by Frances Sheridan, finished more recently by Elizabeth Kuti, seemed out of place at the Traverse Theatre which is better known for new plays than restoration comedies. And though there was much to be admired in *The Wake*, it lacked the emotional weight, or maybe a sense of universality, to justify its position in the world-class company of the International Festival.

A formidable turnout all the same.

Mark Fisher is theatre critic of The Herald and it's Scottish correspondent.

Entrances and Exits

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

BEN BARNES (pictured) is the new artistic director of the National Theatre, replacing **PATRICK MASON** who vacates the post at the end of the year. Mason's immediate plans as a freelance director include new opera productions at the English National Opera and in Maastricht. Abbey receptionist **CELINA CAREY** has taken up a new position at Cothú. As part of a re-structuring of the Abbey's technical department, **TREVOR DAWSON** and **KAREN WEAVERS** are vacating their posts as production manager and production coordinator respectively. A new position of technical director has been advertised and an announcement is expected shortly. The Abbey's education officer, **SHARON MURPHY**, has been promoted to the

position of outreach and education director following the departure of **KATHY MCARDLE** (pictured at right) who has replaced **FIACH MACCONGHAIL** as director of Project Arts Centre. MacConaghail, in turn, is currently working as cultural director of Ireland's participation in Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany.



BEN HENNESSY has been appointed the new artistic director of Red Kettle Theatre Company. Hennessy was a founding member of the company and has served on its board since 1985. He has designed the sets for almost all the company's productions to date and was previously Artistic Director of Little Red Kettle, the company's youth theatre wing... **ROSE PARKINSON** is the new

Director of the Galway Arts Festival... **VERONICA COBURN** passes the baton of artistic director of Barabbas to **RAYMOND KEANE**, as per the position's rotating structure... **MARTIN MURPHY** is the new artistic director of Dublin Youth Theatre; he will remain in his position as artistic director of Team Educational Theatre Company.

FERGUS LINEHAN is the new director of the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival, replacing **TONY Ó DALAIGH** who remains as coordinator of the Festival's Friends scheme and is also part-time artistic director of Draíocht, a Centre for the Arts in Blanchardstown. **MOYA DOHERTY** is the new DTF Chairperson. Former general manager **CIARÁN WALSH** has left the DTF and is the new managing director of Druid Theatre Company; the DTF is re-considering its administrative structure before advertising the general manager position.

DONNA MCGARRY is the new arts administrator of Dubbeljoint Productions. **GEARÓID MAC LOCHLAINN** has been appointed as the new riarthóir (administrator) of Belfast's Aisling Ghéar. **AOIFE WHITE** is the new administrator of Pan Pan Theatre Company. **SHARON O'DOHERTY** has been appointed general manager of Second Age Theatre Company. **ETÁIN WINDER** has replaced **MARY JUDE RYAN** as administrator of Focus Theatre. **RUTH OGSTON** is the new general manager of Prime Cut Productions. She replaces

SEAN KELLY who left the company in January and is currently employed by Laganside Corporation. And the Lyric in Belfast have named a new Executive Producer: American-born **JOHN SHEEHAN**, who comes to the post having spent the last two years as artistic director of Siamsa Tíre in Tralee.

SITUATIONS VACANT:

Daghda Dance Company has advertised for a new artistic director following the departure of **MARY NUNAN**, who is now course director of dance performance at the University of Limerick's Irish World Music Centre.



The St. Patrick's Day Festival have advertised the position of artistic director following the departure of **RUPERT MURRAY**.

The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon has advertised the position of drama officer. **JANE DALY**, the current acting drama officer, will vacate the position in December. Contrary to previous plans, **PHELIM DONLON** will not return to the position, as he is taking on a new project: an overview of arts infrastructure throughout the island, a new initiative funded by the arts councils in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Droichead Arts Centre has advertised for a new director following the departure of **PAUL O'HANRAHAN**.

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JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK

by Sean O'Casey

Reviewed at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin
on 9 September and at
the Donmar Warehouse, London on 20
September BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON

COMPARISONS, SAYS SHAKESPEARE'S Dogberry, are odorous. But confronted by two overlapping productions of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* — one directed by Garry Hynes at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, and the other directed by John Crowley at the Donmar Warehouse, London — it is impossible not to contrast and compare. Each version had qualities the other lacked. But, if one wanted proof of the play's greatness, it lay in an ability to yield two totally different readings. In Dublin it emerged largely as character-driven comedy; in London as sombre political tragedy. There were more laughs in Dublin, but in London I felt closer to O'Casey's pessimistic view of Ireland.

Even the programme notes offered

radically different perspectives. In Dublin Anthony Cronin remarked that the play's greatness had nothing to do with the public importance of its themes; instead he stressed O'Casey's debt to Dickens, his abundant sense of comedy and "his fascination with speech patterns which echo public rhetoric as well as distorting it." In London, the historian Roy Foster took a totally opposite tack: that "the play succeeds and satisfies because the situation itself is electric." As Foster reminds us, the play was first performed in 1924 only two years after the bitter Civil War it represents, and subversively exposes both its posturing heroism and pious nationalism. A savage struggle was fought, in effect, over a form of words: the oath of fidelity to the British crown.

Each production of *Juno* has to reconcile these two contrasting visions of the play: as neo-Shakespearean or Dickensian comedy and as political tragedy. If we are to believe James Agate's review of the original Abbey Theatre production, the comedy at first



DEREK SPEIRS/REPORT

HAPPY FAMILY? The cast of the Gaiety/Garry Hynes *Juno and the Paycock*

prevailed: seeing it in London in 1925, Agate wrote that the tragic element in O'Casey's play occupies some 20 minutes "and for the remaining two and a half hours the piece is given up to gorgeous and incredible fooling." No one could have said that of Trevor Nunn's fine 1980 RSC production at London's Aldwych Theatre: at the time I noted its "measured sadness," the strutting pride of Norman Rodway's "Captain" Boyle which was "a personal embodiment of a national weakness" and above all, the exhaustion, despair, and durability of Judi Dench's magnificent Juno. Even better in many ways was Joe Dowling's famous Gate Theatre production of the late 1980s: the comedy was there but my abiding memory is of the slime-caked walls and cracked and sooty windowpanes of the Boyles' tenement implying, from the start, a family doomed to destruction.

My impression is that productions of *Juno* have been getting steadily darker, which is why it came as something of a shock to find Hynes' version laying so much stress on the "gorgeous fooling." Francis O'Connor's set eloquently expressed the Boyle family's poverty: the gaunt green walls, the vertically-hanging tin bath, the shabby curtain partitioning Mary Boyle's tiny bedroom from the main living room. But, in a sense, the production took its tone from the casting of Michael Gambon as "Captain" Boyle. Gambon gave a superb performance that I would not willingly have missed: above all, he brought out Jack Boyle's comic contradictions. He essayed a jaunty nautical swagger constantly belied by his tattered, shrunken trousers and his panic under pressure: he clearly lived in fear of the termagant tongue of Marie Mullen's unusually fierce Juno and, when squaring up to his one-armed son in the final

act, backed off at the first sign of physical assault. Gambon gave us all of the posturing "paycock" and the deference to authority: I shall not forget the ludicrous way he stood to attention for the reading of the will or his attempt to impress his daughter's theosophist-lover by allowing his hands to describe the Yogi he had seen on the streets of San Francisco as if they were circumambient leprechauns. Even in his final moments Gambon was richly absurd, keeling over in a drunken stupor as he described his supposed heroism during Easter Week. A great piece of acting, but Hynes' production seemed content to serve largely as a supporting framework in which two acts of comedy were followed by a tragic finale.

Contrast John Crowley's London production, where Colm Meaney's "Captain" Boyle had little of Gambon's comic inventiveness, but seemed more integrated into a constant directorial vision. Meaney's Boyle was tough, solid, slightly dour: if he was ridiculous it was not in his physical appearance but in his mental belief in his own heroism. The one concession to his alleged nautical background was the anchor tattooed on his hairy forearm; the only real hint of absurdity came in the second act when he posed in his refurbished parlour with one hand across his chest and the other propped up by a bottle of Irish whiskey. The tragedy of Meaney's Boyle lay in his lack of any moral centre. In the first act Meaney was all domestic Fenianism vehemently abusing the clergy and telling Joxer he'll be "establishin' an independent Republic and Juno'll have to take an oath of allegiance." By the second act he had become a stout defender of the faith and Establishment toady only to revert, in the play's final moments, to a stupefied Mitty-esque heroism. The character's tragic flaw was implicit from



PAU ROS

ANOTHER TAKE: *The Donmar Warehouse Juno and the Paycock*

the beginning: in the Dublin production it stole up on us at the end.

But this, in a sense, is the crucial difference between the two productions. In Dublin I felt I was watching a comic pair — the vain, ragged-arsed husband and the shrewish wife — accosted by unforeseen disaster: the abandonment of their pregnant daughter, the death of their backsliding, republican son. In London, O'Casey's family itself became a metaphor for a riven, divided Ireland, one in which husband and wife, father and son were at odds and one in which public postures and rhetoric invaded private places. At the Donmar, far more than in Dublin, I became acutely aware of the puritanical cruelty both of Mary Boyle's trade-unionist admirer who ditches her in her hour of need, and of her once-republican brother who screams "she should be driven out o' th' house she's brought disgrace on!" O'Casey's real scorn, I suspect, was reserved for all those who elevate ideology above humanity, the abstract above the particular.

If the Dublin and London productions proved one thing, however, it is that Joxer is really the play's classic role. In Dublin he was played by John Kavanagh — that one link with Dowling's production — as a venomous scarecrow of a man who seemed to live permanently on the tenement stairs and who had the cunning survival instinct of the selfish exploiter. In London he was played, with no less brilliance, by Ron Cook as a more feral figure dominated by a ravenous hunger: what I shall always remember is the wolfish way he scooped up every last inch of frying-pan grease with his bread, and the long, lingering look he took at the Captain's final bottle of stout before secreting it in his pouch. Joxer is O'Casey's master-creation: a parasite who is both social victim and animal predator.

If Joxer is actor-proof, Juno is a role that makes harsh demands on any actress. But O'Casey was quite specific in the physical image. He says in the stage

directions that Juno has the look you often see on the faces of working class women: "a look of listless monotony and harassed anxiety blending with an expression of mechanical resistance." Neither Juno for me quite matched that. Marie Mullen in Dublin was too much Old Mother Riley; Dearbhla Molloy in London had the serenity of a middle-class saint. But both rose nobly to the ineffable grief of the final act: in particular Molloy who, even as she took her dead son's rosary beads from under her pillow, cried out "Blessed Virgin, where were you when my darlin' son was ridled with bullets" with a defiant despair as if doubting the Holy Mother's existence. For O'Casey the pieties of religion were clearly as hollow as those of devout nationalism.

So two different productions, each with its own strengths. In Dublin, there was the great Gambon, the magnificent Kavanagh, and some vivid acting in the minor roles: I particularly liked Brid Brennan's sexually voracious Maisie Madigan and Declan Conlon's chillingly viperish Charles Bentham. In London, the standout performance was Ron Cook's Joxer. But, without wanting to indulge in artistic point-scoring, I came out of the theatre more enriched by John Crowley's production. In Dublin I felt I was seeing a constellation of stars who never quite connected with each other. In London, by the first moment when Mary talks of the body found in a byeroad "out beyant Finglas," I sensed I was witnessing not only a domestic tragedy but O'Casey's bleak vision of an Ireland in which idealistic dreams of social betterment had given way to fratricidal hate.

.....

Michael Billington is theatre critic of The Guardian.

ALONE IT STANDS

by John Breen

Yew Tree Theatre Company
and Island Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 26 November, 1999
at Andrew's Lane Theatre, Dublin

BY IAN KILROY

ALONE IT STANDS IS A FOND TRIBUTE to a place, an event, a sport, and a people. It retells a classic story from Irish sporting history, when, in 1978, the Munster rugby team faced down the All Blacks. Everyone expected defeat for the Irish team, but belief and passion won the day as Munster secured a 12-0 victory against the mighty New Zealanders. It is a classic David-beats-Goliath story, theatricalised here in a generous, unsentimental, and humorous way.

Doubtless the play convinces because it is a work, in part, of autobiography; writer/director John Breen, a Limerick native, knows exactly what rugby means to that city. There the sport is not just the preserve of the upper middle classes as it is elsewhere in Ireland; there it belongs to all the people. And it is these people, in all their variety, that we see on stage: We meet the team, the opposition, the obsessive fans, and even a woman in labour (her battle to give birth parallels the battle on the pitch.)

In order to bring the match and the dramas surrounding it to life, Breen has left both naturalism and the enclosed set behind. On a bare stage, the six-member ensemble jump in and out of various characters, each displaying great range and ability. The result is a production that makes full use of the actors' bodies; their moves are inspired from the game itself — with its scrums and line-outs — but they also indicate changes of milieu and character through a mere gesture or change in posture.



IN THE SCRUM: The cast of
Alone it Stands

The enactments of the actual match get a little repetitive at times, and there is an apparent debt here to an earlier play about sport — the staging is more than a little reminiscent of Paul Mercier's *Studs* — but in the end *Alone It Stands* is its own play, with a subtlety and sympathy that much of our contemporary theatre lacks. It brings a welcome populism back to the theatre; the night I attended, the dressed-down crowd at Andrews Lane participated as if they were really at the pitch, shouting "come on Munster!" and "up Garryowen!" before the house lights went down. While *Alone it Stands* may not fit the expected mould of the "great Irish play," there is no doubt that this is valid and refreshing theatre.

Ian Kilroy is a playwright, poet, and journalist.

AN GHRÁIN AGUS AN GHRUAIM

Amharclann de hilde
on tour; reviewed 10 September, 1999 at
the Samuel Beckett Centre, Dublin

BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

TUIGTEAR ÓN TEIDÉAL GO BHFUIL *An Ghráin agus an Ghrúaim* dírithe ar spórt a bhaint as íomhanna cultúrtha Éire neamhspleách. D'eirigh le Amharclann de h-íde ard - chaighdeán a aimsíú sa dráma seo, i mbeagnach gach gné den obair. Bhí dearadh Fiona Leech an-oiriúnach don dearcadh áifeiseach ar a raibh an tionscnamh go léir bunaithe - dathanna glórmhara, feisteas den scoth (*The Riordans* thart ar 1971), tae á nól as cupáin plaistic agus troscáin ó chistín feirme sna seachtoidí. Ag cur go mór leis seo, bhí amhráin den tréimhse céanna, mar shampla "Little Arrows," ag nascadh codanna éagsúla an scéal lena chéile. Bhí léiriú Bhríd Uí Ghallchóir bríomhar, dírithe agus glic ó thús deiridh. Rinne na h-aisteoirí an-iarracht ar a gcuid ráitis a fhuaimniú go cruinn, ionas gur féidir leis an lucht féachana an scéal a leanúint agus greim mhaithe a fháil ar fhís áifeiseach Alan Titley. Línigh Donncha Crowley (An tUncail) agus Lesley Conroy (An Cailín Aimsire) staid bhacach, truamhéileach na n-íseal go h-an chruiunn, agus cé gur dhealraíodh é roimh am don lucht féachana, chuireadar an iompú bunoscionn lenar chríochnaigh an dráma ar bhunaidh laird. Ghlac Barry Barnes agus Bríd McCarthy páirteanna fear a' tí agus an máthar le brí agus cruinneas.

Ba mhór an trua nach raibh téacs cainte níos fearr le n-obair leis ag an gcompántas fuinniúil seo. Go minic, ní raibh i saothair Titley ach feithicil chun greann a chur ar gach duine, gach staid agus gach rud ar an stáitse. Chuaigh caighdeán an ghearrán fén in ísle ar fad ó am go chéile, go h-áirithe nuair a bhi cursaí gnéis a phlé. Ta dóthain áifeise le



COUNTRY LIFE: *The cast of An Ghráin agus an Ghruaim*

nochtadh agus tú ag plé le cúrsáí grá, póstá, oidhreachta agus gnéis gan bheith ag brath ar mheon agus ar ghreann na leithrise. Sa mhéid sin, bhi níos mó baint ag an dráma seo le scannán *Carry On* ná le h-aon íomhanna ársa gaelacha.

THE TITLE OF ALAN TITLEY'S PLAY *An Ghráin agus an Ghruaim* sets up an appointment with the sacred cows of an official vision of independent Ireland. The point of reference for his title, which anyone who has gone through the Irish educational system will know, is the much-studied book about rural life, *An Ghrá agus an Ghruaim*, which Titley has altered to mean not "Love and Misery" but "Hatred and Misery."

An Ghráin agus an Ghruaim is set in a rural household in the late 1960s/early 1970s. The principal setting is the kitchen, with forays into the pig pen, and glimpses of the serving girl's bedroom and the bottom of the stairs. We meet the family as they struggle with the local teacher's interest in their marriageable daughter, and their prissy son's emergent vocation to the priesthood. Lurking on the edges of their concerns are the unmarried uncle

and the serving girl. The farcical denouement will see them win ownership of the house thus overturning the pretensions of the farmer and his wife.

The fact that, due to reforms in the education system and broader changes in public life, the world of *An Ghrá agus an Ghruaim* has lost all its grip on the experiences of younger Irish people does not diminish its legitimacy as a target of satire. Amharclann de hÍde clearly took this into account in their commitment to strong production values. The acting was uniformly energetic and skilful. In a very well-focussed ensemble cast, the ability of Donncha Crowley (uncle — unmarried) and Lesley Conroy (servant girl) to achieve pathos grounded the survival of a long-telegraphed and farcically contrived resolution to the play's narrative twists and turns. The company really worked to deliver their dialogue with clarity and precision, thus contributing greatly to the audience's enjoyment of the play's many moments of knockabout comedy. Barry Barnes, in particular, offered crystal clear delivery, and his partnership with Bríd McCarthy as the strong farmer and his wife anchored

much of the goings-on.

For all these reasons, it is regrettable that the script itself was not more robust. Far too frequently, Titley's aim appeared to be to exploit the superficial circumstances of persons, situations, and objects for a cheap laugh. This was notably the case when sex was the focus of the scene. There is no shortage of comic material in rural attitudes to matters of love, marriage, inheritances, and sex during the period in question; a subtle approach would have produced just as much enjoyment while offering a lot more by way of challenge to the forces conspiring to produce such attitudes. At one point in the action, we were more engaged with the set pieces of *Carry On* films than with the sacred cows of Gaelic Ireland.

MAR BHUILE SCOIR, THAITIN AN TAISPEÁNTAS go mór leis an lucht féachana, daoine óga ina bhformhór. Sa mhéid sin amháin, dealraíonn sé go bhfuil athrú ag teacht ar staid na Gaeilge sa tir i gcoitinne, agus go bhfuil lucht féachana Amharclann de híde ag dul i meid.

THE ADVENT OF TG4 HAS CHANGED THE linguistic topography of the country, with one of its material benefits being increased working opportunities for Irish-speaking actors. The shortcomings of the writing notwithstanding, the production values achieved by Amharclann de híde in this production offer another opportunity for audiences for work in Irish to extend their cultural enfranchisement.

CARTHAGINIANS

by Frank McGuinness

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

24 August - 18 September 1999

reviewed 15 September BY JOSEPH LONG

"BLOODY SUNDAY" WAS THE WORST THING

to happen in Ireland in the past 30 years, according to Frank McGuinness in a recent radio interview. McGuinness was in his teens on that day of 30th January 1972, when 13 people were shot dead by British soldiers following a civil rights demonstration in Derry. Even today, both the personal trauma and the collective trauma are still unresolved. Can a dramatist render an account of that double trauma, within the scope of a play? *Carthaginians*, first produced at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, in 1988, is an attempt to do just that, but it does so indirectly, by displacement and refraction.

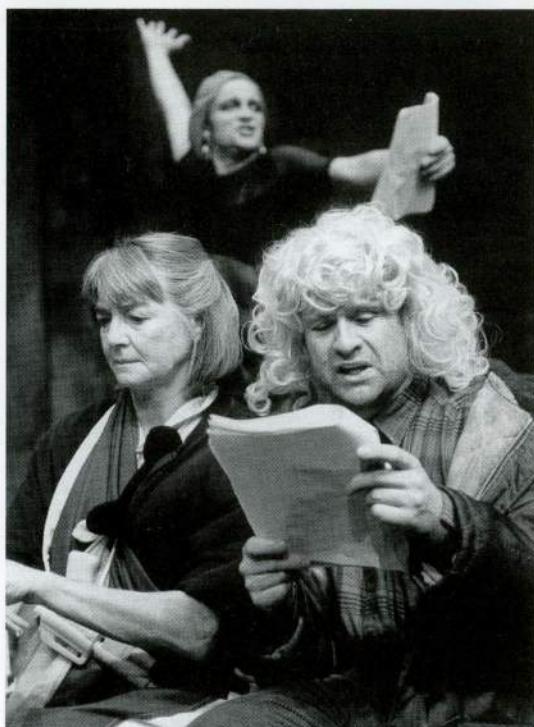
In Simon Magill's Lyric Theatre production, a strong ensemble cast re-interpret the text for a Northern audience. Three women from Derry, Maela (Carole Nimmons), Greta (Paula McFetridge) and Sarah (Stella Madden), have quit the city to squat in a graveyard. They are waiting for the dead to rise. Two male characters, Seph (Paul Boyle) and Hark (Stuart Graham), social rejects in different ways, have joined the little group of refugees, while the flamboyantly gay Dido (Richard Dormer) plies between them and the city, trading messages and provisions and marking up a commission on his errands.

The central scene of the play, in a sense, problematises the possibility of writing such a play at all. Dido reveals himself as playwright and proposes, or rather imposes upon the group, the playscript he has written, derisively entitled *The Burning Balaclava*. The group is press-ganged into taking part in an improvised reading. Richard Dormer's high-camp Dido carries off this wild, satirical farce with brio: he functions as stage manager in his own invention and switches headgear to play several parts at once. He declares his nom de plume to be Fionnuala McGonigle, to be pro-

nounced, in fake French, as Fionn-ooh-aah-là, with derisive reference to foreign pretenders, mercifully unnamed, whose ambitions are lampooned: "I have come to your city and seen your suffering. What I see moves me so much I have written a small piece as my part of your struggle . . ."

The caustic caricature moves closer to home when it attacks the sacrosanct icons of nationalist representations, echoing, for example, Mrs. Tancred's lament in *Juno and the Paycock*, but applying it here, sacrilegiously, to a toy dog which has had the stuffing kicked out of it. Even the central icon of Bloody Sunday, the image of Fr. Daly waving a white handkerchief amid the firing in the street, is desecrated in the system of carnivalesque inversions which the play-within-the-play generates. Some audiences might well have found the ridiculing of the sheet-waving priest too strong a provocation. On the night reviewed, the very excesses of Richard Dormer's drag act kept the audience within a comic mode of response and enabled the point of the satire to get across. The point is not, of course, to speak irreverently of victims and of suffering, but to illustrate the gap between a truly unspeakable experience and the system of received icons and representations which grows around it and which deflects rather than expresses the experience.

Towards the end, the play moves from farce into ritual. In the final tableau, at



JILL JENNINGS

META-THEATRICAL: Carol Nimmons, Dan Gordon and Richard Dormer (background) in *Carthaginians*.

dawn on Sunday morning, Dido takes leave of his sleeping companions and of his native city. He scatters the flowers he has preserved on the recumbent forms: "Watch yourself, Hark and Sarah. Watch yourself, Greta . . ." The "watch yourself" repeated nine times extends the prayer to the nine counties of the province which he is both leaving behind and taking with him: "While I walk the earth, I walk through you, the streets of Derry. (. . .) Carthage has not been destroyed." A positive resolution is suggested, if not spelt out didactically. The dead may not have arisen in any lit-

eral sense, but, for each of the sleepers, when they awake, the dead will have been laid to rest. The character of Dido has to bear the full weight of the final tableau. The difficulty, perhaps, in this production, is for the character to recover sufficiently from the trivialising effect of the earliest scenes, where he is played to a rather stagey gay stereotype.

In the set designed by Carol Betera, the action is played against the high wall of a graveyard. Beyond the high wall, effects of sunlight and foliage, in John Riddell's meticulously controlled lighting design, mark the passing of the days. The high wall is pierced by a central gate, previously bricked up, but the bricks have been knocked through. This sacred space has been entered by infraction, it is an ancient space, long abandoned, rediscovered. Two alleyways intersect at right angles, forming a cross inscribed in the circle, a primal sacred symbol, the meeting-place of the heavenly and the earthly.

A single oak tree, somewhat stylised, adds to the suggestion that this is no orthodox place of prayer: it is a liminal space, a space of alternative encounter, set in opposition to the high-walled citadel of Derry. The set is therefore rich in connotations which take it beyond the realistic. As much can be said of the play's dialogue, which seemingly reproduces casual exchange, even inconsequential banter, but constantly constructs alternative systems, building a mosaic of juxtaposed texts, as the characters sing songs, tell stories, quote poems, elaborate a harlequin cloak of quotes and snatches. The extreme street-realism which characterised, in this production, the diction and the quick-fire delivery of the lines presented something of a problem, in so far as it tended to inhibit the development of alternative meanings, of a possible dimension beyond the harshly-assert-

ed realism.

If this play is clearly a companion piece to McGuinness' other Northern play, the exclusively masculine *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme*, in its writing it equally points forward to the later play of carceral confinement, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. This "Bloody Sunday" play moves away from the documentary techniques which characterise other representations, shifts the focus inwards onto the group of displaced persons, their hopes for survival, their spiritual aspirations, and also onto language itself and its possibilities. The current production serves it well.

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

CELL

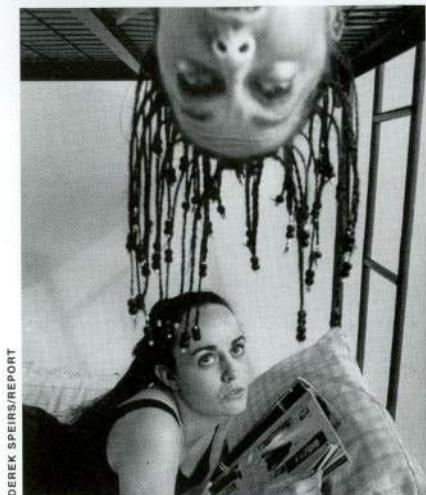
by Paula Meehan

Calypso Productions

on tour; reviewed at City Arts Centre
on 24 September, 1999 BY CATHY LEENEY

ISSUE THEATRE IS ALIVE AND FREELY ROAMING the country so long as Calypso Productions are producing plays. In Ireland there is sometimes a snobbish reaction to theatre that dares to deal with anything other than beautiful writing and elegiac stories set safely in the past. We need plays like Paula Meehan's *Cell*. It is passionate, contemporary, and deeply felt. We need such plays to be produced, directed, and designed with confidence, huge skill, and powerful theatricality. *Cell* at the City Arts was not.

In harsh, white light, the "reality" of a shared prison cell was half-heartedly presented in Robert Ballagh's design. Two young Dublin women, Martha (Barbara Bergin) and Lila (Laura Brennan), share the space with a bully, Delo (Eithne McGuinness), who has driven a previous



DEREK SPENS/REPORT

DROPPING IN: Barbara Bergin (above) and Laura Brennan in *Cell*.

inmate to suicide. A new prisoner arrives to take the space. There is tragedy, and then the power begins to shift.

In genuine and well-coloured performances Bergin and Brennan were convincing, but the terrifying power of Eithne McGuinness' Delo over these young women was not made to work. Joan Sheehy's Alice, an older woman from Leitrim, provided some city/country fun, but she did not carry real resonance as the outsider catalyst. In the tiny, confined acting area, no sense of claustrophobia was achieved in the design. No fourth bunk was represented in the setting, yet there were, at one stage, four inmates in the cell. Was this to imply that the fourth person was an hallucination? If so, this was not backed up elsewhere in the production or performances. This lack of clarity did not help the play's impact.

The director, Garrett Keogh, may have been concerned to present the shocking exploitation of women by women with good theatrical taste, but the outrage of being deprived of every

kind of liberty, even the liberation of dreaming, came across only at moments. The chaos underlying the surreal order of prison life was glimpsed, but never came to life.

Cathy Leeney is a lecturer at the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin.

THE CHAIRS

by Eugéne Ionesco

Galloglass Theatre Company
on tour; reviewed 8 November, 1999 at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght BY DERVAL CONROY

Though it was received poorly at its 1952 Paris premiere, Eugéne Ionesco's *The Chairs* is now regarded as a landmark play. It bears all the hallmarks of the "theatre of the absurd," particularly the representation, stripped of all illusions, of the human condition as meaningless and purposeless, presented baldly (rather than analysed) in a form which itself is devoid of the rational.

In the play, an elderly couple in their circular island home are preparing for the arrival of a crowd of guests to whom the Old Man will finally deliver his life's message, through an orator whom he has hired specially for the occasion. Throughout the evening, as a stream of invisible guests arrive, the couple bring more and more chairs onstage to accommodate them, until finally they hardly have room to move. Addressing this proliferation of empty chairs, the Old Man heralds the arrival of the Orator; now satisfied that posterity will learn of his message, he and the Old Woman both jump out the window to their watery deaths. As the Orator turns to the audience of empty chairs to convey the message, it becomes clear that he is deaf and dumb: the sounds he makes, and later the words he writes, are incomprehensible.

The recent Galloglass production, if somewhat uneven at times, succeeded on the whole in capturing the play's essence. Moggie Douglas' set of faded circular walls, dotted with doors and long shuttered windows created an atmosphere of bleakness and isolation, which was further emphasised, as the audience filed in, by haunting background sounds of the sea. The worn walls were later offset by the muted shades of the chairs, resulting in a subtle but remarkable harmony of colour.

In the bleak but often humorous depiction of mankind which follows, marked by a discourse of empty clichés, repeated stories, and polite conversation, both Peter Dix as the Old Man and Peg Power as the Old Woman gave engaging and moving performances which cut to the heart of the poignant emptiness which characterises their existence. Dix in particular captured splendidly both what is dignified and pathetic in the Old Man.

The character of the Orator (well-rendered here by Virginie Hyvernat) is of much greater importance than his brief presence onstage would imply: since the opening of the play, we have been waiting for his arrival. Unfortunately, his double significance both as a real (visible) character, and particularly as a frustrated deaf mute whose efforts to communicate are in vain, was rendered much less powerful by the decision to have the character wear a wetsuit, where the tragic representation of the incommunicable was overshadowed by the incongruous idea that the sea was flooding onstage with the Orator's entrance (as his mimed "swimming" motions seemed to imply).

The production also suffered from the variable success of the use of music which, while chosen to great effect to

highlight the almost robotic movement of the two characters as they welcome guests and carry chairs, too often tended to evoke a sentimentality which jarred with the over-excited, disjointed tenor of the dialogue.

Overall, however, this was an evocative production, subtly directed by Theresia Guschlbauer, who with Galloglass has provided audiences nationwide with a valuable and rare opportunity to see this French gem.

Derval Conroy is a lecturer in the Department of French at Trinity College.

THE INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL

10-19 September 1999

Lambert Puppet Theatre, Monkstown
The Seed Carriers reviewed 16 September
and *Women by Four Hands* reviewed 18 September BY SARA ZATZ

IF YOU STILL THINK OF PUPPETRY AS children's entertainment, you missed the masturbating female puppets in *Women By Four Hands* at the seventh International Puppet Festival in Monkstown. The Festival, founded by the Lambert Puppet Theatre in 1991, provides Ireland with a rare opportunity to see some of the world's top puppeteers, performing works that push the boundaries not just of puppetry but of mainstream theatre as well. Two of the nine companies presented this year, Stephen Mottram from England and Venezuela's Teatro Naku, performed works specifically for adults. These two productions would easily have blended in with the best on offer from the more prominent Dublin Fringe Festival.

Stephen Mottram, perhaps Britain's pre-eminent puppeteer, quickly dispels any notions of the cute and charming in the opening sequence of *The Seed Carriers*: sev-



BREAKING DOWN TABOOS: *Women by Four Hands*

eral humanoid puppets cheerfully bounce across the stage, only to be brutally trapped and killed moments later by a mysterious set of hands. As the murdered puppets are broken apart, their insides become the source of new life turned out in a factory with production line efficiency by other enslaved puppets. In the chilling sequence of scenes there are hints of concentration camps and genetic engineering. *The Seed Carriers* becomes a wordless parable for survival under the darkest of conditions, when individuals are disposable units in a powerful and arbitrary system. This is a rare piece of theatre where form and content fuse seamlessly, as the very nature of puppetry enables the metaphor of manipulation by unseen forces.

Despite the harsh quality of the subject matter, it was impossible not to feel child-like wonder at Mottram's amazing technique. The only human performer, with a

cast of more than 40 wooden puppets, Mottram created a stunning set of visual images, assisted by a haunting musical score from Glynn Perrin. In his hands, what at first appears to be two puppets copulating suddenly becomes a spider scurrying away, leaving behind a glimmering pile of eggs — one puppet suggesting two different versions of reproduction and survival. The only limits to Mottram's skill were exhibited in the numerous set changes, which often dragged despite the automated puppets that kept the action moving while Mottram handled the scenery.

Teatro Naku's *Women By Four Hands* presented eight sketches exploring different aspects of femininity. The mostly wordless scenes ranged from the humorous to the erotic, with depictions of various women's lives: a cabaret dancer, a woman who can't stop eating, an old woman praying behind drawn blinds, two girls on a playground, and the most absurd — a dancing chicken about to be cooked. Despite the often lighthearted touch, there was a pervading sense of pathos as the women seem to struggle with their assigned roles. The cabaret dancer is revealed to be drinking heavily after her performance, while the woman who rattles off her list of boyfriends is left waiting on the corner when none of them shows up. The two puppeteers, Sonia Gonzales and Lilian Maa'Dhoor, worked together in semi-bunraku style, operating the puppets from behind while fully visible to the audience, and usually using both performers to manipulate one puppet together. Their impressive joint puppeteering created wonderfully fluid and unified movements, particularly with several dancing puppets. However, unlike traditional bunraku puppeteers, they were not masked; at times their presence seemed to suggest that they were the puppets' alter

egos or vice versa.

Undoubtedly, *Women By Four Hands'* most memorable scene, and also its most daring, involved the puppet "Manuela," who danced suggestively, masturbated (to a soundtrack of a woman moaning), and then came out to flirt with male audience members, all of whom responded quite positively. One wonders what the audience reaction would have been if she had been a human woman performing the same material. Teatro Naku powerfully and humorously showed how puppetry can be used to explore on stage areas that are still taboo in the mainstream theatrical world, while definitely arguing that puppet theatre is as much for adults as young people.

Sara Zatz holds a M.Phil in Irish Theatre Studies from Trinity College.

JUDAS OF THE GALLARUS

by Donal O'Kelly

The Peacock Theatre

DATES 1999

Reviewed DATE BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THE NATIONAL THEATRE'S COMMITMENT to new writing is pursued presently, it seems from recent productions, with what David Lloyd referred to in *Anomalous States* as "a total ethical and cultural identification with the nation." The emphasis is on the literary artist and the Abbey's literary department has mirrored the intention of London's Royal Court in its apparent aspiration to become a playwriting factory. The fact that much successful new writing now is being premiered not in Dublin but in London (as is the case with the plays of Conor McPherson and Mark O'Rowe) testifies to an increasing justification for putting the National Theatre's literary and dramaturgical standards under the microscope.

Donal O'Kelly's track record would merit, on paper, production by this the-

atre, and *Judas of the Gallarus*, with its pseudo-history of a fictionalised event on the fringes of a real historical event (the shooting of Michael Collins) would exemplify Lloyd's marker for the National Theatre's notion of a literary tradition.

The play takes place in a gallarus, a stone cell on a Kerry clifftop in 1923. Michael Collins has been shot. The suspect in the killing named by the British, Jock McPeak, takes refuge there, driving out the hermit Paddo from his retreat to perform some mystical movement on a nearby hillside. Jock has been brought there by IRA man Duv Shyne, who is caught between differing accounts of Jock's actions. A neighbour, Noreen, arrives, providing succour in every sense



AMELIA STEIN

ON THE RUN: Paschal Friel and Karen Ardiffe in *Judas of the Gallarus*

for the anti-hero, and as the text weaves further fictional possibilities for Jock's actions, this gallarus turns from retreat to potential sarcophagus.

It is a one-act play, and as such, characters are no more than rough drafts of something greater. They speak in the self-conscious language of the postmodern

artist. Though the play is set over 70 years ago, the characters would equally be at home at times in a Tarantino movie. Paddo warns the intruder in his sanctuary, "Don't fuck with me motherfucker." Duv further challenges Jock's neo-romanticism with "You're a fucking space cadet McPeak." The overt pastiches of linguistic styles ranging from 1990s Hollywood to W.S. Gilbert throw character into crisis. They do not speak as themselves but are cyphers for the foibles and whims of the literary artist's pen. This leads to a one-dimensionality, turning Noreen into a simple sex object, and reducing Paddo into a silent conduit and cover for scene and time changes.

The biggest crisis of character is suffered by the hero, Jock, as the plot interrogates his identity, and with each turn of the screw he seems to be caught in soap opera: Did he shoot Michael Collins? Is he being chased by the British? Is he a British spy? The text destabilises momentary identification and we are forced to reassess him with increasing regularity. What helps us even less is his uncanny desire to enter linguistic quotation and pastiche reference games. By the time he jokingly attempts suicide we care little.

Postmodern narratives may indeed interrogate identity, disrupt linearity and quote, ghost, simulate, and parody. But truly successful attempts go beyond self-conscious literariness. Perhaps the production style (realism) may not have been wholly appropriate but Johanna Connor's set was a beautiful firmament for this literary indecision. The actors struggled valiantly to make sense of the writer's unchallenged and untrammeled stream of consciousness, even though I felt that Jock was bare-chested for a time disproportionate to his location on a Kerry cliff-top. But one wonders why director, Jason Byrne, approached this

text realistically, and how the Abbey's literary department let it through to production in the first place.

MR. STAINES

by Dermot Healy

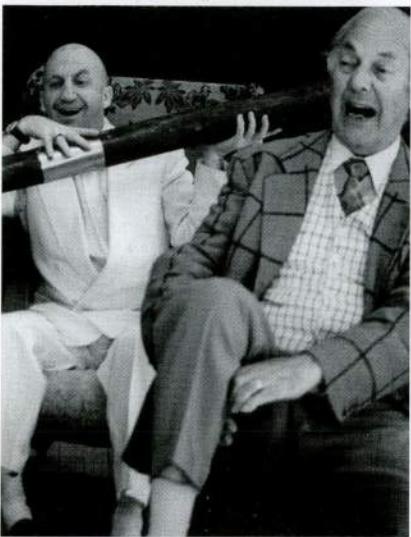
Pan Pan Theatre Company
on tour; reviewed October 10 at Nun's
Island Arts Centre, Galway

BY DEIRDRE MULROONEY

MR. STAINES, FROM THE PEN OF Dermot Healy, is located somewhere between Beckett's *Footfalls* (which Healy recently directed for Dha Ean Theatre Company) and Ionesco. The prolific and diverse Healy is preoccupied with memory and the ways it operates in people's lives. From *The Bend for Home* and *Sudden Times* to his own sepia-soaked performance in *I Could Read The Sky*, his territory is the past tense. Untrustworthy memory also dictates the timbre and very slow pace of *Mr. Staines*, which seems to have taken the wind momentarily out of Pan Pan Theatre Company's prodigious sails.

The play opens promisingly, as Mr. Staines, a sort of Josef Locke figure in underpants, enters the stage reluctantly on a nostalgic wave of crackling John McCormack records. The play stutters to a start as this dozing man is rudely awoken by an omniscient being in the lighting box. Staines addresses this virtual presence as a puppet would his puppet master. Thespian memories soon float, like the formidable Harry Towb's fluid, effortless acting in this production, from 42nd Street to the Bois de Boulogne, as he drifts sleepily in and out of various existences from his past.

Engaging in a conversation with disembodied women prompters in the wings — Beckettian "voices off" — this man of infinite gest initiates us on a metatheatrical (not to mention Pirandellian) journey. He is soon joined by "Mr. MacGregor" (Ronan



IT'S A MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD: Charles Kelly and Harry Towb in *Mr. Staines*

Leahy), another player in this "I am seen therefore I am" universe. A diffident but hopeful new kid on the block, MacGregor seems as confused as to why he is there as does the doddery Mr. Staines.

They seem to have run into each other by coincidence, in suitably vague circumstances, and have been in this conversation ever since. Is Mr. Staines MacGregor's mentor figure, to be imitated as he skips blithely around the stage, which he inhabits a home? Are they father and son? None of this is made clear.

Charles Kelly, an omnipotent, wine-swilling "Manager" in a white suit, is thrown into the equation. Working at an upstage desk, his mute and powerful presence provides a foil to the nervous blather of the precarious downstage world, all overhung by two threatening crossed poles. When he sadistically punctuates their conversation by releasing the threatening poles

(the main source of dramatic tension), strategically, one by one, Kelly's silent action speaks louder than their inconsequential torrent of words ever could.

The much-discussed offstage women — Fedelma Cullen's shrill Mother and Suzanne Robertson's strident Gloria — finally appear, of course in the absence of the men. Trapped in an absurdist universe from which she aches to break free, Gloria blames her mum for breaking up prospective affairs by always being "there." Even Gloria's clothing — Veerle Dehaene's cropped shirt which ends abruptly at the top of a pretty pink dress — is slightly askew.

The young man and the young woman's stories intertwine. We hear both sides as their memories speak versions of each other. All we can ascertain for sure is that at some point in the past they met unexpectedly on a road, where he spurted out the dubious chat-up line, "We are going to die separately." It all winds down with Towb, on his knees, supplicant again to the real protagonist — he who controls the lights — who, at last, extinguishes them.

This self-consciously "open-ended" script meanders obliquely, giving the usually dynamic Pan Pan little to work with. The production conspicuously lacked the characteristic high energy levels of the company's devised work. Nowhere was the overwhelming colour of *Peepshow* — which gave a glimpse into an array of fabulously quirky characters' lives; nor the manic quality of their highly charged exploration of Nazism, *Cartoon*; nor the live-band impetus of *A Bronze Twist of Your Serpent Muscles*. Despite some well turned-in performances, especially from Harry Towb, and Gavin Quinn's sensitive direction, *Mr. Staines* just didn't do Pan Pan justice.

Deirdre Mulrooney's "Orientalism, Orientation, and the Nomadic Work of Pina Bausch," is online at www.angelfire.com/de2/deirdre.

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

**adapted from Jacqueline Harpman's
novel by Johnny Hanrahan
and John Browne**

Meridian Theatre Company
on tour; reviewed 5 October 1999 at the
Dublin Institute of Technology, Rathmines
as part of the Dublin Fringe Festival,

BY MELISSA SIHRA

MERIDIAN THEATRE COMPANY'S STAGE adaptation of Jacqueline Harpman's 1994 novel opens with a solitary female figure incarcerated in a metaphysical torture-chamber, the boundaries of which are indicated by thin strips of light. This non-place echoes the bunker of Beckett's *Endgame*. The landscape without is arid and soulless, a post-nuclear vacuum. "Child," played by Gina Moxley, is the nameless figure, who at first appears to be trapped in the absolute emptiness of an arbitrarily repetitious present, possessing neither memory nor identity. But the play itself is in fact an enactment of memory: Child is dying, and she is recording her story in the hope that someone will discover the record of her life and the lives of the 40 women with whom she lived. We, the audience, are put in the position of having made that discovery.

But that the play is actually told through flashback is far too subtly indicated to the audience through a few hand gestures and sounds of screeching audio rewinds; more definite clues are needed to tell the audience that this is not a story set in and concerning a deadening, nullifying omni-present. All the moreso because Harpman's tale is so bleak and unremitting; though it's the story of self-realisation and liberation, what Child and the women are liberated into is more nothingness.

As Child's storytelling reveals, she was the youngest of a group of women who



TOM LAWLER

WATER OF LIFE: Gina Moxley in *The Mistress of Silence*

were imprisoned in an underground bunker where the male guards constantly changed the feeding routine, depriving the women of any sense of time or control. Child's self-actualisation begins when she discovers how the very rhythms of her body can place order upon the abstract. While Beckett's characters rely on words to assert an existential framework, Child imposes a structure on the void by counting her heartbeats.

When Child and the other women, all realised through Moxley's superb handling of a multi-personified monologue, gain what they perceive to be their freedom, they enter an empty landscape as stultifyingly repressive as the prison-cell. This is the no-man's land that Beckett's Clov can only contemplate from his ladder within. The remnants of bloody decimation and devastation that the women encounter as they move from one charnel house to another, are the gruesome leftovers of Holocaust and ethnic-cleansing brutality that Clov feared he would find.

The confinements of present-day reality

are expressed through the women's experiences in the wasteland that was once known as Earth. The light-beams form an insubstantial barrier between their landscape and the audience's, indicating that the two worlds might not be so far removed. The women's allocation in a void, with constant movement their only reality, is shown to be as limiting to the human condition as domineering rhetorics of authority. With nothing to react against, humanity becomes spiritually inert, a hostage of its own limitlessness. Eventually the women all die off, without ever knowing where they had been or where they were going. This vain search for meaning and identification, the need for a reference from which to extract a sense of self within the seeming orderlessness of things, is Harpman's terrifying comment on contemporary experience.

In *Endgame* Nell asserts that "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness." Beckett's drama embraces the powerful symbiosis of tragedy and comedy, producing dialogue that at its bleakest makes us laugh, and in doing so, allows his nihilism all the more humanity and impact. *The Mistress of Silence*, in contrast, depicts unrelieved gloom. While Johnny Hanrahan and John Browne's adaptation poignantly captures the incredible sense of loss and desire at the novel's core, theatrical sustainability requires greater contrast. As Child's story unfolds, the tragedy looms so large that it begins to teeter dangerously close to self-parody.

While the integrity of the piece cannot be questioned, my view is that the narrative, with its unrelenting ferocity, is essentially not a dramatic text, documenting as it does a series of atrocities without reprieve, and thus without tension or climax. However Moxley's self-sacrificial physicality; the brutalising nerve-wrenching sound effects; and the

Orwellian lighting schema make the production a powerful piece of theatre regardless of the lack of variation or relief within the actual text. *The Mistress of Silence* is a brave production unified by its collaborators' direction, performance, and design. But Harpman's story is a fable best absorbed cerebrally by a fireplace on a winter's night. Just don't read it if you are anxious about Nostradamus' millennial vision that the end of the world is nigh — you might be convinced!

Melissa Silra is a doctoral candidate at the School of Drama, Trinity College, and is a founding member of Blue Rose Theatre Company.

SITE by Fir Clis

Performed in Fisheries Field, Galway as part of the Galway Arts Festival

Reviewed on 13 July, 1999

BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

SITE TAKES PLACE ON A PLOT OF LAND somewhere west of the Shannon. Formerly a smallholding, the land is sold to a bourgeois couple, who promptly become ensnared in webs of intrigue, and pay a spiralling price for their dream home to a grasping "developer." This man controls all around him, from local politicians to the labourers on his site. We follow the progress of "development" from dubiously achieved planning permission, to completion of a monstrous bourgeois dream house, through to its destruction by the labourers in protest at their having being short-changed.

This play, the first production by Fir Clis, presented real opportunities to engage with the cultural politics of the tiger economy's building boom. It also offered audiences a return to the magic of live performance in the open air. In this respect, it succeeded rather well. Waiting

in the leafy lane to pick their way over rough ground in the lee of banks of temporary seats, spectators experienced the smell of earth, clouds of midges, and palpable feelings of expectation evocative of childhood visits to the circus Big Top.

Once seated, the liberal doses of broad clowning, tightrope walking and real inventiveness — such as the Power Drill Orchestra, the Ballet of the Brown Envelope, and a motorised collie with homogeneous flock of sheep, exploited the language of circus to considerable effect. Here was pleasure in the making of illusion combined with bravura showmanship. Fir Clis' animation of their theme was rewarded with laughter of recognition, approval, and disapproval. Even the simple narrative lines, all broadly sketched and neatly resolved, were accepted as the capacity audience recognised and embraced the spirit of the occasion.

But as a critique of the tiger economy, the decision to portray the workers as lovable creatures of the circus, combined with the compelling attractiveness of their performances, blunted the edge of the play's satirical thrust. The line between enchantment and critique need not be absolute, as the work of Dario Fo or John McGrath demonstrates, but it is a difficult line to negotiate, even when the material necessary to realise both aspects of a work has been assembled.

The use of the set illustrates the point at issue. As a visual text, it offered moments of real promise: the removal of a Celtic cross and its replacement with fake doric columns, the unveiling of an estate agent's hoarding advertising a new housing estate — Offaly Close — and the play of orange and green in the costumes. But such visual events passed without the kind of attention that might have released their power to question the actual

dynamics of power and its manipulation which are sharply focused in both the economic and cultural implications of an explosion in demand for private housing.

Brecht's question, "We ask of property, whom do you serve?" is well worth posing here, and carrying through to the fullness of its implications. *Site* seemed to assume that it had been answered prior to performance and that the event was a variation on a theme, the significance of which was the subject of consensus. Satire inhabits a difficult terrain between optimism and cynicism. Too much credulous insistence on the basic beneficence of public persons and institutions enables potential roguery to make good its escape; with an overdose of cynicism, actual villainy may camouflage itself in one-size-fits-all garments woven from the grey fabric of "they're all the same."

Individual performances were consistently strong. That *Site* was self-consciously an ensemble achievement was reflected in the tightness of the routines, the company's ease on a physically demanding set, and the splendid commitment of leading performers like Mick Lally, Midie Corcoran, and co-author Paraic Breathnach to a show put together without benefit of public funding. In all these respects, *Site* recalls and reaffirms the *macnas* which has animated the cultural border crossing which Galway artists have contributed to performance in this country for over 20 years.

This show has considerable potential on the festival circuit. If *Site* is to have another (funded) life, and I hope it does, the opportunity might be taken to excavate the creative site cleared by Fir Clis on this occasion, with a view to taking on the very real — and not at all laughable — dynamics and consequences of the current boom.

Postcard from... Barabbas

The Whiteheaded Boy went on tour to America,
and we asked the company to write home.

