

irishtheatre MAGAZINE

# irishtheatre

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MAGAZINE

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The Arts Council  
An Chomhairle Ealaíon



IS THAT BROADWAY ON THE HORIZON? *STONES IN HIS POCKETS*

TOM LAWREN

## No stopping *Stones*

**M**ADONNA, TOM HANKS, DUSTIN HOFFMAN, AND CALISTA Flockhart are among the celebs who've flocked to London's New Ambassador's Theatre to see Marie Jones' *STONES IN HIS POCKETS*, which *Variety* has dubbed "the season's runaway sleeper hit." The show made back its £150,000 sterling investment in seven weeks and has extended its run at the New Ambassador's through 19 August. It then transfers to

the Duke of York's Theatre in the West End for an open run. Next January, the production will have a five-week run in Toronto, and negotiations are currently underway to bring the show to New York, either off- or on Broadway; and it's slated to run in Los Angeles in late 2001. The London reviews, needless to say, were ecstatic, particularly as regards the performances: SEÁN CAMPION and CONLETH HILL display "dazzling virtuosity," says Michael Billington in *The Guardian*; the production has "unleashed two extraordinary performing talents on the London stage," agrees Michael Coveney in *The*

*Daily Mail*; for *Variety*'s Matt Wolf they are the "double act of anyone's dreams." The pair are scheduled to remain with the production for the next year to 18 months.

### DOLLY COOKING IN LONDON

It's not just the *Stones* boys that have the London critics reaching for superlatives... While Irish critics' response to Frank McGuinness' *DOLLY WEST'S KITCHEN* was decidedly mixed, the London critics heaped praise upon it when the Abbey production opened at the Old Vic in May. A "tremendous new play... a triumph" said Kate

# Feeling Festive

**S**OMEHOW, THOUGH WE SWORE AFTER the challenge of devoting our last issue to an exclusive topic (theatre in Northern Ireland), we wouldn't do another themed issue for a while, this issue took on a mind — and a theme — of its own. To a certain extent, it's the season that's in it: Summertime is festival time, particularly in Ireland; as the regular season of theatre slows down, the special events kick in, and so does the countdown to October and the feeding frenzy that is the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival and the Dublin Fringe Festival.

But it's not just the annual festivals that seem to demand feature coverage in this issue: lately there's been nothing less than a barrage of Irish arts festivals around the world, from the high-profile "Island" festival in Washington DC to the edgier "Spring Greens" in Glasgow. Ireland's cultural presence in EXPO 2000 is in its way a festival as well.

What we've tried to do here is celebrate, but also investigate, this trend towards festivalising Ireland — to try to unearth

what the preconceptions and the limitations behind the festival genre. No less than eight festivals are reviewed or previewed in feature articles in the issue; in addition, on the occasion of the re-opening of Project Arts Centre, we feature an interview between Project artistic director Kathy McArdle and a woman who knows a fair bit about running a building herself — Mary Coll, until recently the director of the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick.

Lest we get swept away with all this festivity, our cover image for this issue provides a degree of gravity: we could not let the opportunity pass to document Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner's extraordinary achievement with their recent Abbey production of *Medea*. In his assessment of the production, which launches our review section on page 58, Fintan O'Toole welcomes Shaw's performance as "the finest performance on an Irish stage since Donal McCann in *Faith Healer*."

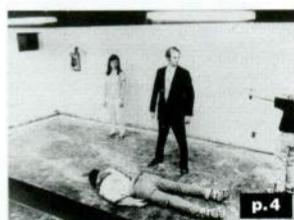
As far as we're concerned, theatre this superb is always cause for celebration.



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p. 4

Kellaway of *The New Statesman*; "Glorious," agreed Coveney; "Patrick Mason's production can do no wrong," crowed Lyn Gardner in *The Guardian*. The show played a 12-week run and closed on 29 July, but the play will have a further life — in Catalan translation, no less, at the National Theatre of Catalonia in late 2001.

#### CAR SHOW PARKS AGAIN

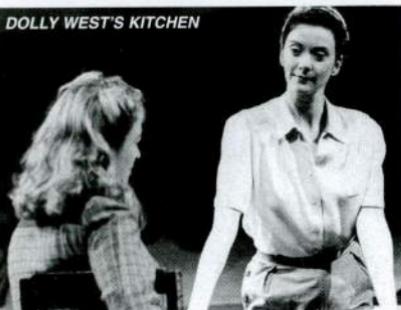
Meanwhile, Corn Exchange's **CAR SHOW** knocked *The Observer's* Susannah Clapp for six when it played the Greenwich+Docklands Festival in July: "vivid, important work... exquisite performances... makes you think again about the relationship between audience and actor." Corn Exchange's latest project is Michael West's **FOLEY**, running in the Cube in Project from 2-7 Oct. as part of the Dublin Fringe Festival.

#### I.A.P.A. UPDATE

Controversy surrounding the **IRISH ACADEMY OF THE PERFORMING ARTS** has finally hit the mainstream press.

*The Irish Times* reported on 27 July that plans for the I.A.P.A. have hit a major snag, with the decision of the Royal Irish Academy of Music to withdraw from the plans. R.I.A.M.'s withdrawal poses a "potentially fatal setback" (in *The Irish Times'* words) to I.A.P.A.; as reported in *itm*'s Issue 5, the R.I.A.M. was one of the key existing educational bodies —

DOLLY WEST'S KITCHEN



AMELIA STEIN

along with the Gaiety School of Acting, Firkin Crane, and the University of Limerick — which were being advanced as partners in the academy, which is to have its central campus at D.C.U.

The R.I.A.M.'s decision follows on increasingly vocal rumblings of dissent about the academy from various arts constituencies: the Association of Irish Composers was questioning the I.A.P.A.'s commitment to music composition as early

as last December, and the small-but-mighty dance community has made its misgivings about lack of consultation heard through a series of public meetings hosted by the Assoc. of Professional Dancers in Ireland. The closing date for consultative submissions to I.A.P.A.'s Planning and Steering Group was 28 July; it will be interesting to see if any members of the theatrical community have made the effort to add their views to the planning process.

## WINNERS OF THIS ISSUE'S "MOST EXOTIC VENUE" AWARD

Yew Tree's already-phenomenally-well-travelled *Alone It Stands* will play in Tasmania (yes, that wee island south of Australia) next March as part of "10 Days on the Island," a festival of work from island cultures; as the Festival's artistic director Robyn Archer was recently spotted in Dublin on a reccey, there might well be other Irish work in the Fest, which runs from 30 Mar.-8 Apr. 2001.

## FRINGE MADNESS

### AROUND THE CORNER

Among the events we're especially looking forward to in this year's Dublin Fringe are — theatre-wise — Gavin Kostick's new play for Calypso, *THE ASYLUM BALL* (playing in the SFX from 25-30 Sept.); Island's acclaimed *PIGTOWN* in its Dublin debut (SFX, 2-7 Oct.); the Welsh company Volcano's physical take on *MACBETH* (Project, 2-7 Oct.); and much-talked-about New Yorker Richard Maxwell's *HOUSE* (Project, 2-7 Oct.). Among the highlights of the Aerowaves dance programme is CoisCéim's new piece *BOXES*, a "vigorous investigation of cardboard," playing 25 Sept.-14 Oct. in Players Theatre, Trinity College. Visual arts will be represented in the Fringe for the first time with the **GAIN+ EXHIBITION** of site-specific works on Dublin's streets.

### AND IN THE MAIN FESTIVAL...

In addition to a new work from Theatre de Complicite (see Matt Wolf's preview on page 20), the *ercom* DTF's international slate includes *GENESI* from Romeo Castellucci, the Italian *enfant terrible* whose *Giulio Cesare* radically divided audiences at the 1998 Festival (5-7 Oct. in O'Reilly Theatre, Belvedere College); Footsbarn back with *THE INSPECTOR* — and a new tent! (3-8 and 10-15 Oct. in Iveagh Gardens); and Simon Russell Beale playing *HAMLET* for the RNT (3-7 Oct. in the Gaiety). Domestically, the DTF are premiering an Enda



FRINGE 2000: HOUSE

Walsh commission, *BEDBOUND*, playing 3-7 and 9-14 Oct. in the New Theatre (smaller, funkier venues abound for the main Festival this year... should we call this Fringe envy?), *GOD'S GIFT*, a new version of *Amphytrion* from the ever-popular Barabbas (10-14 Oct. in the O'Reilly Theatre), and Macnas' *THE LOST DAYS OF OLLIE DEASY* (4-8 and 10-14 Oct. in the Round Room, Mansion House.)

### MORE MCGUINNESS AND MORE MORRISON

#### Theatre shopping?

##### This year's Theatre

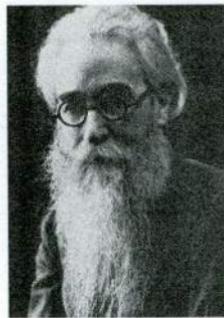
**Shop will be held on 6 October — a week earlier than usual. For more Theatre Shop info contact Jane Daly at admin@theatreshop.ie or on (087) 246-3399.**

**Their website is [www.theatreshop.ie](http://www.theatreshop.ie).**

Conall Morrison is making his debut directing for the Royal National Theatre with Frank McGuinness' version of *PEER GYNT*; it opens at the Olivier Theatre on 24 Oct. with previews from 14 Oct. Francis O'Connor is designing the set, Joan O'Clery the costumes; performers include Patrick O'Kane, Sorcha Cusack, Olwen Fouere, Paul Hickey, Melanie McHugh, and Lloyd Hutchinson.

## NO BIRDS AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE THIS AUTUMN

Previously announced runs of Frank McGuinness' version of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in the Peacock and Tom Kilroy's *The Seagull* in the Abbey for late 2000 have been pushed back to next year. Meanwhile the Abbey have confirmed their scheduling through the end of the year: In the Abbey, *THE SECRET*



*FALL OF CONSTANCE WILDE* will be back from 6-21 Sept. before heading to the Barbican in London. The Abbey festival show is *BARBARIC COMEDIES* by Catalan playwright Ramon Valle-Inclán (pictured) in a version by Frank McGuinness; it plays 28 Sept.-21 Oct. following a premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival. Ben Barnes directs Brian Friel's *TRANSLATIONS* from 2 Nov.-9 Dec.; Lynne Parker then takes on Declan Hughes' new version of *TARTUFFE*, 14 Dec.-27 Jan. 2001. In the Peacock, *CLOSER* (directed by Simon Magill) plays from 17 Aug.-23 Sept.; Paul Mercier's new play *DOWN THE LINE*, also directed by the prolific Ms. Parker, fills the Festival slot from 28 Sept.-4 Nov.; an Abbey outreach and education department collaboration with *TEAM* will play the Peacock for two weeks after the Festival; and Ken Bourke's *THE HUNT FOR RED WILLIE*, directed by Mark Lambert, plays 23 Nov. into the New Year.

## WORKSHOPS, SEMINARS...

The Crescent Arts Centre is the venue for a Northern Ireland-based gathering of the ongoing INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP FESTIVAL

on 2-6 October. David Zinder, Frankie Anderson, and Gabor Tompa are among the artists leading sessions... Firkin Crane are facilitating the third session of a travelling international conference, "CONVERSATIONS ON CHOREOGRAPHY" from 19-22 October. Contact Sharon Sheehan on 021-507484 or at sharon@firkincrane.ie...

## NEW WRITING IN CORK

Kilkenny writer Ger Bourke is the winner of this year's Corcadorka New Writing Award. Corcadorka are producing Bourke's play *BANSHEE MAKERS*, directed by Pat Kiernan, in September — 2 weeks from 6 September at the Cork Opera House, followed by a week-long county tour and then a week in Carrick-on-Suir.

## AND YOU THOUGHT THEATRE IN A CAR WAS FUNKY?

How about a horse-drawn stage? As part of the "River Through Time" festival, Kilkenny's Barnstorm Theatre are per-



TOM LAWLER

**NEW PLAY IN THE FESTIVAL:** Paul Mercier

# news

forming *THE BALLAD OF RORY ROE*, which is performed, yes, on an equine-propelled performance area. The play, a commission by Ken Bourke, tours four Southeast towns from August 14-17 on its way to a two-day open-air fair in the grounds of Kells Priory (August 19-20). Watch out for marauding Norsemen!

## LISTINGS, LISTINGS EVERYWHERE

**CALIPO** will be offering a "post-Festival antidote" in the form of an as-yet-untitled new show about one man's journey into the contemporary Irish music industry. It plays 30 Oct.-11 Nov. at the Droichead Arts Centre in Drogheda and then at Project in Dublin from 13-18 Nov.... **BLUE RAINCOAT** are bringing their production of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* on tour around the island through Nov., following a run in Berlin from 3-17 Sept.... Speaking of plumage, **RED KETTLE** are presenting Loughlin Deegan's latest play, *The Queen & Peacock*, at Garter Lane, Waterford from 28 Aug.-9th Sept. and at the Belltable, Limerick, (11-16 Sept.)...

**ROUGH MAGIC** will present the Irish premiere of American Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain*, opening at the Belltable Arts Centre, (2-11 Nov.) before playing at the Town Hall Theatre Galway (14-18 Nov.) and the Project (21 Nov. - 16 Dec.). They will also present a series



LEONCE AND LENNA

of play readings, focused on British and American writing, during the run at the Project... **UPSTATE**

**THEATRE** will present *The Countrywoman*, adapted by Elizabeth Kuti from Paul Smith's novel, in Drogheda from 21-30 Sept. and Tallaght's Civic

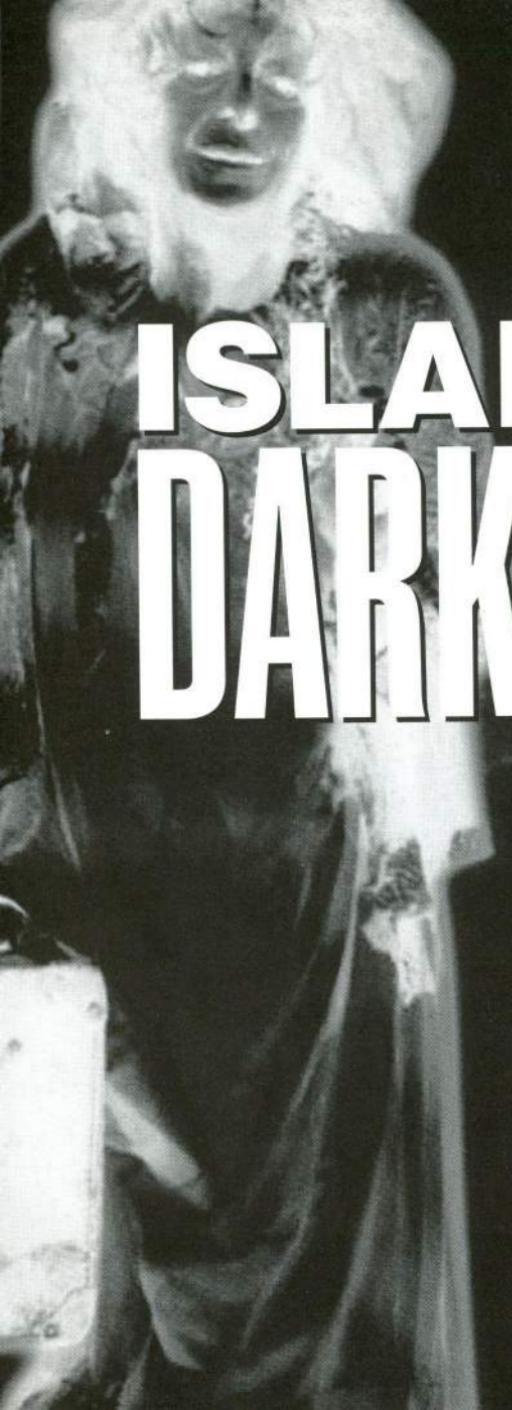
Theatre, from 3-14 Oct. Declan Gorman directs.

**THEATREWORKS** will present the Irish premiere of Frank McGuinness' *Mutabilitie*, 4-23 Sept. in the Samuel Beckett Centre, Dublin... **DUBBELJOINT**'s highly controversial play about the RUC, *Forced Upon Us*, will make its Dublin premiere from 5-17 Sept. at the SFX... **YEW TREE** are co-producing *Big Maggie* by John B. Keane with An Grianán, where it premieres on 25 Sept. before heading out on tour.... **REPLAY** are touring a new play, *Shalom Belfast*, 5 Oct.-2 Dec.... **BIG TELLY**'s new production is called *Fish*; it opens in Coleraine on 7 Oct. before touring, ending up on the HMS Caroline, docked Belfast's Alexandra Quay (10-11 Nov.)...

**PRIME CUT**'s Belfast Festival show is *The Coronation Voyage*, by Quebecois playwright Michel Marc Bouchard and translated by Linda Gaboriau... **GALLOGLASS** will tour Georg Büchner's comedy, *Leonce and Lena*; it opens in Clonmel in mid-Oct. before heading on a seven-stop tour.

## ATTENTION NORTHERN THEATRE FOLK!

Prime Cut are running a residential course for actors and theatre practitioners interesting in writing for the stage, at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annaghmakerrig from 7-10 September. Funded by the N.I. Arts Council, the course is open to any theatre practitioner based in Northern Ireland. Ring Prime Cut on 028-90-313156 to find out more.



*How much of an impression of the diversity of contemporary Ireland – and its theatre – can one festival provide?*

# ISLAND OF DARKNESS?

*Not much, argues American critic **NELSON PRESSLEY**, who attended the recent "Island: Arts from Ireland" festival at Washington's Kennedy Center. We follow Pressley's article with excerpts from the symposium "An Unpredictable Past: Theatre and History in Contemporary Ireland," conceived by Jerome Hynes, Fiach MacConghail, and Fintan O'Toole, which took place during the festival.*



# ISLAND OF DARKNESS?

LUCKY THING THAT THE THEATRICAL ENTRIES IN THE Kennedy Center's "Island: Arts From Ireland" festival this May came accompanied by a symposium. The sheer diversity of voices on the podium, with panellists rallying around the theme of "An Unpredictable Past: Theatre and History in Contemporary Ireland" suggested that there is a good deal more energy and aesthetic range in contemporary Irish theatre than audiences here in Washington — a fairly sophisticated theatre town — have any reason to suspect, even after this much-heralded festival has come and gone.

The effects of the recent flood of Irish imports to America aren't all good. It's possible to see Marina Carr's devastating, brilliantly performed *On Raftery's Hill* as the latest and most grotesque installment in the ongoing saga of the oppressed Irish eating each other alive. At the Kennedy Center, *On Raftery's Hill* was accompanied by Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* and Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa*, the latter of which constituted a kind of escape into the joys of storytelling. On their own terms, each show was a solid choice; as a rep, they did little to expand or re-shape one's understanding of the currents in Irish theatre.

That task fell to the seminar, led by Fintan O'Toole, and the discussion revealed some strains and conflicts that haven't made it across the ocean yet. Most electric was Paul Mercier, founder member and artistic director of Dublin's Passion Machine Theatre Company.

O'Toole introduced Mercier as a man who has given voice to the urban Ireland that has emerged over the past 20 years, and the way Mercier talked about the knee-jerk romanticisation of Irish history and the urgent issues arising out of what he called the new "vibrant, rude, lively culture"... well, one longed to see how this passion and direct political engagement would translate itself on the stage.

As for the image of an upscale, fast-paced, well-to-do Irish — who knew? Certainly no one who takes their idea of Irishness from what's on America's stages — what Nicholas Grene, professor of English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin, termed "black pastorals." Novelist Colm Tóibín joked during the seminar's question and answer session that if one's idea of Ireland derived from *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *On Raftery's Hill*, "You certainly wouldn't go there on your holiday."

It was a lighthearted comment, yet he had hit it. Here, the theatrical imprint remains of quietly desperate or drunkenly dreamy/belligerent rural figures tossing sod on the fire, dodging bullets or bitching about the Brits, idling and bickering and turning on one another, driven to brutal



A SPELLBINDER:  
*Donal O'Kelly in  
Catalpa*



# ISLAND OF DARKNESS?

string of Synge (Joe Dowling's *Juno and the Paycock* at Arena Stage), O'Casey (*The Plough and the Stars*, again at Arena), and Friel (multiple stagings of the repression-themed *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Translations*), capped by the shit-stained ranting of *The Steward of Christendom* and the grim bludgeon that is *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*?

It seemed telling when Eric Lucas of the Keegan Theatre — a Washington-based company that emphasises its young founders' Irish roots — debuted his first play last winter, *The King of Mackie Street*, and it featured bumbling, down-and-out characters who drink too much, botch a robbery, and end up quite literally a bloody, murderous, fundamentally incapable mess. If you want an index of the continuing American impression of stage Irishness, I'm afraid you'll have to take that.

So, to take the plays in the order in which they appeared at the Kennedy Center, it was a minor revelation to see O'Kelly's one-man *Catalpa* break the mould a bit. O'Kelly is a spellbinder; he sinks himself into a given character's distinctive voice and vocabulary as easily as if he had been entered by an alternate spirit. My appreciation of this skill deepened at the seminar, where O'Kelly stammered shyly on the theme of "Remaking History" before performing a scene from *Bat the Father, Rabbit the Son*, which made his point for him even as he enchanted the audience — panellists included — with his breezy style.

In America, solo performance is almost

always about identity politics, so one came to *Catalpa* (which took place in the Kennedy Center's 500 (or so) seat American Film Institute Theater — a movie house which is taking on more and more theater events) braced to find political overtones in this tale of a 19th century rescue of political exiles. But *Catalpa*'s politics are more implicit than explicit, and O'Kelly's efforts here go mainly into the exploration of some of history's minor players and their choices. The audience responded to O'Kelly's craftsmanship as a performer more than to any punch in the message; it's a charming piece of storytelling. At the seminar, O'Kelly characterised himself as a divided artist, sometimes working on a subconscious, personal level with his creations, other times grappling with obviously political stuff. It would be fascinating to see the other O'Kelly in the wake of *Catalpa*.

Druid Theatre Company's production of *On Raftery's Hill* played the 1100-seat Eisenhower Theater, and it looked like it was taking place down a mine shaft. A bare bulb hangs in a rough-walled, coal black room (actually a sickly green once the lights come up a bit), and the things that go on in the Raftery home do indeed want hiding. It's an incest play, with Red Raftery bullying his daughters into sexual submission. The story's a shocker; the first act finishes with a rape, and the second act unearths a secret that makes the deed — and the accepted set of circumstances in the Raftery household — even more appalling.

There is no denying the power of the vision or the performance. Director Garry Hynes pushes Carr's darkness to its extreme, creating an airless, undecorated, essentially primitive atmosphere, a world "before laws," as is said twice in the play. Tom Hickey is a roaring demon



**HAUNTED BY GHOSTS:** Stewart Parker's *Pentecost*

in the role of Red Raftery, but the key performance is Cara Kelly's, as Dinah Raftery, Red's eldest daughter. Dinah has been living in full knowledge of the nature of Red's evil since she was 12 (she's now 40), and the toll of all that misery is visible in Kelly's weary physical performance, and in her flat voice. But Dinah still retains a certain tough energy, and the way Kelly captures the embers of Dinah's spirit, all but dead in this lightless pit, is heartbreaking.

In performance, the line about the characters as "gorillas in clothes, pretending to be human" jumps out; it was

repeated during the seminar (some of the cast were on hand to read from this and other works). So by the time the Rough Magic Theatre Company's *Pentecost* rolled into the 800-seat Terrace Theater the following week, it was impossible not to hear the line about "the ape man in charge" as if it had been amplified. The play, set during the Ulster Workers Council strike in 1974, pits Protestants against Catholics, but the interesting thing about the drama — performed with wit and intelligence under Lynne Parker's calm direction — is the way it's haunted by ghosts, particularly



# ISLAND OF DARKNESS?

of children (childlessness of varying causes pointedly weighs on the play's three women). Late in *Pentecost*, as the strike moves toward its resolution, one of the characters wonders what sort of society they are all giving birth to.

If the answer lies in *On Raftery's Hill*, how depressing for Ireland. Of course, that's far too much to lay at the feet of a single play. A three-show festival

can't begin to scratch the surface, even with the aid of an appealingly rambling seminar. In it, both Tóibín and Hynes said they viewed Carr's play as a necessary dissent from whatever feel-good-ism is taking hold of their country. Sounds like an interesting discussion, but over here, we're barely getting half of it.

---

Nelson Pressley is a freelance theatre critic based in Washington, D.C. He has written for American Theatre magazine and contributes regularly to The Washington Post.

# AN UNPREDICTABLE PAST

*This seminar was accompanied by excerpts from relevant Irish dramas, read by members of the cast of On Raftery's Hill.*

**FINTAN O'TOOLE [moderator]:** I first heard the phrase "an unpredictable past" from a journalist in what was then the Soviet Union, right after Gorbachev had come to power... Like any good journalist, having heard a good phrase I decided to steal it — because it applies also in a different sense to contemporary Ireland, which is also a place where the past has become unpredictable... There has been a great deal of change, and a great deal of conflict, going on in Ireland over the past 30 years, feeding a sense that the relationship between where people are now and where they were in the past is continually up for grabs... What we are going to do over the next couple of hours is to talk about the way in which these changes have reflected themselves in the theatre — but also how the theatre has been part

of that process of change, how playwrights and directors and actors in their work have been conscious of intervening in that process of change and reopening aspects of the past and staging them in a very conscious way for a society in transition.

**NICHOLAS GRENE [Professor of English Literature, Trinity College]:** ...Sebastian Barry's plays are not history plays as such. At least they don't deal in verifiable facts of the past, if that is what we mean by history... The figures around whom he builds his plays are members of his own family but not, for the most part, members of the family about whom there are any records. He has sought out the black sheep and dark horses of his family's legends rather than any one whose



## TWO LOOKS AT IRISHNESS: Roche's Belfry and McDonagh's The Lonesome West

life can be charted through definite dates, facts and documentary knowledge...

These ancestors of Sebastian Barry had been forgotten but also in some measure suppressed from family memory. To recall them, or rather to re-imagine them, was also to re-imagine the larger history of the nation and the parts of that narrative that have tended to be forgotten or suppressed... What the family plays of Sebastian Barry have done collectively, I think, is to make us own our history, own up to it... We cannot any longer thrill to the distant drama of the Easter Rising, without at the same time acknowledging that there were others who saw it differently — and still do. History is always selective, and it is also always made up, imagined as narrative and theatre. Barry's plays, in their very freedom from the facts and events of history, make us aware of that act of imagining involved in recreating the past.

**DONAL O'KELLY [playwright, performer]:** One of my favourite theatrical quotes is from Brian Friel: "confusion is not an ignoble condition." I am eternally grateful to him. I tend to live in a constant stage of muddled confusion, but I think that's the way life is, and I think that's the way history is. One of the challenges in writing plays about history is dealing with complexity... History is told from the point of view of the heroes, victors, generals, and kings, but history is really the life stories of the people who don't make it to the history books. A few years back, in 1988, I wrote a play called *Bat the Father, Rabbit the Son...* a look at three generations of Ireland since the founding of the state. Rabbit is a middle-aged haulage magnate, trying to forget his past but is haunted involuntarily by the ghost of his dead father Bat, who bubbles up and takes him over when he least wants him to... the basic idea is that, whether you like it or not, your past is part of you. *Bat*

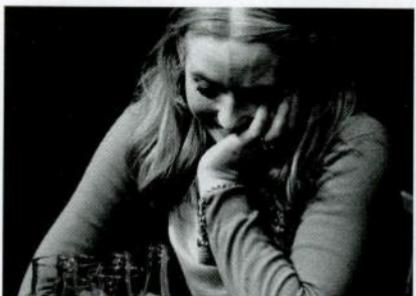
# ISLAND OF DARKNESS?

Ireland we are trapped with the past we have, whether we like it or not...

**PAUL MERCIER** [playwright, director]: ...The independent sector — the Irish alternative theatre — has been the life force, touchstone, spring well, inspiration, and conscience of Irish theatre over the last 30 years, performing in basements, warehouses, halls, gymnasiums, churches, schools, factories, prisons, hospitals, streets and most recently in parked cars in the city centre... The reason I started writing was to subvert what I saw as a stupid world, but I also wanted to record that world, particularly to give voice to those experiences that were not being heard, histories that were not being told. To show that no one way of seeing and interpreting the world is more important than another, or more stage-worthy or more dramatically meaningful or more theatrically potent than another. That high drama exists in the lower life, that the extraordinary is to be found among the ordinary, and also that the sooner we took the gun out of Irish drama, let alone Irish politics, the better. The sooner we stopped the paddywhackery from within, never mind how the outside world sees us, the better.

**GARRY HYNES** [artistic director, Druid Theatre Company]: ... [Druid] did a play in the early '80s by M.J. Molloy called *The Wood of the Whispering*, which is one of the stranger plays of the Irish repertoire. Its characters are all sick, strange, and old; they all haven't a future and they all

remember a time when Ireland was full of people... This was an opportunity for us in Druid to explore that generation which went before us, and it allowed us to discover how fortunate we were, if only in sense that we had choice... But not everyone in our generation had those choices. We in Druid were university-educated, and all of us in some ways were able to look beyond Ireland for our futures. But there were others our age who lived in small towns and villages, and who felt betrayed because they had been promised freedom and didn't get it... Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*, which we produced in the mid-1980s, is about that conflict, between those who've kept their idealism and those who've lost it... And then you have



**DRUID:** Conversations on a Homecoming

the plays of Martin McDonagh... which are the other side of the coin... Here is an Irish life which is almost like a psychosis. The characters, in their language and attitudes, resemble characters from Irish theatrical history, but they have no connection with any community, they live in isolated rooms and are forced endlessly to go over petty old scores... Finally we come to *On Raftery's Hill* by Marina Carr. In this play, you have a set of characters

*continued on page 96*

# PERFORMING IRELAND AT EXPO

*Ireland is spending over a million pounds on its cultural presence at EXPO 2000. But why? KAREN FRICKER went to Hannover to find out.*

**N**OTHING YOU HAVE READ OR HEARD ABOUT EXPO can prepare you for the sheer, vast weirdness of it. About halfway into the 40-plus minute tram ride from the centre of Hannover, the site looms up in front of you: a complex of huge buildings, many of unconventional shape and hue, with a string of cable cars dangling overhead like big bright yellow fairy lights.

When you come through the East Entrance, the European Boulevard stretches out to your left, lined with national pavilions, some purpose-built and some existing structures on this once-and-future trade fair site. Surprisingly tacky food and drink and souvenir stands are plunked along the centre of the Boulevard, while much classier restaurants selling different national cuisines are tucked between and within the pavilions.

Directly in front of you is the central EXPO Plaza, on which the German pavilion holds pride of place as the largest and most expensive national hall on the site. Beyond that lies the West Pavilions, the second major area in the EXPO, even fuller of exhibitions than the European Boulevard. As well as pavilions devoted to countries and to EXPO's corporate partners there are several barn-like warehouses where those countries that couldn't or didn't want to occupy a whole pavilion have a presence: mostly sad stalls with a

few tourism posters and some local goods for sale. There are also five big halls devoted to the theme of EXPO, "Humankind, Nature, Technology" — walk-through exhibits designed to "suggest possible solutions for the global problems of tomorrow."

All in all the site covers 160 hectares, and some 180 countries and 11 corporate partners have a presence there. The site opened on 1 June and will remain operational until Hallowe'en, and some 25 million visitors are expected to pass through in those five months.

Those are the bare facts, but the question remains: what is this all for? The short answer is that world expositions are and have always been trade fairs, opportunities for international exchange of information and goods on a mass scale. This explanation makes sense in a historical context — back in 1851 when the Crystal Palace exhibition was held (the first world's fair as we understand them now) one can understand the need to create an occasion and a location for representatives of different cultures to come together to share information and to buy each other's goods. In the day they were doubtless the only occasion that many people had to ever experience foreign cultures (I'm reminded of that wonderful scene in Mike Leigh's *Topsy Turvy* when Gilbert, or was it Sullivan, got his inspiration to create *The Mikado* while visiting a Japanese exposition in London in 1884).

But in this age of global travel, instant information, and text messaging, the idea of EXPO feels like something of a dinosaur. We can go to Japan ourselves now; or if we

don't fancy the long flight, we can find out anything we ever wanted to know about the country on TV or the Internet — eating our AYA sushi while we surf. And yet, EXPOS continue to happen, which indicates that they must be of financial benefit to someone — probably those packs of businessmen who prowl the EXPO site, wearing lapel badges of their national or corporate affiliation, heading into the VIP entrances of pavilions while the mere mortals queue outside.

What EXPO feels like is a big show, a big performance of culture. Every country



**EIRE AT EXPO:** The Cube and Fir Clis

CORBIS/KEVIN MCBEATH

dresses itself up, packages itself as it wants to be perceived by the rest of the world, and the hope is, I suppose, that if a country presents itself well enough, visitors to its pavilion will therefore go and spend their tourist mark, dollar, punt — whatever — in the country itself. As much as I'd like to dismiss that notion as indefensible, I can't: I did find myself thinking, as I was charmed and soothed by the humour and beauty of the Finnish pavilion, how nice it would be to visit Finland.

Looking at EXPO in this context, there-

fore: how — or rather what — did Ireland perform at EXPO? What message did the country send through its national presence, and to what extent were the arts, particularly theatre, used to send that message? The best moment to investigate this question seemed to me to be the week of 28 June, as this was Ireland's "National Day" — the arbitrarily chosen day in which EXPO's activities would centre on Ireland and around which, more crucially, much of Ireland's cultural contribution was programmed.

The focus of Ireland's performance at



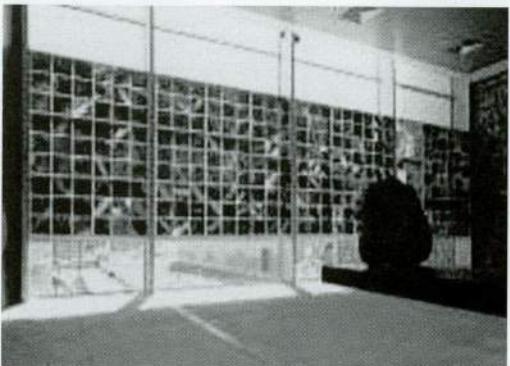
EXPO is its national pavilion, located a bit of a ways down the European Boulevard, past the strikingly sweeping wooden walls of Hungary (it's easiest to adopt the lingo of EXPO employees, who refer to the pavilions as if they were the countries themselves: "Let's go to Croatia!" "Mexico has the best parties!") and beyond the grim, barely-done-up white warehouse that is the United Kingdom.

The Irish pavilion, designed by Murray O'Laoire Architects and Orla Hanly, is a rectangle of dark gray polished stone suspended over a shallow

pond — a visual metaphor, of course, for the fact that the country is an island. Everything about the Irish pavilion, in fact, seems to function on a representational as well as literal level, and it seems to me that if it weren't for the helpful young Irishmen and women who guide visitors through the place, much of what the pavilion is trying to "say" would probably be lost on most visitors. That inner wall to your right as you walk in, made up of stones held back by a grate, see, that's the West, which is still wild, and this polished wall to your right is the East, which is developed. If you run your hand over the wall you can feel the names of Irish places etched in, in different languages; if you stick your hand in this slot you can feel real Irish rain!

It's all very subtle, multi-layered, perhaps too difficult to grasp, but quite beautiful and calming. What takes a bit of time to register about the Irish pavilion — it really only becomes clear once you've visited other countries and started to compare and contrast — is just how much Ireland has foregrounded the work of artists in its contribution, and how deftly it has used art to advance the message it's trying to send about the country and its natural resources. The beautiful, multi-coloured wall you pass as you turn onto the second level is actually an artwork by Martina Galvin, made up of different treatments of peat. In the final room is a large sculpture by Vivienne Roche that looks like seaweed, and a flat textured resin wall, meant to evoke the sea, also by Galvin.

In my observation, Ireland is the only country to publish its own literary jour-



**OUR HOUSE:** *The Irish pavilion at EXPO*

nal at EXPO: a tabloid-sized newspaper called *Portal* and edited by Pat Boran, it will be published in five issues and is available to all visitors as they leave the pavilion — an ingeniously simple way to further communicate a message about the primacy of writers and artists in contemporary Ireland. Boran also hosted an evening of readings and ballad singing on the evening before the National Day festivities, in the "EXPO Café" in central Hannover; there was a sense of cultural whiplash, after the massive barrage of sensations and 'information' that is a day on the EXPO site, to sit quietly and listen to Eavan Boland and Dermot Healy read and Frank Harte sing. Funny also, the clustering instinct — how cultures will create a microcosm of themselves when taken out of their natural habitat: post-readings, we retired to the city's only Irish pub, McGowan's, in which, amid the late-night pints and smoke and "howsitgoins," you could as easily have been in Howth as Hannover.

National Day opened with a speeches-and-anthems ceremony in EXPO Plaza, made unique by the world premiere of a

new musical work by Dónal Lunny — again in my observation a unique effort on the part of the Irish to foreground contemporary arts in its National Day presentation. *Dúiseacht* ("Awakening") was a work for orchestra and traditional Irish instruments performed by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and three trad musicians, including Lunny himself on bodhrán.

The message the music sent is that which is being communicated both subtly and aggressively throughout Ireland's presence in EXPO: that Ireland

is a mixture of old and new, traditional and contemporary. This message was extended through Ireland's theatrical contributions to EXPO, which are all of the large-scale, festive, outdoorsy, participatory sort. While the programme could be criticised for its exclusion of text-based theatre, Fiach MacConghail, Ireland's cultural director at EXPO, says this decision has everything to do with context and location. If EXPO had been in Berlin, then a more traditional theatre programme might have made sense, but, according to MacConghail, both EXPO and Hannover itself simply didn't seem the right places to stage proscenium-based Irish theatre. Hannover isn't really a theatre town, and EXPO itself is so far away from the city that, if you were to do theatre on site, the only audience you could depend on would be a passing-by, touristic, probably German-speaking one.

And so, what MacConghail did instead was commission work from companies that have experience or expertise working "outside the box" (to abuse a buzzword) of the proscenium. Or in the box, as is the case with *Barabbas... the Cube*, a big metal

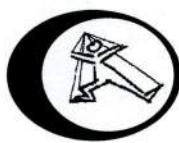
square around which 24 viewers sit and watch a puppet show within. *The Cube* trotted the European Boulevard for three weeks in July and August, sending a message of playful-yet-high-tech that extends from its physical appearance to the content of the internal puppet show itself (I didn't get to view *The Cube* but understand the uileann pipes recording of the "Hallelujah Chorus" is a particular highlight.)

In a search for other companies that can work outdoors and on a large scale, MacConghail outdid himself in thinking outside the frame with his discovery of Bacchanal, an as yet unsubsidised, Sligo-based company which has mainly been known for its work in communities and in the St. Patrick's Day Parade (Bacchanal's artistic director Dominic Campbell, as it happens, is the new artistic director of the St. Pat's Festival). Their show, *Hand over Fist*, was yet another "Ireland is urbanis-

ing" fable featuring straw-boys who swap hats to become human motorways, and a traditional dancer who meets up with an astronaut on hydraulic platforms high above the crowd.

Fir Clis came all the way from Galway for a single gig — Ireland's contribution to the ongoing EXPO "How to Say Hello in a Foreign Language" series, an ever-changing musical revue played on a mobile stage piloted by two German entertainers, a compere and a comedian, decked out (for reasons lost on me but apparently clear to the local audience) in a bright red suit and a bunny outfit, respectively. Fir Clis' shambolic but very funny half-hour-long sketch featured readings from Yeats, a lot of famine-era goodbye-saying, and some recycled material about the construction boom from their show *Site* before they had us all chorusing "Howaya!"

*continued on page 57*



## THE INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL IRELAND

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SARA ZATZ, *irishtheatre MAGAZINE*

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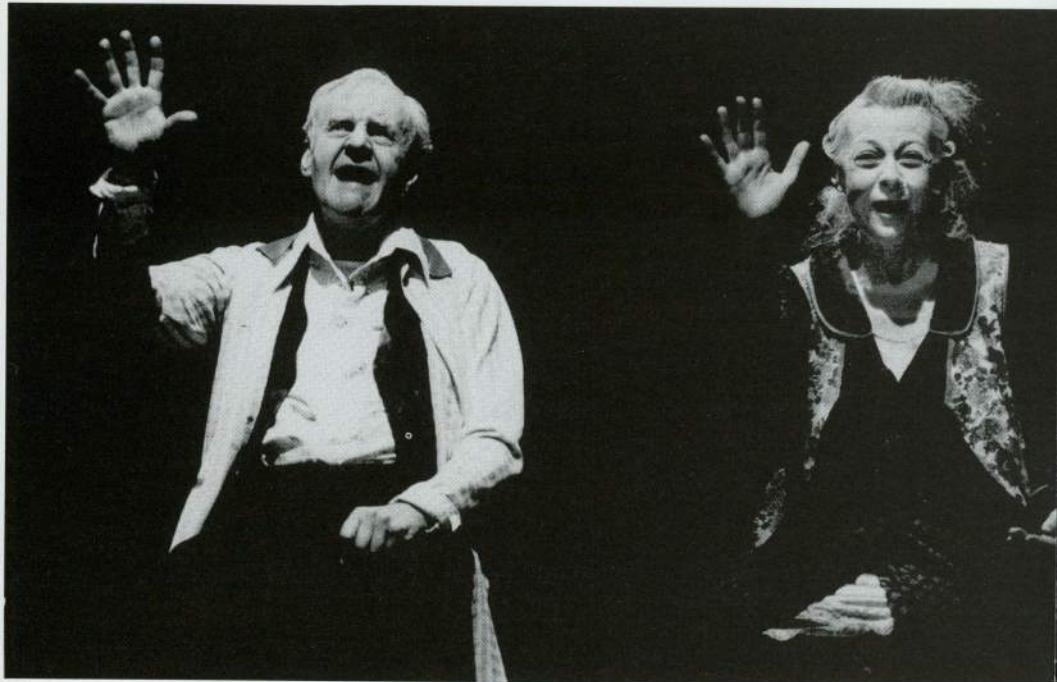
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# COMPLICIT



## WITH SUCCESS



*As Theatre de Complicite make their long-awaited return to Dublin this Festival season with their new production, Light, MATT WOLF offers an appreciation of the London troupe with a French name and an international reputation.*

**I**T'S OCCASIONALLY THE WAY OF THE THEATRICAL WORLD FOR THE avant-garde to position itself near the mainstream. But that barely begins to describe the amazing trajectory over the past 17 years of Theatre de Complicite, the London-based organisation with the French name that has caused a global stir since its inception in 1983. Over the intervening decades, the troupe has appeared three times on London's West End; shaken up Broadway in 1998 with its Royal Court co-production of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, which received a by-no-means-absurd six Tony nominations; and extensively travelled the world, enthralled theatre-goers with its style of brainy yet bodily alive theatrics.

For proof of its appeal, one could cast a glance back at the turn of the year just gone, where one of the by-products of millennial fever — at least in London — was a severe box office drought. (Amid all the festivities, who had time for the theatre?) Not, however, at the Riverside Studios, where Complicite's *Mnemonic* was turning away crowds and establishing itself as a true show for the 21st century: a synthesis of knockabout fun and philosophical rumination that seemed to reinvent for a new age an amalgam of history, metaphysics, and the larkiest of vaudeville. This autumn, Complicite returns to Dublin for the first time since 1994 with a new show, *Light*, based on a novel by the Swedish writer, Torgny Lindgren.

Who is Lindgren? A Stockholm-based author, now 62, who looks to benefit from Complicite's ceaseless invention as such disparate writers as John Berger, Bruno Schulz, and Brecht have before him. While the commercial theatre plunders the back

catalogue of films (*The Graduate*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Witches of Eastwick*) for inspiration, Complicite trawls a far more eclectic repertory. Indeed, the safe option is rarely the Complicite route, which may account for the bracing fact that Complicite at its most surprising is also one of contemporary theatre's tearaway success stories. To cite Complicite's own fact sheet: the troupe has devised nearly 30 productions, touring to some 180 cities in 41 countries. In the process, it has won in excess of 25 international awards.

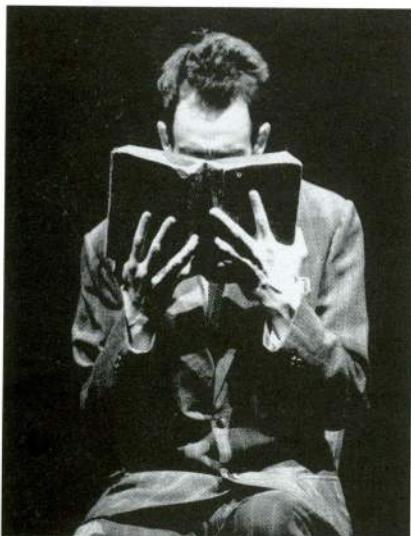
For that, credit in large measure the Cambridge-educated actor-writer-director Simon McBurney, 43, one of four original founders of the troupe — the others were a Canadian, an Italian, and a second Briton — who numbers himself among a generation trained in a physical theatre (in his case, at the Jacques Lecoq school in Paris) that nonetheless remains fiercely attuned to the intellect. The troupe's first show, *Put It On Your Head*, was "part pantomime, part commedia dell'arte, part Beckett without words, part idiocy," recalls McBurney, while an early success, *A Minute Too Late*, yoked together mirth and misery in a way Beckett himself would have well understood.

Over time, several separate but equal strands have emerged in Complicite's work, once the troupe branched out from its own self-devised projects and began applying an ethos of sorts to extant plays or books. Was anyone familiar with Daniil Kharms? Britain's National Theatre audiences were, among others, when they co-produced, in the early '90s,

**THE PLAYERS** Richard Briers and Geraldine McEwan in *The Chairs*; Complicite's artistic director Simon McBurney.

Complicite's adaptation of the Russian absurdist's writings. In 1996, South African writer J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, a retelling of the Robinson Crusoe story, prompted one of Complicite's rare misfires, though no Complicite show has been received with anything less than huge respect.

The National has been a particular advo-



**BREATHTAKING:** *Street of Crocodiles*

cate of Complicite's, at various times housing its stagings of Durrenmatt's *The Visit* — with company mainstay Kathryn Hunter in her blazing Olivier Award-winning performance — and Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. That latter revival, starring McBurney and Juliet Stevenson, earned one of the few standing ovations I have ever witnessed in London for a straight play. And the tiny Cottesloe gave an early home to arguably (along with *Mnemonic*) Complicite's banner achievement to date: *The Street of Crocodiles*, a breathlessly excit-

ing 1993 piece adapted from the short stories of Bruno Schulz, the Polish writer murdered by the Gestapo in 1942. It was that piece, during its 1999 stint in Stockholm, which fired up *Light's* author, Lindgren, who then granted Complicite the rights to attempt a comparable stage success out of his own writings.

*Street of Crocodiles* has been often reprised, as has *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*, a 1994 show inspired by John Berger, the British critic and novelist whose 1979 book, *Pig Earth*, contained the eponymous peasant woman Lucie's rending story. (It was Berger, tellingly, who first gave McBurney a copy of *Light*.) Early in 1999, away from the Complicite banner, Berger and McBurney collaborated on one of the more unusual London theatrical offerings of late: a devised piece, *The Vertical Line*, set in the bowels of London's disused Strand tube station.

One has learned by now to expect the unexpected from McBurney and Co., including a Shostakovich project — *The Noise of Time* — done in conjunction with the Emerson String Quartet, that premiered in New York last year and will play in London in 2001. "It's all Simon," says Complicite's admiring administrative producer, Judith Dimant, explaining the longevity of the troupe. "It's his vision: his determination to move on and be challenged." (Among McBurney's challenges, one ought to mention his freelance career as a film actor, recently seen slurping soup, and deriding Russia as "uncouth" in the Ralph Fiennes *Onegin*.) But it's also the fearless will and intelligence of a savvy team of players who are reinventing the very idea of a play. And leaving audiences looking on in awe.

*Matt Wolf is London theatre critic for Variety and arts correspondent for The Associated Press.*

# Cat's Journey

**ALICE BARRY** is a playwright and actor; her plays include *Nobody's Child* and *I Like Armadillos*, which were produced in the 1997 and 1998 Dublin Fringe Festivals. She is under commission from Parallel Films, and her radio play *That's Not A Name I Know* was recently broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Her latest play, *Cat Melodeon*, will play in the International Bar from 9-14 October as part of this year's Dublin Fringe, following its premiere at the Le Cheile Festival in Oldcastle, County Meath, in August and a brief Irish tour. Barry here introduces the play, and offers an excerpt.



ALICE BARRY: After working on two commissions last year I realised that I missed the involvement in a rehearsed, live production. There's nothing like grating away at a piece with actors — debating about meanings and motivations, convincing and cajoling and making sure that everyone involved is happy with the final production. ♦ *Cat Melodeon* revolves around a large, old travel chest and follows the epic journey of Cat from whispering childhood to screaming adulthood. The piece moves visually from black and white to colour, and is performed by two actors. The large travel chest depicts all the different locations. Cat (played by one actor) draws us into her world and we meet the people (all played by the other actor) and events which are instrumental to the development of her

character and steer her into her final fated crusade. ♦ In this scene, Cat, after travelling with Arnie (an encyclopaedia salesman) for nine years, has decided to brave the world on her own. She gets a job at the Coisle Bar in Cavan, where she meets Moya, who gives her a glimpse of her future destiny.

NARRATOR It wasn't clear to her at first what her role in the world was. Her head was filled with facts and figures. Words and numbers swirling around aimlessly. What did it all mean? What could she do with all this information? What was required of her? By the time she had finished the encyclopaedias they had covered the country from head to toe, side to side, coast to coast. It all felt the same to her. It wasn't so much as where she'd been but what happened to her there. Small incidences were what marked the different towns for her. The people she'd met. The reactions they'd gotten. The world of her adoptive father and his big books and big mind were becoming too small for her. Besides, with her help he'd sold all his quota. She wanted to see what life was like on the inside.

*Cat puts the book back in the box.*

CAT If you're sure you don't need it any more? Thanks for everything you know, all you taught me.

ARNIE Only the tip of the iceberg girl.

*Cat walks off pulling the box behind her. She turns back.*

CAT Hey, and thanks for the box, just Arnie.

*Cat walks off pulling the box behind her. She walks around the stage making a random pattern.*

CAT (sings) Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong...

West Virginia, mountain momma,  
Take me home, country roads.

*Cat turns the box on its side and we see it is a bar counter. There is an old faded sign with "help wanted" attached to the box.*

CAT I saw your sign on the window and I'm here for the job. I haven't done any bar work before but I'm honest and reliable and I can work as hard as any man or woman. I'll need a place to sleep as well and I'll look after myself for food if that's all right.

*Cat takes the sign from the box and walks behind it. She waits. Moya walks in and looks at her. Moya has a purple silk scarf on. She swishes it around her.*

MOYA Woah! Whey's Hannah?

CAT Her mother's dying and she's gone to sit with her.

MOYA Ha ta wey till shew was dyin.

CAT And who are you?

MOYA Wish I knew d'answer te da.  
An wou I still b'ere if you weren?

CAT Can I help you?

MOYA I doen know. You te me.  
Wha've ya go t'offer?

CAT Any drink in the bar, for money.  
And the explanation of any word in Encyclopaedia International for free.

MOYA Wha I'n loogin fo ya'll no fin'in any boog gir.

*Moya puts some money on the counter.*

MOYA Bushmes, na ice.

*Cat gives her a drink. Moya knocks it back and taps the counter.*

MOYA 'Nother.

*Cat gives her another. She knocks it back and taps the counter. Cat gives her another.*

CAT You won't find it in the bottom of an empty whiskey glass either.

MOYA Beher fun searchin dough.

*Moya knocks back the drink.*

MOYA Psychoanalysis?

CAT An approach to the study of the human personality involving the rigorous probing of an individual's personal problems, motives goals and attitudes to life in general. Both a theory of

human behaviour and a method of treating emotional disorders. It was developed by Sigmund Freud in Vienna in...

MOYA Wha brins ya here? No wan moves to Ballybeyon.

Cat hands her a drink.

CAT Just livin'.

MOYA Aren wey all, jus abou. How come Hannah wen off and lef ya in charge?

CAT I'm honest and reliable, I guess.

MOYA Y'ave an hones face all righ. Open, bu dey's a measua a charge in i too. Defense. I say now ... (pauses to let Cat say her name; she doesn't) ya doen trus too meny paple. Am'n I righ?

CAT I've never had much opportunity.

MOYA A gir afer meown har. Moya, Moya Doolin, nice te mea ya.

Moya spits on her hand and puts it out to shake.

CAT Likewise.

Cat spits on her hand. They shake. Moya turns her hand and begins to read the palm.

MOYA Interesing. No much famly. A loner? Y'ave a goo strong lifeline dough. Da shows characer and spiri. Dey's somein ou dere fo ya. Somein imporan. Meybe a tacher no, no ... bu ya may a diffrence all righ. Love? Ah, now. Y're sentence te kape a grey love.

Moya looks her straight in the face.

MOYA Pi'ey.

Moya drops her left hand and beckons for her right hand.

MOYA Dey's a dar man, a broder? Naw. Cou be... Hang on, dey's ... naw, nawtin'. Da's i. Har ta rea. I'n no geting nawin' else.

Moya looks up at Cat.

MOYA Dey's grey sadness i you pas.

Lave i der. Das de place for i. Lave Ballybeyon now fore i catches up wi ya. CAT I like it here.

MOYA Bu does i lieg you?

CAT Well Hannah and the other locals I've met seem...

MOYA ... no de paple gir, de place. Loo beyon yar words te fin de true manin o life. Ya won fin ou if dey's a Go' or if dey's life afer dea be loogin' in any boog.

CAT What about the dark man?

MOYA Bes avide him. Mae yown desiny love, tis beher. Doen bey guyed bey udders.

CAT No offence Moya, but that's a load of crap. One minute you tell me not to bother with the dark man, then you tell me to make my own destiny and not to be guided by others. If I'm not to be guided by you then I should bother with the dark man. So, should I bother with him or not?

Moya thinks for a while.

MOYA Ifin es go a nice ass I spose ya cou chance i.

They both laugh.

CAT You're mad.

MOYA Bu i de nices possible way.

CAT I'm Cat. Catherine Casey. And I'm staying. I like it here. Country living suits me. I've spent all my life movving and now I want to stop. A bit of security. Is that too much to ask for?

MOYA A wha cos dough?

CAT A good friend once told me 'If you are afraid don't hesitate. Get right into the trouble if that is the honest course.'

MOYA Ah bu, foos rush in whey angels fay te tread.

CAT Well, let's just say I'm an honest fool then.

# PROJECT ORIENTED

*12th June saw the long-awaited re-opening of Project Arts Centre in its newly-renovated (and bright blue!) central Dublin headquarters. The day after the opening, MARY COLL, until recently the director of the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick, met Project's new artistic director KATHY MCARDLE to talk about what happens now that the doors are open.*

**I**ARRANGED TO MEET KATHY MCARDLE EARLY ON THE MORNING after the official opening of the new Project Arts Centre — which is a little bit like arranging to meet a bride the morning after her wedding, and speaks volumes both about my sense of timing, and McArdle's work ethic. But she arrived on time, eager to talk, and with a breathless enthusiasm for the new Project that made it difficult even for me to get a word in edge-ways... We mused briefly on the highs of venue management — letting the cleaners in at 9.00am, and checking that the plumbing works — before getting down to talking through the task that lies ahead for her, namely running a building with three programmable spaces: The Gallery, The Cube (a multi-purpose space which can be used for visual arts events or performances), and the Space Upstairs, mainly a performance space for contemporary theatre, dance, and music. All are modular, all are flexible, and all present quite a challenge for a woman taking a venue under her wing for the first time. And Project is no ordinary venue: it's one of Ireland's oldest and boldest arts centres, with more history, more baggage, more expectations, and more media interest than a Sinn Féin Árd Fheis.

**BLUE IS THE COLOUR:** A  
view of East Essex Street  
including the new-look  
Project Arts Centre



**MARY COLL:** So, where is the stimulating, radical, contemporary material for these spaces going to come from primarily — Ireland or elsewhere?

**KATHY McARDLE:** I would hope that it would be a combination of both, but I think primarily it has to be a space for young emerging companies. Project has always been that place where people could come with an idea, and a lot of energy and a lot of imagination, and realise their visions, and I think it still has to be that space. That's the first imperative. In addition, of course, Project would want to host interesting international work, but the real challenge there is finding the financial resources to make that happen... it's terrible in the end how it all comes down to money.

**How are you going to deal with that frustration, the money issue — or lack of it — that torments us all?**

Fiach [MacConghail, former Project artistic director] asked me that yesterday after the opening. We have all experienced that pain when you see a brilliant piece of work and you don't have the money to bring it over here, or someone comes to you with a brilliant proposal and you can't make it happen. I think though you just have to get on with it... in the end it's not all about money. Project has never been about money — it's about what happens there.

**Much the same as the Belltable... we kept pushing and pushing, not playing safe artistically in the hope that if we achieved a level of excellence, the Arts Council would not let us go to the wall. That's not the kind**

of policy Patricia [Quinn, the Arts Council's director] would approve of, I'm sure, but having grazed against the wall and survived, I'd have to say it worked for us. But it's nerve-wracking poker.

I think to some extent that happened to Project last year. Project nearly went to the wall, literally... it was carrying so much. The Mint [the performance space which Project used for dance and theatre while its building was under renovation] was still being programmed, there was the ongoing visual arts programme, and we were starting to upscale in preparation for the new building.



KEVIN MCNEILY

**KATHY McARDLE**

**Why do you think you were saved — what is it about Project?**

I think it was because, when it comes down to basics, we are the only space in Dublin that has a genuine alternative kind of ethos, although I think the Crypt is a great space and the New Theatre is good as well.

**Where does City Arts Centre fit in, then?**

It seems to me that within a very short distance there are now two arts Centres, City with its very strong social, community and political agenda; and Project with its alternative, radical agenda...

**City Arts Centre, then, is primarily community-driven... is that difference sufficient justification for the existence of two major arts centres in such close proximity?**

... Traditionally Project has been, and will remain, artist-led rather than community-led; however, I actually think there is a balance that needs to be struck there... it's imperative that the artists

**LOOK OUT FOR FUTURE PROJECTS:** *Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre*

make connections with the people coming through the doors as well... I think that Project is also at a point where it actually needs to look to places like City Arts Centre, and to the Outreach and Education programme in the Abbey to see how they are developing new kinds of relationships with audiences.

**So, in terms of artistic programming, who do you want to work with?**

This is a very dodgy question... well, that shows in the kind of choices you make

about how you programme. So for example, we have commissioned Raymond Deane to do a piece of music which is a kind of celebration of the new Project. Tom McIntyre is writing a play for us called *Is the Taoiseach at Home?* I have a very interesting multi-media performance company coming over from England called curious.com, and we are commissioning them to create a piece of work for the Cube. Bedrock are coming in with Ken Harmon's *Wide Boy Gospel*, because one of the things I am really

interested in doing is developing new ways of developing scripts and new playwriting at Project.

**Following on that — what is happening to Irish women's writing for the stage, where is it, and why are so few women involved in the process? I can't work it out.**

I don't know either, but it's another thing that I am really interested in. I can't explain why they are not coming through, but something really radical needs to happen. My feeling is that traditionally women have been used to writing privately. Poetry, novels, and short stories you can write in your own home, but even though you can write a play at home, for it to be fully achieved or fully realised you need to go public with it, and many women find the prospect of that level of exposure daunting. Women are nervous about going out there with a play and saying "would you produce this?" ... I think the solution might lie in giving woman writers productions of the work early, so that they get introduced to the process early. I think that was what happened with Marina Carr. Her work was produced professionally while she was still quite young, and she was in contact with people like Tom Hickey, Tom McIntyre, and Michael Harding from a very early age. Contact like that can help enormously.

**How will you address the issue?**

I want to bring young women writers in to work with Project, but as part of an inclusive group, not under the label of "women writers." Women in Irish society are going through fascinating changes: The roles are all changing, interesting dilemmas are being created, and drama must come out of all that ... I am putting a script development programme in place which should also help.

**What else makes you passionate about theatre?**

The mystery of it — you never quite know what the chemistry is going to be between the performers and the audience. Not enough research has been done on this, the psychology of it all, the subconscious, the dynamic, especially the group dynamic — how all that energy comes together and operates, and is exchanged between people, and how people's responses are affected by context, by the lives they bring into the theatre with them, all the social rhythms. The other thing that is really interesting for me about theatre is where it is at now. Whether we like it or not it is a minority art form, but one of the minority art forms that people still feel very passionate about.

**Do you of all people actually accept that, that theatre is a minority art form? Accessibility and audience development were always your mantras, whereas experience taught me that you could only go so far. Theatre would not succeed in becoming valued and embraced by all. The majority of people don't care one bit about theatre, so should we just concentrate instead on narrowing our focus on the group of people for whom theatre does actually matter, instead of wearing ourselves out trying to bring people in who are just not interested?**

I think you have to develop your main relationships first with people who are actually interested, and expect them to come through the door. I think then you have to make forays into other groups, to offer the choice to other people who may not be aware that theatre is actually going on around them....

**So, what's your biggest fear, then?**

Well, strangely enough it's not really commercial, I have to say. I am more con-

**COMING UP AT PROJECT:** Bedrock's *Wideboy Gospel*

cerned with the quality of the experience people have at Project than about how much money we make... actually my biggest fear is that people will say that Project is dead.

**That's quite realistic because it's our national natural inclination to knock people, and a lot of people will sit back and say O.K. Kathy, go on, impress us, and then won't let themselves be impressed, no matter what you do.**

True. Another fear I have is that I'm really aware that Project started in the '70s, and the people running it were the people making the work — directing it, acting in it... there is a shift now to where I as artistic director am there to facilitate other people making the work, all the companies. Ultimately I know that an awful lot of the quality of what happens in Project depends on the quality of the exploration

and interrogation that those companies are engaged in themselves, and that is going to vary all the time.

**Tell me about it! For some reason, in the public eye, a good or a bad season in the Belltable was always a reflection on my work as artistic director more than on that of the writers, directors, or performers, and either way, in the end, I had very little real control or input other than to negotiate contracts and discuss availability.**

I suppose one of the things that Project has fought very hard for, and I will continue to work for — and I know you worked for this in the Belltable with the UnFringed festival, and it's happening in other arts centres too — is the right to be more pro-active in programming, to say I want to commission that piece of work, I want to put a particular season together. Project as a producer is something I really want to develop.

**That's fine in theory, but how are you going to say no? You control access to the space that so many companies want to perform in — think they have a right to work in — and in a city with very few spaces.**

You say no according to instincts a lot of the time, and then try to articulate why your instincts are saying what they are saying. For me, at the moment I am not even looking for the companies whose work is the most experimental necessarily, because experimentation for its own sake can be as dangerous as anything else. What I am interested in is people who are asking important questions about the contemporary world... it will be the people who are the true contemporaries that I am looking for. And I won't always get it right.

**How seriously will you become involved in the production process then, will you try to sit down with certain companies that you have earmarked for the Project and talk to them about long-term relationships?**

Yes, because you can't work on a show-by-show basis. In the programme for the first six months there is a commitment to Loose Canon, to Bedrock, and to Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre — to presenting Michael Keegan Dolan's work as a choreographer. It's about relationships happening over a three-year period, which is the term of my contract... if I can stick it out for three years, after which time the heave to get rid of me should be coming from the younger generation.

**Beyond the theatre companies, what is the basis of your other relationships within the business — specifically with the Dublin Theatre Festival and the Fringe?**

Well, this year we thought long and hard about where Project had to position itself... but we felt that the spirit of Project had always been in the margins,

in the fringes of things and that we wanted to stay there, so we said all right, this year, this year, we stay in the Fringe. In the Fringe as well there is an opportunity to really support the work of emerging companies, and new Irish work... [for example] we will be presenting Meridian's new production, *The River*, this year, and it is that kind of work that Project has always existed to support.

**In the end, in the midst of all of this, how will Kathy McArdle's head deal with life as Kathy McArdle, Project's artistic director?** I don't have a life now, and haven't had one for the past eight months. Probably the only way will be to be very discerning in how you operate with people. You have to be open — it's not fair to have a conversation with one person about their idea, and then not have a conversation at all with others. Secondly, you have to make your own decisions about who you want to be with. We all have friends who predate our present professional lives, and mine are a really solid foundation. You have to withdraw a little when your head can't cope any more, and it's also about your own sense of yourself — who am I in this transaction?

**When you finish then, in three years, how would you like to wrap it up, what do you want to leave as your legacy?**

I would like to be able to say that I delivered the new building — that Project was rejuvenated in terms of its audience and totally overhauled in terms of its administrative structures. I would like to leave it financially secure, so that the next person in can programme imaginatively, and I'd like people to say that she managed to hold onto the old spirit of the place. That's very important. If I haven't done that, well then, I've failed.

A FESTIVAL UNPACKS

# REALITY

The recent "Young at Art" festival in Belfast challenged preconceptions about theatre for young people, reports ASHLEY DUNNE.

CHRISTMAS PANTOMINES, NATIVITY PLAYS, AND PUNCH and Judy shows: this was once the range of theatre available to young people. "Jolly good fun" for three to 13-year-olds inclusive. Allegedly. ■ The "Young at Art" festival 2000 had puppets and magic, but there the similarity ends. The festival which ran in Belfast from 25 May - 3 June, aimed to access "all art forms for all ages from 3-25 years." And, as far as theatre goes, it succeeded. This was theatre which was no longer content to treat young audiences in a patronising and "they-all-lived-happily-ever-after" manner. Instead, each piece considered carefully the age of its target audience and presented a view of life that was appropriate and honest. Watching the shows left one with the uncanny sensation of watching reality

unpack itself, Russian-doll style.

Only one word can properly describe *The Carpet of Dreams*, Puppetus' venture for 4-7 year olds — magical. From the lazy Saturday morning sunshine of the Botanic Gardens, we were ushered through a bright yellow room, where a woman wearing a mask that made her look like a puppet, lovingly rocked her puppet Baby, and into the room where the performance took place. Mums and dads sat on benches around the walls, while children



curled up on a huge black mat covered with luminous shapes. A hush descended as lullaby music was heard and the Mother carried in her Baby, laid him within the tree-trunk frame of the puppet theatre, kissed him goodnight, and disappeared from view.

And then amazing things began to happen! Baby rose through the air still covered by his blanket, and disappeared — only to reappear again riding the blanket through the air. Baby met unusual and entertaining characters on his journey — a strange purple man, who shone with inner light, a gracefully mischievous orange ball, and a curious colourful bird who laid a square egg for Baby. The performance was non-verbal, and the atmospheric music helped to lock the children's attention in the silent wonder of this dream world. Cleverly, Puppetus made the final sequence of the show almost interactive: the set opened and Baby came out to the delighted children, waving and blowing kisses, before Mother came and carried him away once more. I heard quite a few small voices complain that this 40-minute show was over too soon, perhaps the best testimony to the success of this true magic carpet ride.

*A Time for Magic* did not leave the viewer with quite such a safe, dreamy picture of the world. Written and directed by Canadian Robert Morgan for audiences aged seven and older, the play tells the story of Sessaylin and Dance, a young girl and boy who together save their respective peoples from the evil character Geddon. Set in mythical lands populated by the Brohmians and the Havenites, this "was a time when magic was real," a fact beautifully illustrated in the opening moments of the play when Sessaylin (Emma Jordan) emerges from a very small and seemingly empty box: the

audience is hooked at once. At times narrators, at times characters participating in the narrative, the adult actors Emma Jordan, Sean O'Rawe, and Vincent Higgins kept the pace fast and furious, not allowing their young audience's attention to waver. At intervals all three stepped out of their roles to have an "argument" about whose job it was to tell the next part of the tale. The technique produced some tension-relieving laughter from the audience, reminding them that what they were seeing wasn't real or truly scary.

As the play progressed, it became increasingly evident that this was not a conventional fairytale. Quite early on, Sessaylin's kindly magic teacher is killed by the evil Geddon, and in the end Dance sacrifices himself so both peoples can be freed. There is a happy ending, but a qualified one: "And the Brohmians of Liberty and the people of Haven together *had* to create a new way of life. For with the book of Miracles gone, so ended the time long ago when magic was real." With nothing else left, they finally turn to each other.

It was impossible not to see a parallel between this story, of two peoples living in fear and mistrust of each other, and the narrative of Northern Ireland's recent history. The connection was brought home even further by the WAVE exhibition of artistic works by young people who have been bereaved or traumatised by the violence in Northern Ireland, which was held in a gallery just above the theatre where *A Time for Magic* was performed. If the exhibition represented an attempt at healing, or at least a progression towards it for its young creators, then the final moments of the play seemed to offer a glimpse of what a healed world might look like.

The most disturbing thing about



**THE LOST GENERATION:** Sherman Theatre's *Everything Must Go*

*Everything Must Go*, Sherman Theatre's revenge tragedy for young adults, is the fact that it felt more real than reality.

The fate of the fictional characters on stage came to matter to the audience in a way that a similar situation of their real-life counterparts probably never had before. Against a soundtrack of music by the Manic Street Preachers (with whom the play was written), Catatonia, and the Stereophonics, six featured actors and a chorus of 20 young people from Northern Ireland brought to the stage the reality of life for many of today's teens and twenty-somethings. Flicking through the programme before the show started I read some statistics on poverty and unemployment in the county of Carephilly, the setting for Patrick Jones' play. Then, they were just numbers; after the show the same figures seemed to scream from the page with the raw pain and desperation I had heard on stage.

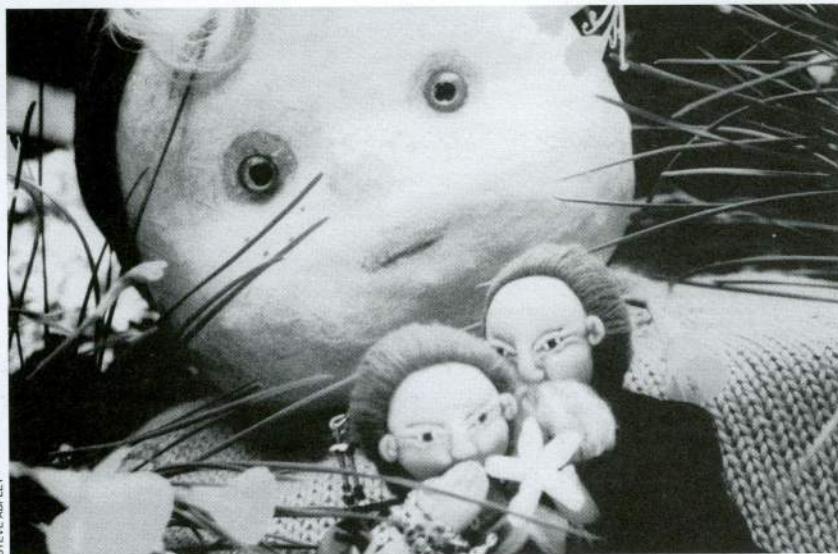
The play concerns five young people, "A," Pip, Cindy, Jim, and Curtis, growing up in a small Welsh town. The mines have shut and the closest thing to freedom is a factory clocking-in card. Theirs is a life without hope. Pip's answer is to get on with it — he's working at the factory and stealing a fast car every now and then. Cindy copes by frequently cutting herself with a carpet knife in an attempt at "pain management." Jim simply follows a leader — usually Pip. Curtis hides behind quotations of famous people past and present, as if others' words are safer, somehow, than his own. All four use drugs. "A"'s way, on the other hand, is revolution. He's something of an idealist, and wants to change things by following in the footsteps of his hero, Aneurin Bevan, who helped found the NHS. Somewhere along the way this collapses into a desire for revenge on Worthington, the man

who sacked his father, and who "A" sees as a symbol of everything that is wrong with his town.

The play wears its Welshness on its sleeve — there are many references to Wales' contemporary politics — but it has a universality throughout. In one scene some of the chorus, dressed as coal-miners, wander around the stage before being sat down at desks with computers. Bewildered, they shake and abuse these strange machines. How different is their situation from that of many small Irish farmers — forced out of business by the crisis in their industry to a world which is not theirs? The scene was made all the more pointed by the staging of an electronics assembly line on a balcony above. The sheer monotony of the work — even just watching it — was frightening.

Wales is often portrayed as a beautiful and idyllic land, but this play purposefully challenges that stereotype. Cindy appears on stage wearing traditional Welsh dress, and then proceeds to inject herself with drugs, watch her friend die from an OD, mutilate herself, and finally drink disinfectant to end it all. The staging of Jim's funeral takes the point still further. Mourners carry in a huge Welsh flag which, when dropped, falls into the shape of a coffin — the death of Wales. And for Wales read Ireland, Scotland, England and everywhere else where this "lost generation" exists. Watching it, I had the very unnerving sense that I or one of my friends could have been one of the characters on stage. The play works through a series of shocks: first you realise that this other world is really someone's reality, and then you realise that reality is not so different from your own.

But this is not a simplistic "there is the problem, now here is the solution" type of play. It is more "This is us. This is how



**MAGIC TRIP:** Puppetus' *Carpet of Dreams*

we live. Is there a solution?" The last moment of the play sums this up. "A" kneels beside his Father's grave, a gun in his mouth, surrounded by police. The cross-filled graveyard which the stage has become is bathed in red light. The rest of the cast is frozen while Pip pleads with the audience "This is my truth. Now tell me yours." As the lights go up there is a darkly thoughtful hush and more than one wet eye, before the audience break into thunderous applause.

The world *Everything Must Go* presents is bleak, but utterly recognisable. And the honesty and passion behind it are inspiring. This wasn't prettied-up and talking-down theatre for young adults; this was a group of young artists using theatre to name a conveniently ignorable reality and to incite their audience to awareness. This and the other two plays in "Young at Art" I saw presented a picture of theatre

for young people that was thought-provoking and encouraging. As the target age became higher and higher the view of "reality" became more and more complex, more detailed, yet much less clearly definable. Or perhaps it was that each production used less and less of the ribbons and bows with which we normally obscure reality when discussing it with young people. In any case, none of the work I saw could be called fussy, pink, or fluffy. Writing for this magazine two years ago, Anna Cutler, "Young at Art"'s director, said she was "in search of integrity, quality, education, entertainment, accessibility — basically excellence without elitism." Judging by this year's programme, it would seem that she's found it.

Ashley Dunne is a student of Drama Studies at Queens University, Belfast.

# CONFESIONS

**LOUGHLIN DEEGAN** agreed to adjudicate 25 productions in seven days believing promises of easy sex and free booze.

**Who would have dreamed he'd fall in love?**

**W**HEN I WAS ASKED TO BE A JUDGE OF THIS YEAR'S IRISH Student Drama Association festival (ISDA), many of my peers encouraged me to take the job: all the students would want to sleep with me, I was told, and a pint would be thrust into my hand every time I turned around. Future judges take note: none of the above is true. Not one student appeared the least bit interested in anything to do with me beyond what I thought of his or her performance (fancy that!), and a drink was only proffered on every third turn — although one could argue that this was because I was swivelling like a weather vane in expectation.

Having shied away from student drama when at college (in D.C.U. there was actually little to be shy of), I was an ISDA virgin. I knew nothing of the strange rituals: the two-hour get-ins, the critique sessions (so early in the morning!), the energy, the egos, the ambition, and the drinking that makes up an ISDA festival. But, being a veteran of many of the country's other theatre festivals I have always loved the heady concentrated mix of theatre and talk, drink and debate that make up a good festival. ISDA has all of this, and more, and like

the fool that I am, I think I fell in love.

There is only one way to "do" a festival and that is to dive in deep — to immerse yourself completely in the programme and become part of a community of people who, for a short period of time, are united by common experience and a love of the art form on display. Being a judge at ISDA only adds to one's experience of this particular festival. Although you are neither an audience nor a performer, you are fundamental to the working of the event and are forced to participate in the overall experience 100 per cent. Each show (there were 25 in total) had to be seen by at least three judges, which meant that each of the six judges had to see a minimum of 14 plays in seven days. It was not uncommon to see four plays in a single day, which often involved extremely complicated logistical manouverings — getting from Belfast to Henry Place in 30 minutes at rush hour, for example, or then rushing from that

# OF AN ISDA JUDGE

7:50 final curtain to the SFX for eight. That things ran as smoothly as they did is a credit to the amazing crews who managed to make ISDA work at all under the most difficult technical circumstances.

And then there are the crits at ten each morning, a huge communal hang-over of an event at which the six judges take their seats in front of a couple of hundred stu-

long-rehearsed opinions, congratulating ourselves on how clever we all sounded (or was that just me?). We were being lampooned on a daily basis, however, by the excellent *ISDA News*, which was published every morning of the festival, and which managed to send up our blatherings in the true spirit of the free press. We soon learned who we were really playing to.

It is a strange formula around which to base a theatre festival and one which could easily be criticised. The competitive nature of the festival — and by God it is competitive — often served to shift the focus away from the actual work being performed at the various venues and onto the opinions of the six judges at the morning crits. With the exception of the Dublin colleges, who could rely on a

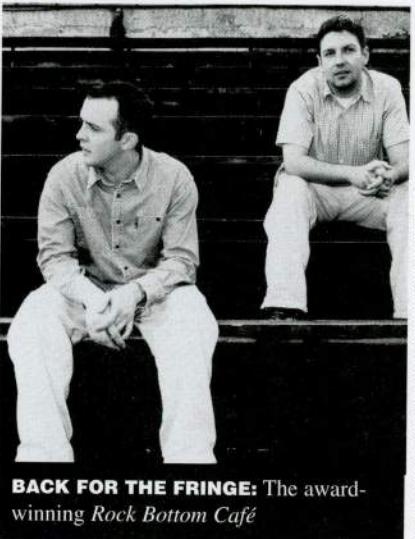


**SEXIEST SHOW:** Breathing Water

dents and give a (professional!) criticism of the shows which were presented the day before. What resulted at this year's crits was, at best, a lively debate between students and practitioners about the theatre on display: the choice of play, its contemporary relevance, the directorial choices made, and the possibility of achieving decent production values given budgetary and technical restraints. At worst the crits degenerated into a one-sided power game where we judges sat happily reeling off

loyal following on their home turf, the crits were almost always better attended than the plays themselves!

But what about the theatre in question? I would have to be honest and say that ISDA 2000 served up some of the most awful productions that I have ever sat through — and some of the most exciting theatrical experiences I have had in the last number of years. And that was the wonderful thing about the festival. As you took your seat you had no idea



RUS KAVANAGH

**BACK FOR THE FRINGE:** The award-winning *Rock Bottom Café*

which camp the next production would fall into (although the organisation presenting the work eventually became a barometer to pre-judge the experience by — University College Cork were so strong this year that all six judges wanted to squeeze in to each performance to see what they would present next). Many times during the festival we sat transfixed by the talent, creativity and originality on stage. These were the times when definitions like "student drama" or "amateur" or "semi-professional" drifted away and we were shown work that moved and inspired and would triumph on any stage, in any context.

Moments that will linger in my memory for quite some time include N.U.I. Maynooth's sensitive and emotional rendering of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*; U.C.D. Dramsoc's breathtakingly well-written and performed two-hander *The Rock Bottom Café*, which I exhort everyone to see when it plays at this year's Dublin Fringe; U.C.C.'s *Breathing Water*

(also to be presented at the Fringe), a perfect example of a "new Cork school" which started with *Disco Pigs* but continues to evolve and excite; and U.C.C.'s production of Albee's *The Sandbox* — a fifteen-minute gem produced to near perfection. Finally, U.C.C.'s flawless presentation of that old war-horse *Equis* made me reverse my position on the play, which I had slated "so dated that it is almost unproducible" earlier in the week. This was a production which impressed not only by the superior quality of the acting and directing on display, but also because of the excellence of its production values.

But these were the high points and the distance to be travelled to the lower depths of the ISDA experience was significant. It is exactly this disparity which provides the greatest threat to the sustainability of the festival in its current guise. The productions presented at ISDA 2000 can easily be divided into two categories: on one hand we saw work which strived for theatrical excellence, and was presented by talented individuals who have apparent ambitions towards a career in professional theatre. On the other we saw work presented by individuals who were simply engaging in amateur dramatics, for social and recreational reasons, and just happened to be in college while they were doing so. It was not for us judges to question the validity of either approach (I feel that each is completely valid in its own right); however, we were asked to apply rigorous professional standards to all the work on the display — the logic being that any criticism received would only serve to motivate the individuals in question to work harder and make better (read as "more professional") theatre next time round.

This formula works well enough for those individuals interested in doing just that. But when a group of non-drama stu-

dents, who got together six days before the festival to choose a script, rehearse it and pull together a set and lighting design (not to mention have a bloody good time in the process), are forced to sit and listen to their efforts being ripped apart due to a perceived lack of "professionalism," the basic premise on which the festival is based begins to crumble.

ISDA 2000 made a concerted effort to include as many colleges as possible in the festival and were justifiably proud to have more participating colleges (and, as a result, more productions) than ever before. This had the effect, however, of exacerbating the disparities outlined above. In reality, what actually happened was that the judges, almost unconsciously and against the expressed advice of the organisers, established two distinct divisions and began to appraise the work using two very different yardsticks.

Finding a solution to this problem will not be easy, but as Irish universities continue to increase the provision of professional training for the theatre professions the gap will only continue to widen. The possibility of colleges participating in a "non-competitive" category is one solution that might be considered; a model similar to the amateur drama festivals which present work in two distinct competitive categories is another.

But the sheer variety of experience lev-

**BEST OVERALL PRODUCTION**  
*Equus* by Peter Shaffer (UCC Dramat)

**BEST DIRECTION**  
Tom Creed, *Equus* (UCC Dramat)

**BEST ACTOR**  
Darren McHugh, *The Rock-Bottom Café* (UCD Dramsoc)

**BEST ACTRESS**  
Catherine McFadden, *At the Black Pig's Dyke* by Vincent Woods (TCD Players)

**BEST FEATURED ACTOR**  
Matt Turley, *At the Black Pig's Dyke* (TCD Players)

**BEST FEATURED ACTRESS**  
Hannah McCarthy, *Equus* and *The Sandbox* by Edward Albee (UCC Dramat)

**BEST SET DESIGN**  
Ivan Pilkington and Tom Creed, *Equus* (UCC Dramat)

**BEST COSTUMES AND MAKEUP**  
Jessica Hilliard and Tasha Coccia, *Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill (TCD Players)

**BEST TECHNICAL DESIGN**  
Kieran Hurley and Michael Ó Chéamhaigh, *Equus* (UCC Dramat)

**JUDGES' DISCRETIONARY AWARDS:**

**SEXIEST SHOW**  
*Breathing Water* by Raymond Scannell (UCC Dramat)

**EXCELLENCE IN NEW WRITING**  
*The Rock Bottom Café* by Edward Traynor and Darren McHugh (UCD Dramsoc)

*ISDA 2000 was hosted by UCD Dramsoc; the event coordinator was Chris O'Dowd.*

els and goals among its participants is part of what makes ISDA so exciting. Sitting on the stage at the SFX in all our finery on the awards night, in front of a cacophony of cheering, applauding, and booing, I realised why I had fallen in love with ISDA. In front of us were over a thousand sexy young Irish minds, roaring at the top of their lungs as they watched an extremely well organised and exciting stage show which celebrated all of their efforts.

And what were they roaring about? Theatre, that's what. Theatre is what these Irish students were cheering for and fighting over and losing sleep over. Theatre is what they were talking about at the festival club until late into the night and theatre was what they took issue with the

judges over (and there were many areas of disagreement, let me tell you, all of which we heard when the judging was over and the ground was levelled for honest confrontation). At ISDA theatre is the drug — and by God it's good for a bunch of bitter and tired old practitioners (if my fellow judges will pardon such a description) to be at the receiving end of a bit of that every now and again. Loved it? You bet I did. As Boy George might have said "I'd prefer a nice theatre festival to sex any day."

*Loughlin Deegan is a playwright and is part-time literary manager of Rough Magic.*

# INTO THE WEST

**SOPHIE GORMAN** gives a critical overview of some of the major theatre productions in the 21st annual Galway Arts Festival.

**T**HIS YEAR'S GALWAY ARTS FESTIVAL UNQUESTIONABLY proved itself to be much more than a colourful spectacle for visiting tourists. The Festival has suffered in previous years by being overshadowed by the evergrowing Macnas parade, but this year under new artistic director Rose Parkinson, the Festival clearly had theatre high on its scheduling agenda.

One of the international big-name items was Warren Leight's play *Sideman*, presented by the Chicago company Steppenwolf, which came festooned with significant acclaim including a 1998 Tony Award for Best Play. This tale of fragmented family life focuses on a talented jazz trumpeter, Gene, one of the last of a dying breed of side men — musicians who travelled from band to band until the jazz era faded from its heyday. Gene's ebbing relationship to his

wife Terri is seen through the eyes of the only tie that binds this couple, their son Clifford. Gene and Terri's union quickly spirals down a very slippery slope, as she develops a fondness for all things alcoholic to distract herself from the unpredictability of her spouse's chosen career, and from his ability to blinker himself from anything outside his music. As these cracks turn into chasms, Clifford's parents retreat into their own isolated worlds, abandoning their son to the status of onlooker onto their dysfunctional environment.

Although *Sideman* could hardly be described as a piece of explosive theatre, this slow burner triumphs in its pace, which wonderfully mirrors the bluesy jazz feel of its subject and its epoch. Anna D. Shapiro directs with a proficient yet gentle touch; Mark Wendland's evocative set wanders from the family's apartment, with its jumbled furniture daily arriving on loan from other side men, to Gene's real home, a traditional dive bar called Charlie's Melody Lounge.

Essentially, this production succeeds as a cohesive ensemble piece, with the necessary space allowed for each of the characters to ring true. But the individual performance that lingered longest was that of Jim True-Frost as Clifford, who was able to communicate both the innocence and awkwardness of a ten-year old boy as well as the wisdom of hindsight and maturity when he plays his actual age. This is all the more impressive considering True-Frost only took on the role two weeks prior to opening night, when the original leading man, Andrew McCarthy, was tempted away by a Hollywood movie offer.

Meanwhile, on Galway's main shopping street, crowds of tourists and family groupings huddled around the spectacle of four bald male figures sitting unmoving in chairs — all painted blue. Men or mannequins — that was the debate that had friends and complete strangers arguing long and hard, and returning regularly to put the display under increased microscopic examination. This even resulted in something of a moving statues phenomenon as, every once in a while, the more persistent would be rewarded with a discreet wink or a flick of the wrist. *Blue Boys*, a playful installation/performance by the Australian Neil Thomas, was high class illusion that kept you guessing.

This festival's big Irish production was guaranteed to win local support whatever



**LOCAL FAVOURITE:** Little John Nee

else, as it was produced by Galway favourites Macnas. The good news is that its appeal spans much wider than just with west of Ireland aficionados. Directed by Mikel Murfi, *The Lost Days of Ollie Deasy* hangs its hat very loosely on Homer's *Odyssey* — but don't expect an evening listening to heavy intellectual lectures when it arrives in the Mansion House for this year's Dublin Theatre Festival.

The production here transformed Salthill's Leisureland into a giant bus,

complete with a blind driver; the audience were sent on a very bumpy but extremely enjoyable journey — even if it was standing-room-only for all concerned (after all this was Bus Eireann). Various "Oirish" characters were sprinkled through the crowd, slightly elevated to ease identification, and were obviously regular travellers on this Westmeath-to-Saggart route. When a young stranger arrived on board, all eyebrows were raised.

On a mission driven entirely by his intuitive faith, young Terry Deasy has run away from home in search of his hurling hero father Ollie, whom he hasn't seen for over 20 years. Ollie (or O. Deasy

nation and ingenuity. The audience are transported to everything from a puppet-show pub, to a Kenmare sports day where a certain competitor displays suspiciously athletic ability to become the egg-and-spoon race victor, to even — when the bus inevitably breaks down with a puncture — a parish hall just in time for the final scene of the local drama club's production of *The Playboy of the Western World*. And sure, why not throw in a hurling match complete with marching band for the craic? Ollie Deasy provides huge, interactive fun of the scale that gives renewed hope for the creativity of Irish theatre.

Over in the Town Hall's Studio, a lunchtime performance proved to be hugely popular with the punters — an authentic sell-out success in fact. *The Ballad of Jah Kettle* is the final episode in Little John Nee's "Donegal Trilogy." The performance opens with the sounds of a train's arrival on the long-disused Donegal line, the only passenger on board being Jah Kettle, member of the Boyle family ("I've been on the boil all my life, that's where I got my name"). Returning to his rural home from America, Kettle's purpose is to scatter the ashes of his recently deceased best friend, Delta Danny Devine.

Half-spoken, half-sung directly to the audience, Nee's performance combines poignancy and his trademark rapier wit to evoke buried memories of his past. Nee has more than a faint touch of the unhinged lunatic about him, as he plays many colourful characters that crossed his path, ranging from the local hardmen to the devil — and even James Connolly (to tell him he's betrayed the people of Ireland). Though this high-energy show was admittedly rough around the edges Nee proved himself to be a most charismatic and expressive performer.



**A DYING BREED:** Sideman

for those still seeking a faint Homer link) was pronounced drowned after an accident on a ferry he'd taken after having helped win the all-Ireland hurling final in '64. The journey has just begun to get interesting.

This is sheer entertainment — pure and simple. Though it could fairly be criticised as simplistic in its symbolism, the production thrives on its endless imagi-

The second weighty American import was the newly formed Irish Repertory of Chicago's production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Most of the publicity around the production centred on the casting of John Mahoney (best known as Martin Crane on the sitcom *Frasier*) as the patriarch James Tyrone; but it was casting of the other roles that ended up being the root of this production's failure. Mahoney provided an acceptable, though unremarkable, Tyrone, but the credibility of the production was fatally undermined with the casting of young Annabel Armour as Tyrone's wife Mary (she could be Mahoney's daughter) and an equally unconvincing David Cromer, who just didn't look or behave the part as the younger son in this haunted Irish-American family.

As the shaky family structure of 35 years of marriage, tenuously held together by threats, proceeded to disintegrate at a balanced rate, the production's progress was less smooth — though similarly downhill. What is generally regarded as an important piece of ensemble theatre was performed instead as a series of adequate solo acts which co-existed on the same stage but never cohesively overlapped. Sheldon Patinkin's direction was notable only by its absence. As emotions flew about uncontrolled and unconvincing, the play's most poignant moments were lost beneath light comedy.

There can be no greater contrast between this arduous endeavour and my own personal Festival favourite — the three-minute-long *It's Your Film* from the British company Stan's Café. This is the-

atre at its most intimate: the lone audience member sits in a small black booth, like one you'd sit in for passport photos. A live, Kafkaesque "film" is played out as a series of stills from a haunting story of someone trying to retrieve lost love. Watching this personalised film is only half of the experience, however. The real beauty of *It's Your Film* is in sitting alone in this dark space, which rattles and creaks most disconcertingly, and watch-



**FAMILY STORY:** *Long Day's Journey into Night*

ing these actors tell a beautiful love story and a detective tale in a matter of moments. In this show which sums up all that was brave and exciting about this year's Festival, you become both the viewer and — when the spotlight is turned on you in the climactic scene and your reactions are exposed to the performers — the viewed. Three minutes was all it took to awaken the imagination and throw perspective firmly on its head.

*Sophie Gorman writes about theatre and other topics for The Irish Independent.*



# Green In Glasgow

*The Arches Theatre's recent festival, "Spring Greens," featured an impressively varied slate of new Irish theatre. So where was the audience, wonders ROBERT THOMSON.*

**I**N A RECENT ESSAY IN THE GLASGOW-BASED NEWSPAPER *The Herald*, the writer Hugh Dougherty — a familiar name to anyone who reads *The Irish Post* — penned a rather wistful essay on the decline of Irish culture in Scotland's largest city, focussing in particular on the loss of a sense of community within the former frontier outpost that was Glasgow's Southside. According to Dougherty, the Irish population's gradual move away from what he describes as its "Gorbals cradle," was ultimately the result of a kind of gentrification: education followed by advancement followed by assimilation (Celtic Football Club notwithstanding, of course.) Over the last 100 years the Irish community may have taken



over the city's Southern suburbs, but they have failed to make them their own.

And the writer perhaps has a point. In the mid-19th century, Irish immigrants poured into Glasgow at the rate of 1,000 a week, helping double the city's population between 1830 and 1870. If it could be argued (and some do) that almost half of Glasgow's current citizens could play for the Irish football team, one is left wondering where most of them were during the recent Irish season, "Spring Greens," at the Arches Theatre, a multi-purpose venue nestled in the arches under Glasgow Central Station. Given the low opening night attendance at many of the Festival shows, Glaswegian interest in Irish culture would seem restricted these days to Irish dancing (Glasgow hosts the World Championships in 2002) and the ubiquitous "Oirish" theme bar.

It's hard to pinpoint just what contributed to the light attendance at "Spring

**MAKING THE CROSSING:** Calipo's *Xaviers* (left) and Common Currency's *Bimbo* visited the Glasgow festival.

Greens." Irish theatre has proven very popular at the Edinburgh Festival—a city whose population was (and still in many ways is) the antithesis of the Irish, Catholic working class. Two years ago, Corcadorka had the runaway hit of the Festival with Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*; last year Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* led a very strong field of productions making the Seacat crossing to Stranraer. Yet the Arches couldn't drum up 11 people per night for what turned out to be an energetic, eclectic programme hand-picked from the 1999 Dublin Fringe.

Undoubtedly there were problems with the venue in terms of marketing and support. This feels galling given that the Arches currently has a multi-million

pound budget to play with — though, granted, this lottery money is for the very purpose of turning the Arches into one of Glasgow's most stylish venues: part theatre, part club. Perhaps we should just put "Spring Greens'" lack of a sense of occasion down to staff being preoccupied with architects and brickies, and hope that if artistic director Andy Arnold's talk of the Festival becoming an annual event is realised, the productions get the sort of audiences they deserve. And that, as we figured earlier, should be half the city.

If the Festival kicked off with little in the way of brouhaha, the opening-night production managed to generate its own energy — particularly impressive as it did so with no set, only one performer, and one lighting change. Greenlight Productions brought only one-half of their advertised double bill of early monologues by Conor McPherson, but the strength of their production of *The Good Thief* managed to help the spectator not feel short-changed. A highly-charged performance from Wayne Leitch, as the small-time villain dodging big-time gangsters, undoubtedly helped: knife-edge story, coercive narrative skills, and a very Irish kind of "craic."

The Arches has always been bedevilled by a noise pollution problem, what with the trains rumbling overheard and a hostel for the homeless next door — the lane separating the two buildings must be the Carnegie Hall of *al fresco* karaoke. There was something very immediate, therefore, in the opening image of Calipo Theatre's *Xaviers* — namely the burning to death of an old homeless man by four teenagers. In the production, the local authorities respond to this act of violence by sending a video director and drama worker to help the youths make a film of their lives. The



**THE VENUE:** *The interior of the Arches Theatre in Glasgow*

resulting video is honest and hard-hitting, slickly produced if messy with ideas, enjoyable if somewhat over-earnest. In truth, very much like Calipo's production itself. The setting is "Anytown, Ireland," though it could just as easily have been one of Glasgow's housing estates, and for all its universality, the assured young cast create a remarkably real sense of place, to go alongside a genuine feeling of despair, bravado, and waste.

Scotland's contribution to the Festival — Rapture Theatre Company's production of Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull*, managed to attract a larger local audience — very local, in one instance. Fresh from an alleyway singalong, an Arches neighbour decided to attend the opening night, though said gentleman did feel a compulsion to leave halfway through. Full marks to the company for coping admirably with the rather obvious distraction of a drunk wandering around the stage trying to find the exit.

Hutchinson's RUC officer and IRA suspect characters should of course be historical relics, arguing the toss about something that seemed important back in the '80s. The ongoing fragility of the peace process, allied to some strong performances, insured that the play lost

none of its tinderbox quality, though of all the Festival productions, the politics at the heart of this play did sound, to an outsider's ear at least, the most dated, particularly with other productions exploring more modish angst involving poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancies — and even, in the case of Common Currency's *Bimbo*, transsexualism!

This play, written by Rosie Barnes, does include some of the hoariest old stereotypes around: the mincing gay man, the tool-belt-clad lesbian, the anorexic bimbo blonde, the "beggars-can't-be-choosers" nerd. Yet for all its lack of sophistication, there is something both comic and convincing about Damien Devaney tottering around on heels as Brian/Abigail, and Sinead Murphy battling conformity as best-friend Jo — both surrounded by the fantastic larger-than-life puppets that constitute their lovers and acquaintances.

Completing the "Spring Greens" season were a couple of sporting productions: Chambermade's boxing drama *Journeyman* and Yew Tree's story of the Munster rugby team's 1978 victory over the All-Blacks, *Alone it Stands*. Turning sport into drama can be a tricky business,

yet both productions pull it off by using stylised choreography — dynamic enough to make us forget that we never actually get a glimpse of an oval ball in *Alone it Stands*, powerful enough to capture the battle of strength and skill between two men in the one-man show that is *Journeyman*. In the character of aging boxer Tommy Riley, writer Frank Shouldice has created a journeyman figure imbued with a sense of nobility and tragedy way beyond his hireling status. Yew Tree's rugby "haka," meanwhile, goes down a storm for all that Glasgow is not much of a rugby city.

Boxing, on the other hand, has always been a passionate force and a new housing development at the centre of the former Irish immigrant heartland of The Gorbals has recently been named after the boxer Benny Lynch. Though Sean O'Casey Street is perhaps a little too much to expect, with the right promotion, a season of exciting new Irish work could, and should, prove a popular draw. The Arches must not give up just yet.

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Glasgow native Robert Thomson is theatre critic of The Herald.

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# Volume Control

JOCELYN CLARKE and MARTIN MURPHY thumb through the latest theatre books.

## THE POLITICS OF IRISH DRAMA

by Nicholas Grene

(Cambridge University Press £14.95)

WHEN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW SAW W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's politically charged allegorical play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* in London in 1909, he turned to Lady Gregory and said "When I see that play, I feel it might lead a man to do something foolish." Lady Gregory, astonished by the normally unflappable and unnationalist Shaw's words, wrote in her diary that she was "as much surprised as if I had seen one of the Nelson lions scratch himself."

This is one of the many small but telling anecdotes that Nicholas Grene sprinkles throughout his lucid and provocative book *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*. It also, more importantly, echoes his book's central exploration of "Irish drama which is self-consciously concerned with the representation of Ireland" and "which is created as much to be viewed from outside as inside Ireland." Grene's book is concerned with the "politics" of representation in which Irish drama is "received abroad as different by virtue of its Irishness, in



Ireland that difference is turned on a gap in social milieu between characters and audience" — and occasionally between playwright and characters.

While Grene's study excludes Farquhar, Wilde, and most of Shaw — with the exception of *John Bull's Other Island* — it does include discussion of plays by Boucicault, Synge, Yeats, Gregory, O'Casey, Johnston, Behan, Friel, Beckett, and Murphy, which are selected to illustrate specific issues. His selection is not canonical but contextual — he discusses Friel's *Translations* rather than *Faith Healer* or *Dancing at Lughnasa*; Beckett's *All That Fall* instead of *Waiting For Godot*. Though his analysis of the plays is primarily textual, it necessarily includes their socio-political context, both as plays produced and plays received — from the

London and Dublin versions of Behan's *The Hostage* to both the *Playboy* and *Plough* riots, during which latter Yeats famously thundered to the Abbey mob, "You have disgraced yourselves again!" If Grene's focus is narrow — 12 plays and largely the 20th century — it is nevertheless deep and acute.

What is rewarding about Grene's elegantly and cleanly written book is his

clear-sighted and rigorous analysis of the interplay between text and context, particularly Irish drama's "otherness." In the gap between the metropolitan audience and the pre-modern West of Ireland negotiated by Synge, Yeats, and Gregory, and between the middle-class point of view and the social milieu presented by O'Casey and Behan, Ireland on stage is at once recognisable and different in its "distinctive otherness" to both national and international audiences.

Grene traces how succeeding Irish playwrights, from Boucicault and Gregory to Murphy and Friel, exploit this gap in their plays. He charts the dynamics and poetics of the relationship between playwright and play, and between play and audience — from Tom Murphy's dramatic reconstitution of pre-modern Ireland in the transformative narrative of *Bailegangaire*, to Synge's theatrical assault on the Catholic nationalist idyll of the West of Ireland. In his analysis of its politics, Grene offers a new consideration of Irish drama as something other than merely the reflection of the political condition of the country, and as more than a manifestation of national self-examination. Directed towards audiences abroad as well as home, Irish drama is "its own special tradition, with a quite marked intertextual line of descent, fulfilling its own role as interpreter of the national life both inside and outside Ireland." In exploring how Irish playwrights represent Ireland on stage, and locating their plays in both a national and an international context — the audiences to whom they are directed — Grene provides one of the most engaging and challenging overviews of 20th

century Irish drama. Best of all, *The Politics Of Irish Drama* makes you want to read the plays again, and to see new productions of them. *The Old Lady Says No!* anyone? —JOCELYN CLARKE

#### FABER CRITICAL GUIDES

(Faber and Faber £4.99)

FABER AND FABER HAVE JUST PUBLISHED THE first five in a planned series of concise guides to the major plays of the 20th century's leading playwrights — these first cover the work of Brian Friel, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. For use in the classroom, college, or home — or indeed by actors, directors and critics — the Faber Critical Guides offer a brief introduction to each playwright's work and its distinctive features, and quickly locates the plays in the context of modern theatre before launching into detailed analyses of each play, with an emphasis on language, structure and character, and some features of performance. All five are well-written and informative, offer accessible if orthodox analyses of their selected texts — anywhere between three and five plays per playwright — and provide cogent and entertaining interpretations of the playwrights and their plays. Jim Hunter's guide on Stoppard is particularly enjoyable: on Stoppard's early 1970's plays *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, Hunter writes, "so when in the 1980s smart people began to talk of post-modernism, Stoppard might reasonably have murmured that he'd already been there, showing his play as his T-shirt." Great stuff. For a fiver, you really can't go wrong. —JOCELYN CLARKE



**THEATRE STUFF:**  
**CRITICAL ESSAYS ON**  
**CONTEMPORARY IRISH THEATRE**

Edited by Eamonn Jordan  
 Carysfort Press; £14.99

THEATRE STUFF IS A VARIED COLLECTION of essays by the great and the good in Irish theatre and academia with, as editor Eamonn Jordan puts in his introduction, "no unifying coherence or argument, and no attempt ... made to establish [one]." It comes at a time which is both alive with possibility and fraught with anxiety for theatre in Ireland.

Some of this anxiety is evident in Fintan O'Toole's essay, "Irish Theatre: The State of the Art," in which O'Toole makes the case for a recognisable third phase in the development of Irish theatre. In O'Toole's argument, while the first phase was concerned with forging an agreed, as-yet imagined Ireland, and the second wrestled with an understood Ireland that everybody knew, this third is confronted with an Ireland that no longer exists, where the disparate experiences of its inhabitants are too fractured to have any hope of real agreement. Hence there is no possibility for naturalistic engagement with it by a writer in the theatre. The only way to deal with it is to create an "evoking" theatre, one which is characterised by inaction and an attention to character. This is familiar territory to anyone who follows O'Toole's *Irish Times* columns, but valuable nonetheless. In many ways as an overarching theory it serves to anchor the collection — so much so that one could have done with a direct reply.

Jocelyn Clarke's article on theatre criticism is a cautionary tale for theatre practitioners, or anyone who has tried their hand at speaking their mind in print. Clarke tells of an experience teaching Drama Studies students in Trinity: after

the students had reviewed Jim Nolan's *The Salvage Shop* (most of them negatively), Clarke invited Nolan himself to meet the students and explain his decisions, prompting students to reconsider the harshness of their comments in the light of the playwright's enlightened, humane comments. Clarke thus deftly drew the students' attention to the distinction between criticising and critiquing, and draws ours to the distinction between the work of a reviewer and a critic.

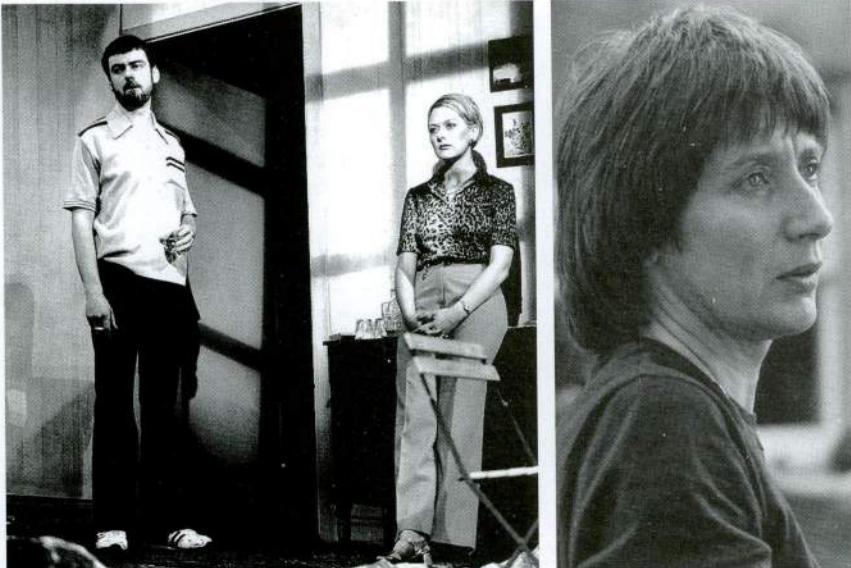
The articles on two of Brian Friel's plays make very apposite reading now that the dust of the Friel festival has settled and normal service is being resumed. In many ways Redmond O'Hanlon's article on *Living Quarters* is the most successful in the collection, underscoring the richness of a play that had lain unappreciated by many people until the recent Peacock production. O'Hanlon successfully manages to open up the whole subject of determinism in Greek tragedy — Friel subscribes the play "after Hippolytus" — and link it to the eternal Frielian concerns of memory and the urge to "replay" moments of crisis.

Bernice Schrank is less successful given that *The Freedom of the City* is a play that has stood the test of time less well, and that, as seemed apparent from the Abbey's recent production, questions of historical veracity seem to be of academic concern in the light of an event like Bloody Sunday, which was, as Saville is in the process of confirming, as near as damn it calculated slaughter. It is almost as if Friel was afraid to say what he really felt lest, irony of ironies, history should find against him.

In a similar way Declan Kiberd and Anne Kelly's articles on Tom Murphy complement his recent work. Declan Kiberd's analysis of opera in Tom Murphy and Tom Murphy as opera takes

as its subject *The Gigli Concert* and the search for redemption through something as frivolous and holy as singing like your hero. That JPW does this in preference to the love of a good (and dying) woman is for Kiberd the stuff of opera, Mona's offer of unconditional love being the transcendent event that allows the tragic hero his apotheosis. For Anne Kelly, however, it is

But is this any wonder given a writer who, more than any other, is concerned with excavating what it means to be an Irish man? Riana O'Dwyer claims in her article on Marina Carr and Christina Reid that Carr is only doing now for the female experience what Murphy was doing for the male experience in the '60s; does that not mean Carr is open to the



**A CRITICAL LOOK:** Living Quarters, and Christina Reid

LIVING QUARTERS: AMELIA STEIN

a mark of how little Murphy is interested in his women as anything more than symbols. Kelly's article looks at a number of Murphy's women, including Mona, and asks the question "why are women denied access to the shaman journey in Murphy's plays?" Even in *Bailegangaire*, with the strange multilayering of Mommo's narrative, Kelly is less than convinced that Mommo operates as anything like a meaning-maker.

same criticism? For while not wishing to overburden a writer who to all intents and purposes has been the female voice in main stage Irish theatre for the last five years, the question remains whether she has yet created a male character who is anything more than antagonist and/or oppressor to her heroes? Where are the male meaning-makers in her work?

But in the final analysis, there are two ghosts haunting this collection of essays,

and the reader only comes face to face with them in the final chapters. In her perceptive analysis of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy* Karen Vandervelde argues for the plays being "a painful portrayal of victims of loneliness and repression. Coleman's words 'We should not laugh' are the very epitome of this complex interplay of the tragic and the comic."

However, whilst in Ireland his *Leenane* is seen for the most part as having the authenticity of a rather superior version of Father Ted, "abroad, McDonagh's drama is often in danger of becoming the opposite, an authentic representative picture, made attractive with funny hilarious incidents." And there's the rub. How do you stop strangers from seeing what they want to see?

This question is if anything of even more concern with a writer as slippery as Conor McPherson, where apparent simplicities belie a hugely subtle metatheatrical spine. Scott Cummings in his analysis of the role of the storyteller in McPherson is fully aware of the traps that the author is laying for the unwary, and revels in the radical ambiguities therein. But the downside is surely when a hugely unsettling and uneasy play like *The Weir* can become the "love-in" that graced the Gate stage recently. This is the spectre that is haunting new Irish theatre: That it has never been so successful internationally, but how long before "what we want to say" becomes "what they want to see" for good?

It would have been nice for this and the whole "McTheatre" phenomenon to have been given an essay of its own. Other quibbles present themselves as well: Some kind of editorialising, like assigning themes or subheadings, would have been useful in a book this heavy (28 articles in all, nearly 400 pages). Eric Weitz's behind-the-scenes article on Barabbas' production

style in *The Whiteheaded Boy* cuts a very lonely figure; generally one would have preferred a bit more on the making of theatre and a bit less on the writing of it. And there are the inevitable sins of omission — personally I would have preferred articles on Paul Mercier and Gary Mitchell rather than those on Dermot Bolger and Tom MacIntyre.

But on the plus side, Declan Hughes' reflections on identity are a feisty riposte to O'Toole's Irish cultural hall of mirrors; Ger Fitzgibbon eloquently delineates the appeal of the plays of Sebastian Barry, a theatre "that has all the aimless fluency of a dream; yet it is not a theatre of pathos or nostalgic escape." Anna McMullan and Victor Merriman champion the importance of theatre for specific audiences, the former in relation to the work of women playwrights, the latter in a valuable critique of Calypso. And Jordan himself contributes a lively meditation on play in McGuinness' work.

Here's a final meditation of my own. If Fintan O'Toole is right and we are in the throes of an evoking age, where the new realities can only be approached through character rather than action, does that mean that we are condemned only to have the theatre of the threnody, the dying fall, where tradition always gets shafted by progress, where "proper" values are ground down by ignorance and materialism, where our heroes will never quite make it to Moscow or Sligo or wherever, where the disturbing pub storytelling of a bunch of sad old men is meant to make you want to embrace them rather than kick them in the head? Maybe that's only right in our new, professionalised arts environment. Give 'em what they want.

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*Martin Murphy is artistic director of TEAM Theatre Company.*

# Entrances and Exits

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

**STELLA HALL** (pictured) has been appointed as the new director of Belfast Festival at Queens. Hall, who is currently the director of the Warwick Arts Centre, will take up her position in September... **JANE DALY** has been contracted as producer of Theatre Shop... **TAMARA DILLON** has vacated the position of development manager with the Dublin Theatre Festival, and **MAURA O'KEEFFE** is serving as marketing and development manager for this year's Festival.



**RÓISÍN McDONOUGH** will replace Brian Ferran as chief executive of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland when he retires in October. McDonough is currently chief executive of the West Belfast Partnership... **LIZ CULLOTY**, previously of the Glens Centre, Manorhamilton and Island Theatre Company, is the new director of Belltable Arts Centre... **ALISON FORDHAM** has been appointed director of Cork's Triskel Arts Centre... **DEREK VERSO** has moved from his position as arts officer at Waterford Corporation to assume the role of director of Droichead Arts Centre in Drogheda... **OLIVER HURLEY** replaces **JOHN SHEEHAN** as artistic director of Siamsa Tíre... **SHEA McNELIS** has been

appointed venue manager of the Tivoli Theatre... The Crescent Arts Centre has advertised the position of director following the departure of **LOUISE EMERSON**. Emerson has moved to England to work for London Calling. **LIZ DONNAN** will assume the role of acting manager until an appointment is made... **HUGO JELLET**, formerly of Gowran Park Racecourse, is the new marketing manager of the Gaiety Theatre, and **MELIOSA GORMLEY** has been appointed as box office manager.

**MARK ROONEY** has been promoted to the position of production manager at The Ark... **RAY DUFFY** is the new technical manager of the Samuel Beckett Centre... **PAUL WINTERS**, previously of the Crypt, has moved to the position of production manager at the City Arts Centre.

**ENID REID WHYTE**, general manager of Barabbas, will leave her position in October to study for a M.Phil. degree in Drama Studies at TCD. Her position will be advertised... Tinderbox has yet to announce a replacement artistic director following the departure of **STEPHEN WRIGHT**. **PAULA McFETRIDGE** is acting as literary man-



ARTHUR GOUGH

ager for Tinderbox until the end of 2000... **JENNY HUSTON**, formerly of Red Rage Films and Voicebank, is the new administrator of the Corn Exchange... **JANICE JARVIS**, artistic director of Replay Productions, will leave her position at the end of the year to pursue a career as a freelance director... Daghdha Dance Company have appointed the formerly New York-based choreographer **YOSHIKO CHUMA** (pictured) to the position of artistic director. **MONICA SPENSER**, previously executive director of Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork, has been appointed as Daghdha's chief executive... **NICK COSTELLO**, formerly marketing and development officer with Opera

Theatre Company, moves to the position of senior publicist with Kate Bowe PR... Galloglass Theatre Company have appointed **BRID FINN**, previously of Limerick's Umbrella Project, to the position of office manager. Also at Galloglass, **CLIONA MAHER** is the company's new outreach and education officer.

**KAREN LOUISE HEBDEN** has been appointed as theatre director of the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire. Hebdon comes to the Pavilion from the JFK Repertory Company, Kent, England... **JEAN BRENNAN**, previously with Omagh District Council, is the new arts manager of the Ballymun Arts and Community Resource Centre. **SEAN COOKE** is chief executive officer of the centre... **MICHAEL POYNOR**, formerly of the Ulster Theatre Company, has been appointed as chief executive of Derry's new Millennium Theatre Complex which is due to open in mid-2001. The centre comprises a flexible main auditorium seating up to 1023 and a 100-seat studio theatre.

#### SITUATIONS VACANT:

**THE PAVILION THEATRE** has advertised the positions of technical manager, administrator and front of house manager, along with other positions including assistant administrator/box office manager, bar staff, and ushers... **TEAM EDUCATIONAL THEATRE COMPANY** has advertised for an additional administrator and an education officer... **BIG TELLY THEATRE COMPANY** is looking for a replacement administrator following the departure of Una E. Kealy...

**BARNSTORM — KILKENNY THEATRE ARTS** are seeking an administrator and a youth theatre leader... Derry's **MILLENNIUM THEATRE COMPLEX** has advertised the position of marketing manager. ■

*continued from page 19*

Beyond the artistic activity apparent on the EXPO site, MacConghail has quite imaginatively stretched his £1.2 million budget (out of Ireland's total £9.1 million EXPO spend) to support a number of other projects. There will be four visual artists-in-residence at EXPO over the five months, who've been given a studio and a chance to work in a new environment (or, in the case of young artist Ronan McCrea, to piss off EXPO officials: In late July McCrea staged an artistic intervention by distributing leaflets on the European Boulevard questioning what might have been left out of EXPO (where people without a country might figure in its cosmology, for example), while dressed in a skunk costume and wearing a sign saying "Das is Echt" (This is Real). While German police had no problem with what McCrea was doing, clearly this kind of activity doesn't fit EXPO's image of itself; McCrea was eventually escorted off the site because he was carrying no identification.)

Other EXPO theatre presentations include visits from the National Association for Youth Drama and Belfast's Young at Art, and other, less evident theatrical activity has included Loose Canon's Jason Byrne spending three weeks in Hannover observing über-director Peter Stein preparing his 21-hour production of *Faust*, and tours of Meridian's *The Mistress of Silence* and Gare St. Lazare's *Molloy* to Berlin.

How much of this pro-arts, "Ireland is a country in positive flux" message comes across to the ordinary EXPO visitor? The Hannoverian whose house I stayed in went to the Irish pavilion and emailed me later that he "didn't really get much from it." This is anecdotal, of course; what the actual benefit will be feels impossible to quantify or qualify.

The most tangible benefit of our cultural presence there remains the direct support that artists have received, both in terms of commissioning money and/or experience.

The impressions that have stuck with me after my three days in EXPO limbo feel like a plate of cultural tapas, little bites of information, amusement, dismay, and irony about different countries and EXPO itself: The intensity of my guide in the German pavilion as she told me that "there are no answers in Germany... we are figuring out who we are." The fact that the Japanese pavilion is completely made of paper. How easy it was for some countries, in trying to say something about themselves in a "universal" visual/technological language, to say absolutely nothing (Canada and the U.K. were the worst offenders in this). The groovy artificial tornado in the pavilion sponsored by the German recycling company. The fact that the U.S. didn't even bother to show up ("Scandalous!" scolded one of the Celtic Cubs in the Irish pavilion). The Nepalese pavilion, a gorgeous wooden structure intricately carved by 80 Nepalese nationals brought to the site for that purpose. The free chocolate and beer you get in Belgium.

Does any of this add up? Is there really anything of substance to learn about other cultures at EXPO? Does this expenditure of billions of international dollars make sense when there is still so much poverty and inequality in the world? Too many hard questions. I know the realest thing I did while I was at EXPO was to leave the site (and the Irish pub) behind and watch France beat Portugal in Euro2000 in a local bar. Sport and live conversation will always make sense, but 160 hectares of global-ideas Disneyland, I still can't figure.



**MEDEA****by Euripides**

The Abbey Theatre

27 May - 1 July 2000;

reviewed on 20 June BY FINTAN O'TOOLE

PLATO, A RATIONAL MAN, WANTED TO KEEP the likes of Euripides out of his ideal republic. Deborah Warner's startling production of *Medea* at the Abbey showed how right he was. All the shock and disturbance, the numbing unreason that defies the very notion of an ideal world, was unleashed in Fiona Shaw's performance. Here was a vivid and ferocious reminder that before they were classics, Euripides' great plays were explosive blasts of human truth. Here too was the living evidence that, in the right hands, they can be so again.

While good theatre results from careful calculation, hard work, and talent, great theatre flirts with disaster. It risks the possibility of being very bad indeed. It takes the stuff of theatrical catastrophe — over-statement, incoherence, misplaced realism — and transforms them into something large, rich and visceral. So it was with this *Medea*. Warner and Shaw took extraordinary aesthetic risks and created a work of extraordinary power.

Risk, admittedly, is unavoidable in any serious production of a Greek tragedy. For all the venerable history of texts like *Medea* there is, for a director, no real choice but to start from scratch. The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays don't contain stage directions, though from other sources it is clear that the staging was austere, distanced by masks and music and highly formal. But it would be nonsense to try to recreate this style in a

modern theatre. *Medea* was written to be played before an audience of at least 17,000 people. If Deborah Warner had been invited to stage the play in Croke Park, an attempt to recreate the original style might make some sense. Since the play was at the Abbey, there was no choice but to invent a way of playing it.

Faced with that imperative, most directors tend nevertheless to create a relatively stark, open space for the action. Warner's first big risk was to reject this instinct. Tom Pye's brilliant set — one of the best uses of the Abbey stage in its 34-year history — created in essence three different playing spaces. The main area, in the foreground, was a kind of stylised courtyard, an open public space in which the chorus and the characters met and spoke. At the back, behind a wall of glass or Perspex, was a private but visible space, accessible essentially to Medea and her circle. Below was a purely private space, which the audience could not see but from which the offstage noises that punctuate the play could be heard.

In lesser hands, this complex arrangement of space into public, semi-public, and private arenas might fragment and disrupt the action. Here, it gave the action both a new subtlety and a terrifying immediacy. To hear Medea's animal cries of rage from below the stage at the start of the play and then see Shaw emerge as a cool, ironic creature was to get at once the unsettling sense of a woman constructing a public self. To witness her murdering her children in the walled-off area at the back of the stage was to have an immediate image of the state of mind that besets us throughout the play — we can see what's happening but are powerless to prevent it.

The second risk in the production was Shaw's decision to allow into the play the last thing anyone would expect to find there — humour. Her Medea, especially in the early part of the play, had a kind of haughty flippancy, a bitter, self-lacerating wit that, with any ordinary actor, would be utterly at odds with the austere terror of the piece. Shaw, though, has the precision, intelligence, and fluidity to be more than one thing at any one moment. Here, in just one aspect of the finest performance on an Irish stage since Donal McCann in *Faith Healer*, she showed us both this carapace of upper-class irony and the soft flesh of hurt and rage beneath. Instead of undercutting the emotion, the humour controlled and sharpened it.

The last big risk was in Warner's handling of the play's climax, when Jason is confronted by Medea with the bodies of his murdered children. Again, there is no real choice but to re-invent these moments, for in the original text, Jason finds Medea and the dead boys suspended in mid-air, on a chariot drawn by dragons sent by her grandfather the Sun. No director could recover the real meaning of this stylised, broadly religious image for a modern audience.

Warner's daring, however, lies in the fact that she moved almost as far from this heavily stylised image as it is far to go, pushing it all the way into the visceral realism of Medea, in a costume like a butcher's apron, confronting Jason with the lifeless corpses of two real children. Yet again, this pushed right at the edge of bathos. Yet again, the astonishing mixture of poised control and utter devastation in Shaw's playing of the scene steered it precisely towards the apex of constrained horror that Greek tragedy aims for.

There were other factors contributing

to the scarifying power of the production: the choice of Kenneth MacLeish's vibrant yet stately translation; the use of the Irish language and sean nós singing both to connect gracefully with the Abbey of John Synge and to locate Medea as a stranger in a strange land; the apparently effortless but quite ingenious re-shaping of the chorus into a natural gathering of women; the clarity of purpose of Garrett Keogh, Barry McGovern, and Patrick O'Kane in the main male roles; and the excellent work of the Abbey's technical crews. But, as is always the case with the best theatre, the parts melded into the whole: a tremendous fusion of myth and reality.

*Fintan O'Toole is an Irish Times journalist.*

#### ALL IN THE HEAD

by Liam Meagher

Red Kettle Theatre Company  
The Forum Theatre, Waterford  
28 February - 11 March 2000; reviewed  
on 11 March BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

BEN HENNESSY'S FIRST PRODUCTION as artistic director of Red Kettle was a real affirmation of theatre and community. *All In The Head* was a huge undertaking, for which the Forum Theatre's large auditorium was brilliantly redefined, and the commitment, imagination, and resources of the ever-expanding Waterford theatre scene mobilised. The cast included professional actors alongside members of Little Red Kettle (the company's youth theatre wing), Waterford Youth Drama, and Stagefright, a local amateur company. The set was designed with economy and wit by Dermot Quinn, artistic director of the Spraoi Festival.

*All in the Head* was children's theatre for everyone, in the sense that it staged



**BREATHE DEEPLY:** *All in the Head*

the content of young people's emotional lives in a way which spoke both to young people and to a general theatre audience. The action takes place over two highly significant days in the life of young Carl: the eve and the occasion of his 13th birthday. It's a rite-of-passage story for the year 2000, making use of three interacting locations: Carl's brain (with actors playing personified faculties such as Sensor Oculus); his neighbourhood — the street, playground, and school grounds; and the world perceived through Carl's eyes — represented by synchronised video monitors positioned centrally on the backdrop. The interplay between these locations was pacy, witty, and well-thought-through, both in the

writing and production.

Playwright Liam Meagher has written regularly for Little Red Kettle; this experience shows in his remarkable ability to create dialogue for young adolescents and to drive an engaging storyline. The story here concerns Carl's awakening interest in Tia, which is comically amplified by the diminutive Bigsy, and complicated by the prior claim on her asserted by the bully, Mullane. There is ongoing sibling contempt between Carl and his sister Debbie, and a caring mother who can only guess at what might have been going on in her almost-teenage son's head. The personification of the sensors of the brain — and of the faculty that coordinates them, Mr. Thalamus (well-played by Brian de Salvo) — was an effective device, and Hennessy's direction drew maximum value from such one-dimensional personae.

For all the seriousness of its exploration of hormonal confusions, the pace and comic language were vaudevillian, with gleeful borrowings from the most enduring form of popular children's theatre, pantomime. But this derivative quality was not unproblematic. Theatre for young people has the inherent potential to challenge the sedentary, atomised cultural practices of global consumerism; that potential was here somewhat undermined by an indulgence in national stereotyping and cliché. There was a persistent flavour of a jaded British humour in the interactions of the cut-out personifications, which came through even in names such as Sensor Niff (straight out of Beano and formula gameshows). There were also obvious cockshots of British popular culture,

for instance the assertion, personified in Sensor Niff, that intelligent people are out of touch, difficult to understand, and boring.

This is a problem for a number of reasons: all of this action is going on in Carl's head, and Carl and the other youngsters speak a glorious rapid-fire Waterford slang that lights up the stage and the auditorium when they are present. It is simply inconsistent to posit a "hoity-toity" Britishness as the signifier of intellectual functioning in his brain. While the play sensitively explores local macho culture as a clash of unequal bodies — Mullane is a hulking brute compared to Carl — this exploration does not extend to its representation of intelligence and verbal dexterity.

All the performances were uniformly strong, with Christopher Dunne and Emma Tallon charming and real as Carl and Tia, and Jack Doyle Ryan demonstrating a real aptitude for comic playing as Bigsy. Dave Curran and Jamie Beamish's sound design enhanced the experience, and justice, hope and special effects combined to produce a final coup de theatre which had the audience on its feet in joyous appreciation.

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

#### **DEALER'S CHOICE**

**by Patrick Marber**

Prime Cut Productions

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast and on tour; reviewed on 29 March 2000 at the Market Place Theatre, Armagh, BY PÓL Ó MUIRÍ

PATRICK MARBER'S *DEALER'S CHOICE* is Freud with cards — not so much penile envy as place a bet. Using the device of the game, Marber delves into the psyches

and neuroses of six men and, perhaps, of men in general. He constructs a story around a weekly game of poker and the stresses and strains which inevitably arise out of losing money.

The play is set in a restaurant, where five of the six characters live in each other's pockets on a daily basis. Stephen is the owner; Mugsy, Sweeney, and Frankie all work for him. Carl is Stephen's ne'er-do-well son. The last character, Ash, is a professional gambler to whom Carl is in debt.

It is a motley group. Dan Gordon's character Stephen is the most interesting and most complex of the lot. He is a control freak's control freak, browbeating reluctant staff into playing poker when they don't want to, meticulously recording games played and cashing staff losses against overtime.

It is this latter trait which is the most disturbing. Stephen is effectively a slave owner who hides his manipulation behind false bonhomie. He buys his staff's labour through their own "friendly" poker school. Being one of the better players in the school — much better than Mugsy or Sweeney and good enough to beat Frankie on a regular basis — he is in little danger of losing control of the other men.

Frankie McCafferty's Mugsy, meanwhile, is the stock funny character — lovable, naïve and dim. He dreams of opening his own business with Carl by turning a toilet into a restaurant. It never occurs to him that it will never happen. Carl, a failed gambler, is resentful of his father yet needs his largesse to survive. Needless to say, he comes to resent every favour granted. Sweeney is the cook who lacks the imagination to be anything else. Frankie has dreams of Las Vegas and being a professional poker player. Ash is by turns a big fish in a small pond and a small fish in a big one, a professional



JILL JENNINGS

**FACE-OFF:** *Dealer's Choice*

poker player who owes big money to other professionals.

It is a fine ensemble piece; Gordon and McCafferty had the plum roles and didn't disappoint. Gordon, in particular, gave a fine performance as a man in the grips of constant, controlled rage and frustration, while McCafferty's Mugsy acted the eejit as and when required. Derek Halligan's Ash was an excellent portrayal of the professional gambler; part weasel, part victim, he happily cleaned out the less able.

Michael Liebmann, Vincent Higgins and Alan McKee were all convincing as Carl, Frankie, and Sweeney, respectively, though their characters aren't as well-rounded as the other three. (Odd too, to hear so many well-known Irish actors affecting English accents. Is this post-colonialism?)

The set was functional. Acts One and Two, (overly long introductions) happen in the restaurant kitchen and dining room, while Act Three, the real meat of the drama, is played out around the basement poker table. It's only when the players gather for this claustrophobic last supper that you get some idea of what

haunts them. Caught in a vicious circle of big loss and limited gain, they lack the courage not to play. Not playing would be sissy — and these are men, big hard men who take their knocks as they come. Much is made of the "honour" involved in cards. Debts, especially, must be "honoured."

Nonetheless, it is a work which leaves you strangely unmoved; the macho posturing wears thin. These people are empty vessels; hence, no doubt, the amount of noise they make about inconsequential matters. One theme which is not developed sufficiently and which may have given the work some added poignancy is the relationship between Sweeney and the daughter he seldom sees. A stab is made in the direction of showing the consequences of Sweeney's gambling on his family life but it just doesn't come across as completely convincing. Nevertheless, *Dealer's Choice* was a refreshing change of pace for a Northern theatre company, and Tim Loane's direction was sound, particularly in the third act, which rattled along like a runaway train — no chance to draw breath, let alone make a choice.

Pól Ó Muirfe is a poet, critic, and is Irish language editor of The Irish Times.

**A DOLL'S HOUSE**

by Henrik Ibsen, in a version by  
**Frank McGuinness**

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast  
21 April - 20 May 2000; Reviewed  
on 20 May BY BRIAN SINGLETON

A HOUSE IN WHICH THE CHILD moves diminutive figurines at whim, playing out both anxieties and fantasies,



**HIS "SKYLARK":** Tina Kellegher and Eoin McCarthy in *A Doll's House*

trapping the self within the confines (physical and moral) of dominant ideology, is the setting for *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's 1879 indictment of the hegemony of patriarchy. What does this modernist classic have to say to us in 2000, and how effective is its gender conflict in a post-feminist world? These are questions any director should address in order to justify this programming choice. The status of the play in the theatrical canon and the profile of the playwright-translator are not sufficient. The literalness of director Simon Magill's approach to the text in the recent Lyric Theatre production tends to suggest that he has no "take" on the subject, and that its production is justified only by the status of both author and translator.

Ibsen presents a Darwinian world of naturalism, in which the sins of the parents are passed on to the children, where social and moral order is maintained by

the inculcation of the belief in the heredity of degeneracy. It is a world of positivist science, of cause and effect, of homeostasis. It is a rational, modern world ordered to ensure the smooth passage of production and consumption. It is a world where man and woman observe their respective places. Those who break the rules of the game are punished by expulsion from family and society.

The relevance for contemporary Northern Irish society is unmistakable, with the fervent religiosity of temperance and Lord's Day observance which infects the still seemingly Victorian atmosphere of Belfast. Thus, instead of a vagueness of geographical location in Magill's production, might we not have been better served by a South Belfast red-brick and a homogeneity of accents, and moreover by some ideological stance on the subject? By this I mean not condescending

contemporising, but providing enough directorial markers to ensure contemporary relevance.

It would be very easy to read the doll trapped, Nora, as a nascent though unwitting feminist, a butterfly, a performing delight for her husband Torvald, and whose survival instinct is based on the sacrifice (or at least concealment) of her pleasure. Fully aware of her position, her tactics consist of eking out a modicum of pleasure within the macro-strategy of patriarchal control, indulging her sweet tooth in secret, investing her passion in her children, and avoiding any confrontation with the painful reality of her existence. It would also be very easy to read Torvald as a domineering, controlling, and thoroughly sexist individual.

Frank McGuinness' version carefully steers us away from such readings, creating dialogue for husband and wife, within the first act, which destabilises fixed notions of their opposing positions. Nora's commands ("Don't!" "Don't!") are repeated to give the semblance of coping tactics, but their excessive repetition points to desperation and hollowness. Similarly, her expressions or words at the ends of sentences are repeated, too, suggesting that she might not be fully convinced by what she is saying. To truly destabilise her, two meanings, one for the expression at its first utterance and one for its immediate repetition, might be found to indicate such insecurity.

In Magill's production, however, Tina Kellegher's Nora played the repetition as a simple echo, reinforcing her first meaning rather than challenging it. The potential for destabilising her self-belief thus became a two-dimensional creation, a monotonous whine instead of what McGuinness offers, namely a search through discourse for a way forward.

Torvald (Eoin McCarthy) played pre-

dictably Nora's polar opposite, a man of few measured moves, controlling her through patronising, hollow pet-names (his favourite being "skylark"). He danced around her, never suggesting a sexual, let alone marital, relationship. His final-act explosion at the discovery of his wife's deceit came from nowhere. No indication of his temper prefaced the outburst and thus it rang hollow, like a pathetic and unreconstructed Basil Fawlty.

And yet somewhere amidst all this lack of truthfulness, Magill, intentionally or not, managed to present, not a nasty husband and his pathetic wife, but two children, frightened of themselves, each other, marriage, and society. This was pointed up even more by wonderfully truthful performances by three child-actors. In a literal, doll's house set, with heavy handed "symbolic" lighting shifts, this was uncomfortable and unsettling: real children in a world controlled by adults trapped in a doll's house childhood. Furthermore, Lalor Roddy's Dr. Rank, whose measured and poignant stoicism, touchingly understated, in the face of death, pointed up Nora and Helmer's hysterical response to life. He revealed the complexity of Ibsen's characterisation, namely the conflict between the public and private self.

Whereas the production's handling of some of the play's symbolic elements (light and dark mirroring character development, for example) was at times heavy handed, particularly in the use of some very dubious lighting changes, Nora's notorious final door-slapping exit was not merely subtle, but in fact barely audible, signifying that one woman's moment of epiphany and rejection of patriarchy had little or no effect. Torvald remained centre stage, clearly shaken, but clearly present and dominant.

A recent rash of newspaper criticism

has praised this literalness of approach, and that of other productions, such as the Peacock's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. To me, literalness smacks of indecision, apathy, and perhaps fear. Nora's door-slammimg should polarise an audience and not invite our measured objectivity. Deadly theatre, like this, is never challenging, shocking, polemical, or simply gut-wrenching. I cannot wait for a future production of McGuinness' impressive translation to engage me in its trauma.

*Brian Singleton lectures in the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin.*

### THE FORCE OF CHANGE

by Gary Mitchell

The Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs  
6 - 29 April 2000; reviewed on 10 April

BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON

GARY MITCHELL'S SECOND PLAY FOR THE Royal Court is a cracker. But it also leaves one puzzled. Why, since it deals with the internal workings and ethical codes of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is it getting its premiere in the 100-seat Theatre Upstairs? Obviously a London debut insures massive media coverage. On the other hand, this is a play that cries out to be aired, argued about, and chewed over in the author's native Belfast.

Mitchell's great gift, as he showed last year in *Trust*, is for writing about a world he knows first-hand; also for combining moral debate with exciting entertainment. *The Force of Change*, in fact, is like *Prime Suspect* with politics: a police procedural that expands into a devastating portrait of Northern Ireland as a series of interconnected, almost masonic, fraternities. He is not simply saying that there is evidence of collusion between the RUC and loyalist paramilitary groups like the

UDA: we know that from the newspapers. He is suggesting that they are linked by something far stronger: a declining sense of idealism, a fierce resistance to change, and, not least, a pervasive, paralysing male ethic.

Gender is, in fact, a key issue in this new play. Two claustrophobic, cop-shop interview rooms, linked by a long corridor, are on view in Simon Higlett's ingenious design. In one of them, Detective Sergeant Caroline Patterson, a 35-year-old married woman with two children, is interrogating a suspected UDA terrorist ringleader, Stanley Brown: she has only five hours in which to nail her man before he is released. What is clear from the surly attitude of her attendant Detective Constable, Bill Byrne, is that she is viewed with a great deal of internal suspicion; she's a woman, she's got a shaky track record, and yet she is being fast-tracked for promotion. Meanwhile, at the other end of the corridor, two of her male colleagues, Mark Simpson and David Davis, are grilling a teenage joyrider who is suspected of being a UDA messenger-boy and who may incriminate the tight-lipped Brown.

Instantly, Mitchell sets up a fascinating contrast between the two investigations. Caroline tries to crack her mute man by barbed taunts and by cataloguing the intimidation of elderly witnesses. She even suggests that the Ulster Defence Association was once an honourable group set up to defend the Unionist population. "What," she rhetorically asks, "has this great Protestant organisation become? A bunch of half-wit criminals like you." But, while she attacks Brown with solo, single-minded ferocity, her male colleagues in the other room perform like a well-oiled comic double-act trying to trap the adolescent messenger into false admission. The juxtaposition of



### **CONFRONTATIONAL: The Force of Change**

the two interviews instantly makes a point about female isolation and all-guys-together complicity.

What Mitchell shows, however, with escalating tension and some brilliance, is the way gender complicity shades into political collusion. Without giving the game away, it is clear from early on that Caroline's sidekick enjoys an unspoken rapport with the suspect: both the old Bill and the silent Stanley seem equally disgusted with Caroline's form of questioning. And when Bill, who has spent 30 years in the force without promotion, gets his chance to question Stanley, all the rancorous disappointment of his Protestant generation emerges. The peace process is a sell-out. The Patten Report is a joke. The Union is no longer safe in the hands of David Trimble. "If we're to stop this current trend of conceding to every Nationalist whim," he tells Brown, "then we have to work together." In one way,

it's a classic cop technique of softening up the victim. At the same time, it expresses the suppurating rage of the hard-line Unionist and exposes the ideological similarity between the constabulary and the criminal.

Mitchell makes political points while showing the police at work. But perhaps his greatest talent as a dramatist is for constantly undermining the audience's moral certainty. It happened in *Trust* where a UDA hard man and his wife joined battle over their son: having entrusted one's sympathy to the wife, one then discovered she was far more ruthless than her husband. And here there are similar shifts in the moral viewpoint. At first we instinctively side with Caroline who is trying to nail a terrorist mastermind while coping with internal prejudice and domestic problems; but, while she maintains her moral integrity, you begin to wonder if positive discrimina-

tion has promoted her beyond her talents.

Equally Mitchell leads you on to condemn Northern Ireland's tribal loyalties and the tendency of the RUC to close ranks when it discovers internal corruption; yet David, the young Detective Constable who seems to embody everything that is reactionary within the RUC, is also the one who does most to protect Caroline when she is under threat. I think it is perfectly clear where Mitchell stands: he is for the peace process and radical reform of the RUC. But he is a good enough dramatist and honest enough commentator to show that, even within Northern Ireland, there are plenty of moral grey areas.

From a mainland perspective, his final achievement is to have banished the kind of Northern Irish stereotypes peddled by the media and to have quickened our interest in the troubled province: no-one living in Ireland, I suspect, has the faintest idea of the groaning fatigue that now greets coverage of the Northern Irish issue. But Mitchell succeeds in bringing it to vivid theatrical life. He is also brilliantly served by Robert Delamere's production at the Royal Court which keeps the tension taut as a bowstring.

Cathy White, who recently played in *The Weir*, was understandably a bit edgy on press night: what she caught superbly, however, was the strain for a woman Detective Sergeant of feeling that it is not just she but her whole gender that is somehow on trial. Sean Caffrey as the mutinous old sweat, Jason Isaacs and Stuart Graham as the ambitious RUC men, Stephen Kennedy as the ferociously stubborn suspect, and Gerald Jordan as the giggling, cocksure young joyrider were also beyond praise. In all honesty, it's a long time since I've felt such tension in any London theatre on a first night.

But when I asked a Belfast colleague why the play wasn't being done there, he said quite simply, "It's too near the truth." I just hope some theatre there plucks up the courage to do a play that has the rare virtue of being both politically topical and dramatically timeless.

*Michael Billington is theatre critic of The Guardian.*

### MARCHING ON

**by Gary Mitchell**

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast  
9 June - 1 July 2000; reviewed  
on 13 June BY EAMONN MCCANN

"WHEN [THE MARCH] IS NOT BANNED... DO we win? No. Do they lose? No. Because they've always marched, so therefore we can never win and they can never lose."

Aspirations choked at every turn, kick-the-Pope bandsman Ricky (Packy Lee) reckons there's nothing for it but to firebomb the Fenians. He's the only character in Gary Mitchell's newest play with a clear strategy for exiting the impasse, and it leads back to where it all began. Viewed in static perspective, this is Mitchell country same as it ever was, stock Prod characters corralled in standard Prod dilemma, besieged by enemies, ancient and modern. Do they lash out or lie down?

Inevitably, ineffably, they turn on one another. Not with the jagged-edged savagery of Mitchell's earlier plays *As the Beast Sleeps* or *A Little World of Our Own*. Nobody is kneed in the groin here, or gouged in the eye with a meat-hook. Ricky flings himself at his policeman father Christopher (Simon Wolfe), then, energy spent, asks would it be all right if he sticks around for a while, see how it goes...

Which could be as good as it gets for Ricky in the marching seasons of the new millennium. Stick around a while, see how it goes.

Samuel (Sean Caffrey) is a staunch old Orangeman grown weary from marching, and not being let march. Son Christopher is beginning to realise that his marriage has as much future as the police force he is part of. Wife Shirley (Helena Bereen) is a worried Christian woman endlessly making sandwiches for the brethren ("You can't have too much

won't make any of them happy ever after, or maybe even happy ever again.

The production at the Lyric was brilliantly timed, its run coinciding with the run-up to the drama at Drumcree. But if there's a "message" here about marches, I missed it. What's unmissable are the resonant things Mitchell has to say, or suggest, about people set in their ways who are suddenly scattered by an inrush of forces from outside, then left abandoned at the edge of the action.

The play makes a point about the importance for Northern Orangeism of the annual Scottish incursion which had never occurred to me before but which, once stated, is joltingly obvious. When Johnnie leaves for home before the confrontation is over because he has to resume a real life in the morning, Ricky's sense of betrayal, his sudden understanding of how friendless he is for the future, is almost unbearably poignant to behold.

Insofar as there's a tragic hero on show, it's the cop.

It's a measure of Gary Mitchell's accomplishment that even common-sense folk who hold it generally the case that all coppers are bastards emerge from the theatre engaged with all of the characters and abuzz with ideas and argument.

The Catholic population never intrudes. Fears, dilemmas, hopes and hatreds — politics — are expressed through the personal relationships of congenial characters. Too congenial, perhaps. Johnnie from Glasgow is a bonnier prince of a bandsman than we've ever seen capering across the Diamond in Derry.

This makes for a cosy view of



**THREE GENERATIONS:** Marching On

help buttering bread.") Grand-daughter Lorraine (Sarah Boyd Wilson) is a thoroughly modern madam who fancies getting the kilt off Johnnie (Ian Beatty), over from Glasgow, as every year, for the July Twelfth fortnight marches.

The action is in Samuel and Shirley's house in north Belfast on the night of the Eleventh. Off-stage, the lodge won't shift until hell freezes over, or the Parades Commission changes its Nationalist tune. Inside, characters react to one another's reactions, in an accelerating whirl of anger and diffuse emotion. You can tell from the outset that the night

Orangeism. But it's the closed nature of the action which has the characters trapped. Lorraine and Johnnie apart, who in different ways are getting out, they are all emptier at the end. The play has been seen in some quarters as a defiant celebration of a working-class Loyalist community's sense of itself. But it's both darker and more tentative than that. None of the big questions facing the Protestant section of the working class are posed straight. But they are all left lurking.

The cast is altogether splendid. Packy Lee in particular spills so much nervous energy it splashes off the stage. And Sarah Boyd Wilson, bubbling with fun and bristling with impatience, is sensational. This is a fine, thought-provoking piece of work from the most interesting of Irish playwrights.

*Eamonn McCann is a Derry-based journalist.*

#### THE HOUSE

by Tom Murphy

The Abbey Theatre

6 April - 20 May 2000; reviewed  
on 12 April BY TONY ROCHE

FOR A DECADE IN WHICH NOTHING apparently happened, 1950s Ireland has become the chronological lodestone for a generation of younger playwrights. As if to show these young Turks a thing or two, Tom Murphy chose to revisit the decade in his latest play, *The House*, which the Abbey premiered on its main stage on 12 April, to a warm and positive response. On the surface, Murphy's play would appear to accept the sociological givens about the period — mass emigration, a kind of paralysis, the oppression of church and state. But when he delves beneath the surface, as he does consis-

tently throughout the play, what he finds is turmoil, uncertainty, and a strong sense of challenge — all elements brought out in Conall Morrison's taut and nuanced direction.

The key point about emigration from Ireland in the 1950s, which saw the departure of 400,000 citizens from the island, is that it was not as one-way as it sounds or seemed. For these emigrants returned — every summer, for the holidays, not just on Euston trains and Holyhead mailboats but, because of improved transportation, from the U.S. by plane. And they did so as hybrids, bearing the features of the culture to which they have migrated along with that of their own. *The House* focuses on three of them as they gather and drink in the local pub: Goldfish, the returned Yank (Don Wycherley), who wears his emigrant status on his sleeve by speaking in exaggerated Americanese; Peter (Andrew Bennett), who wishes to assert that he hasn't changed but does so in an English accent; and Christy, the play's central character, (Patrick O'Kane) whose complex allegiances move the play beyond the confines of the public house (and beyond being merely a reprise of Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*).

For the other major setting of the play is the house of the title, owned by a very Chekhovian three sisters and their mother, Mrs. de Burca, who are on the verge of selling up and moving out. The symbolic space of the house becomes associated with female energies, the pub with the men, and the play's rhythm oscillates between the two. As a result of this gendered polarisation, there is a considerable tension when each of the three younger women enters the pub, not least that generated by the sexually aggressive Susanna (Ali White).

The figure who moves from one set-

ting to the other, while remaining isolated throughout, is Christy. He does so uneasily for a number of reasons. There is the issue of class, a subject which Murphy is one of the few Irish playwrights to address, as he does here. When Christy enlists the other men to help repair the de Burcas' wall, Goldfish for one does not want to be there, and is sensitive to the implied forelock-tugging. Mrs. de Burca (Geraldine Plunkett) speaks in sentimental terms about

known him in England, exposes the inverse snobbery by which he refuses to marry any of them and challenges Christy's motives in his obsession to gain a purchase on the house. The crucial meeting between them is not dramatised directly, and it's the consequences of what happens that we're left with.

The woods in which Christy and Susanna meet are reflected in Francis O'Connor's set design — a great big forest of coloured broken glass that we see overhead and which adds a further dimension to the scenes in the pub and the house. It recalls the magic forest of Murphy's 1972 play *The Morning After Optimism*, an otherworldly refuge where his world-weary characters go to try and recover their lost idealism. In a way, Christy in *The House* is on a similar driven quest; as played by Patrick O'Kane in a performance of coiled energy, he feels like a character about to burst out of his skin with what he's going through, of which much that occurs elsewhere on the stage can be viewed as an extension, if not an externalisation. And Christy is capable of gentle, reflective

moments as well, especially in the two confession scenes in the play where, once more, Murphy asks the question: how can you confess in a culture where people don't go to confession anymore? In the present play's bleak and unforgiving tone, I did not feel even the traces of the God who is argued with in earlier Murphy plays — and so the confession is more a cry of desperation than a prayer for release.

AMELIA STEIN



**BAR ROOM BRAVADO:** *The House*

Christy and the family's wish to adopt him, but in likening the stubborn opposition of Christy's biological father to that of a mule, the racist reasons for the failure to adopt become fully clear. The class differences mean that Christy on the surface is formal and polite to Mrs. de Burca and her daughters. But they also help to generate the underlying sexual tension throughout, which he dares not acknowledge in public. Only Susanna, who has

*The House* is about people who are trying to work out where they belong. This is clearly the case with the returned emigrants; but Mrs. de Burca points up the parallel as she and her daughters prepare to leave their family home and all it represents with their few remaining possessions. And the play's other important character, Christy's boyhood companion and now solicitor Kerrigan (Frank McCusker), is less settled than he at first appears, with his wife and children. For if the emigrants have moved away, he has moved up in the society, into a position which he becomes increasingly terrified of losing. Murphy's plays are all about being outcast, whistling in the dark, having a sense that you're not at home with yourself. And his people are looking for some kind of place where they can feel at home — England, America, Ireland, the pub, the house, marriage. But the reason, I think, that he keeps writing plays (and let's hope there are even more to follow this) is that there are never any final answers for Tom Murphy.

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#### KINGS OF THE KILBURN HIGH ROAD

by Jimmy Murphy

Red Kettle Theatre Company  
On tour; reviewed on 5 July 2000 by at  
the Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny  
BY GERRY MORAN

RED KETTLE'S PRODUCTION OF JIMMY Murphy's play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* opens with a Daniel O'Donnell song and a round of drinks. An unusual cocktail, to say the least. The song stops,

the drink goes on and the stage is set for another, typical Irish drinking play. Toss in a plethora of "fucks", "me arse", "me hole", "shite", "bollocks", "bastards" and you get a strong flavour of things to come — five characters, five "men in drink" waking their recently deceased boozing buddy and work-mate, Jackie Flavin.

Another Irish wake. Another play about Paddies, booze and expatriation. Same old story? Well, yes, but not quite. What makes this play different is not the what but the how. Not the plot but the characters — *real* characters, each one of whom could have been plucked from any local in any town in Ireland. But this is not Ireland. This is Kilburn, England and the play is about displacement, disillusionment and drink. In large measures. With equally large characters, brought to life by an excellent cast who are wonderfully directed by Jim Nolan.

It is noon, present day, in the function room of an Irish club on the Kilburn High Road in London — a function room that any drinking man would feel comfortable in thanks to Ben Hennessy's excellent set design and Jim Daly's moody lighting. The room is aptly adorned with posters of Irish writers, Irish pubs, hunger strikers, and a jukebox that doesn't have any rebel songs. Even this "home" from home is not quite what it used to be.

Jap (Sean Lawlor), Maurteen (Eamon Hunt), Shay (Joseph M. Kelly) and Git (Noel O'Donovan), four Irish labourers on the building sites, have convened to wake Jackie Flavin. The drink is flowing and their spirits are high — except for Maurteen who is brilliantly sullen because he's on the dry. Jap, the loud-mouth, soon accosts him and amid much banter, bitterness, and humour as black as their pints, aspects of the four characters' lives and relationships emerge. But



GERALD O'CARROLL

**DESPAIR AND DRINK:** Kings of the Kilburn High Road

the focus is always on boisterous, bully-boy Jap and his plans for going home — a home that Shay reminds him is now as alien to them as the country they're in.

The tension mounts and we are redeemed from the possible boredom of this non-stop verbal sparring by the imminent arrival of Joe (Frank O'Sullivan) whose presence seems crucial to the proceedings. Whoever this Joe is, we, the audience, can't help wondering, how he is going to compete with, or contain the marvellously aggressive and domineering Jap.

Joe eventually arrives. He is tall, dark, and sophisticated-looking, and for sure

looks every bit Jap's match. Joe, a successful builder, soon gets into the swing of things, throws out a wad of money for booze and promises a hell of a wake. Pretty soon the drink kicks in, Maurteen falls off the wagon (as we knew he would) the song and dance commence and fifty minutes after Daniel O'Donnell's dulcet intro the curtain comes down on Act One.

Act Two opens with a bang. The jackets are off (Maurteen is down to his vest), the drink and rebel songs are in full flow, as they parade around the bar with pool cues for pikes. The scene is set for battle, between Jap, the man with all the answers (but nothing to show for it), the self-proclaimed King of the Kilburn High Road; and Joe, the doer, the achiever — the Real King.

Git finally gets round to a scene-stealing telling of Jackie Flavin's death. That death, however, is but a vehicle for the men's disillusionment, their disenchantment, their despair. They should have gone to America. They should have gone home. But it wouldn't matter. Kilburn, Kilkenny or Kilimanjaro — Jap, Shay, Git and Maurteen were born losers. Or was it just the hand they were dealt? And was Joe "just lucky"?

Joe, the Real King of the Kilburn High Road, finally walks away leaving the four to their sorry devices. As the curtain comes down we are left with a glimpse of one empty whiskey bottle. A symbol perhaps of the drunken emptiness of their lives.

*The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* is about Celtic navvies, Celtic drinkers, and Celtic talkers as opposed to Celtic Tigers. A timely reminder, no doubt, of the way we were. It's a play about hard times, hard men, hard drinking, and all that goes with them. It is many an Irishman's story. Too many perhaps. And although it's a common one it is acted with such gusto, such power and such energy by five magnificent actors, that you couldn't but be moved. This is a timely piece of theatre that is impossible not to enjoy.

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**MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION**

by George Bernard Shaw

The Peacock Theatre

18 May - 8 July 2000; reviewed on 8 July

BY IAN KILROY

IN KEN LOACH MOVIES, LIKE *RAINING STONES* and *My Name is Joe*, the protagonist always has a moment of clarity, in which his or her individual predicament is seen in the light of wider sociological forces. Dramatically, this moment is structured as an almost overtly political speech or monologue. An imaginary soapbox is mounted and the dramatic element becomes secondary to a reforming impulse. Art retreats as politics advances — something Loach may have learned from his forebear in campaigning drama, George Bernard Shaw.

In this, the 50th anniversary of Shaw's death, two major productions have been staged in Dublin to mark the event: *Arms and the Man* at the Gate Theatre, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* at the Peacock. The two are representative of the author's "plays pleasant" and "plays unpleasant," respectively. While both pieces date from

the 1890s, it is the Peacock's choice for production that carries its years best. When Vivie or Mrs. Warren take to the soapbox, their voices are as contemporary as any convincing Loach character, despite the Victorian English in which their arguments are couched.

In the case of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the argument is concerned with prostitution, the exploitation of women, and the vice bred by unfettered capitalism. While, 100 years on, the play's signifiers of female liberty — women smoking cigarettes and acting masculine — seem anachronistic, the essential message of the play does not. Shaw's Fabian socialism still speaks sense.

Brian Brady's production, however, succeeded only partially in bringing the play's continuing relevance to life on stage. The difficulties lay not with the playing — the ensemble cast, by and large, were excellent. Unlike Brecht and his A-effect, here the pill of Shaw's message is administered with the easy-to-swallow sugar of 19th-century naturalism. The cast here gave the characters the kind of life that this type of naturalistic drama demands, and we witnessed real people on stage, rather than puppets in a politically-motivated author's matrix.

Suzanne Robertson ably played the practical, and somewhat ungrateful and unlikeable, Vivie Warren. Anna Healy had great presence as that great amoral survivor, Mrs. Kitty Warren, while Chris McHale, Nick Dunning and Brian McGrath all offered strong performances in supporting roles. And on the production side, the lighting and set were up to the usual standard of the National Theatre; with the set's use of Victorian soft pornographic photographs adding to the 1890s feel. The strength of the speech-making in politically committed plays like this can



AMELIA STEIN

**BOSOM BUDDIES:** Suzanne Robertson and Owen Sharpe in Mrs. Warren's Profession

become tiresome; the reforming impulse is most effective when it is in equilibrium with the dramatic. On the whole, Brady's production maintained that balance well.

But the choice to retain the play's Victorian setting limited its potential contemporary resonances. With eastern European women working the night streets of Dublin, Mrs. Warren's profes-

sion is alive and well, but here the ladies' flowing dresses and the gentlemen's dapper boaters distanced the issues at the heart of the play. As it stood, the whole thing reminded me a little of Bloomsday — people donning Victorian garb in the museum of nostalgia, particularly as the production was staged in the beginning of summer tourist season. The performance I witnessed was packed wall-to-wall with guffawing, camera-clicking group ticket types, who seemed to enjoy the distance that the Victorian décor provided from the material; they were never really made to confront the power that the play must have had in the 1890s, when it was banned by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner.

You cannot help feeling that an opportunity was missed to present a powerful, contemporary, and vitally relevant piece of theatre. Ultimately, this was a reductive reading of a complex text. That one of

the play's central points was missed — a critique of the professions through a comparison with prostitution — is proof of this. To say, as the programme note does, that Vivie Warren is a heroine with "raw courage" and "sheer charisma" misses the point that she is as much the amoral slave to mammon as her mother.

Ian Kilroy is a playwright and critic.

**ON RAFTERY'S HILL****by Marina Carr**

Druid Theatre Company  
On tour; reviewed on 23 May 2000  
at the Gate Theatre, Dublin  
**BY MEDB RUANE**

A YOUNG WOMAN ABOUT TO BE MARRIED is raped by her father. Her sister is in fact her mother, her brother can't protect her, and her grandmother/great-grandmother may have been abused by her father too. Marina Carr's fine new play *On Raftery's Hill* shocks, appalls, and sensitises its audience to Ireland's formerly most secret crime. Families are dangerous. No matter what they say, it's your own that put you at the greatest risk.

Leaving behind awkward points of plot-making that kept earlier works like *By the Bog of Cats* and *Portia Coughlan* wheezing as they hit the final straight, Carr's language here flows like old-style porter, urging itself on to ever-better heights of grimness and humour. The drama centres on a place where the stench of dead meat reeks ranker than a knacker's yard: Red Raftery slaughters his stock for fun and leaves the carcasses rotting on his run-down farm.

You don't quite get that stench in Tony Walton's traditional kitchen-sink set, which rubs up against many images of many old plays. Garry Hynes' direction drives the sensational topic of abuse with unrelenting theatricality, bolstering the claustrophobic atmosphere by staging both acts indoors and in the same space.

Building on local gossip about a young neighbour who gives birth, loses her child, and dies because its father was her father, the action teases out the dysfunctional dynamics of the Raftery's inter-relationships. Sorrel (Mary Murray) is set to marry Dara Mood (Keith McErlean), who, with her father's

shooting companion Isaac Dunn (Kieran Ahern), are the only outsiders on the Hill. Ded, her brother (Michael Tierney), lives like a hog in the outhouse and is scared witless by their father Red (Tom Hickey); Dinah, Red's daughter (Cara Kelly), has looked after Sorrel since her own mother's death, but kept mum that Sorrel is in fact her daughter, as well as her sister. Vivian Leigh playing Tennessee Williams meets Miss Havisham in the character of Red's mother Shalome (Valerie Lilley), who boasts she never let her husband lay a finger on her, and evokes a colonial past Sebastian Barry might have imagined.

Generational cycles are classic Carr territory, working themes of how the female hero loses, or is blocked from reaching, independence. This time round, the pivotal character is male, in the person of Red, who draws a fascinating performance from Tom Hickey, to a point where his rationale for abusing his daughters is almost convincing. His motives may look sexual, but as the play progresses that semblance yields to a truer picture — his abuse of power and innocence.

The choice faced by the Raftery daughters is to collude or collapse. Within those Oedipal urges and wrestling for dominance, Carr's usual preoccupation with guilt develops into a piercingly uncomfortable probing of how shame corrodes humanity. The subtexts follow classic abuse models as closely as an anthropological handbook, which helps turn the well-made plot but does provide some jarring explanations. We learn, for example, how Dinah was sent to her father's bed at the age of 12 by her own mother, giving us some sense of how she too was betrayed. That particular collusion is less convincing by being reported rather than revealed.



**NO ESCAPE:** Cara Kelly and Tom Hickey in *On Raftery's Hill*

*On Raftery's Hill* moves away from the heightened naturalism of other Carr plays whose mythic, surrealistic touch was dangerous dramatically, but compelling for the same reasons. Instead, its heightened realism is instantly credible but slightly out of touch with its present-day timescale. The theme of marriage as an escape from family, which was questioned in *Portia Coughlan*, and savagely explored in *By the Bog of Cats*, is curiously taken on merit. It might as well be 20 years ago, rather than today.

But that is to ignore the fundamental place that memory occupies in Carr's body of work. Whether as the mythic imagination of a whole community, or the life experience of one member, memory grabs the present in a body-lock that individuals can't escape on their own. On

*Raftery's Hill* offers no redemptive vision to ease its audience's passage towards the bars or bus-stops outside. Its gift is a souvenir to unsettle comfortable times ahead.

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#### **OUR LADY OF SLIGO** by Sebastian Barry

The Irish Repertory Theatre, New York,  
in association with Out of Joint  
and the Royal National Theatre  
12 April - 2 July 2000; reviewed  
on 17 May BY JOHN ISTEL

IN A STRANGE WAY, THIS SPRING'S production of Sebastian Barry's *Our Lady of Sligo* at the Irish Repertory Theatre in

New York, raises an unanswerable question: what is great acting? The play, a lugubrious cancer drama about Mai, an embittered 50-year-old ex-alcoholic dying in a Dublin hospital room in 1953, doesn't raise this question on purpose. It isn't in the business of raising questions; instead, Barry's play seems to exist solely in order to indulge the author's need to muse lyrically and imaginatively on a possible life based on that of his grandmother's.

Barry delivers moments of lyrical beauty here and there that pierce the general torpor of the evening that is *Our Lady of Sligo*, which, for this Irish-American at least, feels like a lesser, witless *Wit*, Margaret Edison's Pulitzer-prize winning cancer play. At one point in the second act, Mai stoically reports, "I'm sick of this dyin'. It's no fun." Ditto for Barry's play — too much memory and not enough play.

It's the most Tennessee Williams-like of any European play I've seen recently, especially in its bald attempts to win audience affection from sheer power of poesy and its towering and terrifying central female character. It also shares with Williams' *Glass Menagerie* a memory-play structure, only Barry mires himself even more in the past than Williams would dare to in his drama. Part of the problem is that the central character narrates the play. If Mai's daughter, for instance, told her mother's story, perhaps there'd be some tension in the storytelling, instead of indulgent, blathering bathos. Plays must occur in the present (in our presence so to speak), as opposed to novels, memoirs, histories, and other narrative fictions that must be written in the past tense.



**DEATHBED MEMORIES:** Sinead Cusack in Our Lady of Sligo

Barry's *Our Lady of Sligo* must be at least three-quarters past tense. Sinead Cusack's central performance as Mai therefore begins to take on a bloated size, not out of proportion to her talents but out of necessity to make up for the lack of present-tense action in what is really a small biographical drama.

It's the simple tale of Mai, a once-alcoholic but now morphine-addled and delusional woman, who lies dying in her hospital room. She recounts her life story between visits from the nurse (Andrea

Irvine, the only other holdover from the British production), her ghost of a father (Tom Lacy), and her husband (Jarlath Conroy) and daughter (Melinda Page Hamilton). Her life, begun in Galway with such promise, bogged down in Sligo after marriage and kids (one of whom dies). Embittered and haunted, Mai delivers monologue after monologue to the audience, detailing her life of lost opportunities, a life that quickly turned rancid and rusted from neglect. With her own future determined by her terminal illness, Mai even lashes out at her daughter, an actress, denigrating her for acting "in plays by foreign writers with hard bitter little names."

The stolidity of the script, especially as turgidly directed as it was by Max Stafford-Clark, leaves one measuring a performance at the centre of the play that at first seems justified in being lauded with awards and nominations, both in London and in New York. But is it great? What is great acting?

Here's a simple definition: It's when a performer simultaneously makes her performance invisible and visible. What I mean is that Great Acting, at least in the traditional Western European canon of classic drama, must first off be invisible: the actor merges with the character such that audiences see the actor disappear and the character emerge. The actor becomes invisible. But, and here's the real rub, that becoming invisible must be made visible — not by over-emoting or grand theatrical gesticulations — but by a slight, but clear physical manifestation — tears, accents, nudity — anything that signifies the presence of the actor.

This is particularly true in film. Take, for example, all the award-winning performances that require a limp, a handicap, or some other obvious affectionate of character.

Dustin Hoffman as an autistic sufferer in *Rain Man*; Daniel Day-Lewis as the triumphant cripple in *My Left Foot*; Meryl Streep as a Polish mother in *Sophie's Choice*. It's easy to "see" the acting because of the demand of the role for some outward, visible affection or manifestation.

Cancer, AIDS, and paralysis have created great roles for great performances over the last decades: Kathleen Chalfant in *Wit*; F. Murray Abraham's Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*; and Tom Conti in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* are three examples. But in reality, for all the deserved acclaim these performers garnered, weren't their successors in each role lauded as well? Didn't the role serve the actor, helping to make the invisible visible?

Which brings us to Sinead Cusack, who certainly imbues Mai with enough vibrancy and ferocity in the face of death to lend her character, who has few redeeming features, a bit of heroic stature. But if she didn't "bare" herself physically when she's bathed by her nurse (an awkward and unnecessary bit of stage business), the bravery of her performance, and therefore its ultimate impact, would surely have been lessened. In that moment, Cusack the actor was made visible, before she continued on, in Barry's meandering play, shuffling off Mai's mortal coil as if hanging up the winter coat. Her performance does nothing to diminish the anticipation for her next stage project, yet the fact that I can't stop pondering the question of what makes a really great performance leads me to believe that I didn't see one on that rainy night in May.

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*John Istel is editor in chief of Stagebill magazine and writes about theatre for publications including the Atlantic Monthly, American Theatre, The Village Voice, and Opera News.*

**THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS**

by Sean O'Casey

The Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

4 May - 3 June and 27 June - 15 July 2000;

reviewed on 12 May

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

*THE PLOUGH HAS COURTED CONTROVERSY* since its first production at the Abbey in 1926. At its fourth performance, audience members rioted, offended by a presentation in which prostitutes, drunks, and looters displaced the central figures of republican history, and thus was deemed to defile the nobility of the nationalist cause. An outpouring of similar invective occurred on the 75th anniversary production by Garry Hynes, again at the Abbey. Hynes' indictment of the failure of nationalism in social terms, played out with an extraordinary un-comic Brechtian truthfulness, irked traditionalists happy to rely on the safety and familiarity of the in-built comic set-piece routines of the play.

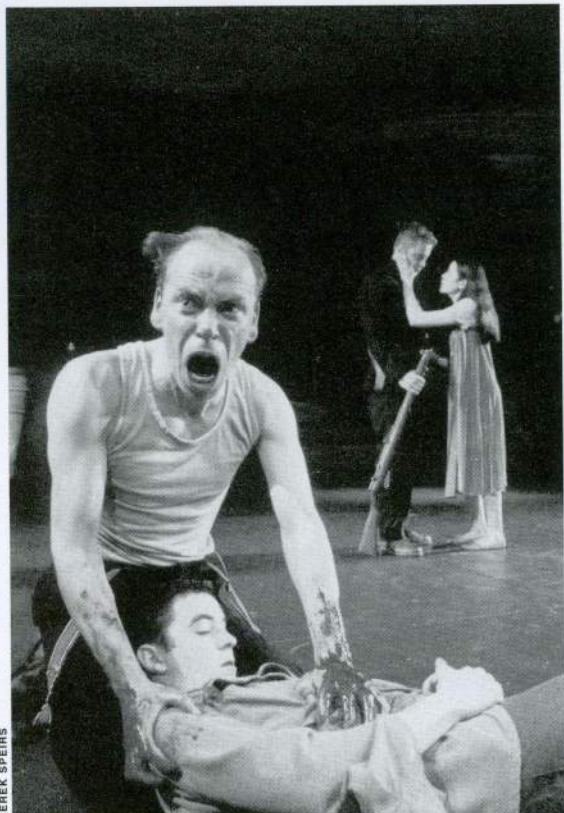
Nine years on from Hynes' defining theatrical moment, Rea's production seems timely in this bubble economy of ours, masking huge social inequities, and as a peace process lumbers on hesitantly in the North. But I wonder: did Rea, on the first day of rehearsals, panic at the sight of an assembled cast that might have looked radical on paper (most of the actors are under 30), but who together might not muster a whole year's stage experience between them?

Casting so young was a brave and interesting choice. The youth on stage turned Rea's "1916" into a quasi-1968 revolt. Fighting on the brink of adulthood added a touch of acuity to the paving of a new nation. The poor economic status and living conditions of these young ordinary folk made their plight all the more poignant, highlighting the fact that the

struggle has always been social as well as political. Interesting ideas these may be, but how do they relate to the play in hand? Problems arise when you see a seemingly teenage Nora Clitheroe and are expected to believe that she could manage a household of strangers all older than herself. Mrs. Gogan has to appear old enough to be the biological mother of Mollser. The Speaker needs to appear as commanding as his vacuous rhetoric rings hollow. Fluther Good should appear an equal part of the assembled company, otherwise his age renders him simply pathetic.

But above all of this, the actors need to be truthful to whatever contemporary stage reality the director has created. Experience of performance for them has largely been a filmic affair, in which characters are sustained no longer than the shot being filmed, often piecemeal, in reverse order, at the whim of the production schedule. Most of these actors display an inability to sustain and develop character, to act to each other, and to find something within them which the camera usually replaces.

Rea's staging also betrays a cinematic bent. Scenes travel like they used to in melodrama before the advent of cinema. In intimate scenes characters sit down to talk or remain in fixed positions, almost as if an imaginary camera has them trapped, in the absence of any spatial constriction. Each scene is played for its visual effect, characters often placed in visually appealing positions though wholly inappropriate for the reality of the scene. The looting scenes travel left to right, the ICA party travel both ways, and the British soldiers invade through an upstage warehouse door in a cloud of smoke. *Apocalypse Now*. The Speaker (or "The Voice" as he is credited here) appears on a screen, speaking in monotone in a black and white clip which might



DEREK SPEIRS

**THE FACE OF REVOLUTION:** Joe Hanley (shouting) and Andrew Lovern in *The Plough and the Stars*

one day be sampled by Bono for some future populist political music video. On that same screen newsreel footage of soldiers marching on to war illustrate Bessie Burgess' doomsday rhetoric. The live cellist copies the stock film connotation of trauma through the musical signs of discordant strings.

But all of this, though visually interesting, made for an unsatisfying stage experience. Characterisation is two-dimen-

sional and the fight scenes are cartoon-like in their posed exaggeration. These moments of physical humour are played up, as are the scenes of looting in which every manner of modern household device (VCRs, ghetto blasters, etc.) are "stroked" gloriously. All of this is simply a cheap vehicle for humour, which misses O'Casey's political point that survival takes precedence over morality. And into the middle of this walks a woman from Rathmines, clearly displaced economically, socially, and politically. Her South Dublin accent and her on-stage paralysis in the physical mayhem reminded me that not much has changed in terms of social division since O'Casey's day. This was a revelation in an otherwise messy visual surface which misses the point that the peculiarity of the liveness of theatre is not to drift in and out of trendy images, but to live with and through fully-

rounded characters in real time.

It would be disingenuous to criticise individual actors for their lack of creation. The entire concept of this production, from its cavernous warehouse set with '70s tack and '90s technology, (so hollow as to prevent the public/private space dichotomy of the dramaturgical momentum), to its mediatised replacements for audience imagination, must shield actors from culpability.

**RUBY****by Marie Jones**

Tinderbox Theatre Company  
On tour; reviewed on 12 May 2000  
at the Group Theatre, Belfast

BY ANNA McMULLAN

I HAD NEITHER HEARD OF THE BELFAST-BORN singer Ruby Murray, nor heard her voice, until my visit to the Group Theatre in April to see Marie Jones' play about Murray's life. From the moment I joined the queue, I encountered a past that was being activated and exchanged amongst the audience members. Most were from a generation who remembered Murray well and could sing along with her hits from the 1950s, when she was at the top of the charts and top of the bill at the London Palladium. The Group Theatre itself embodies a history of working-class theatre and entertainment in Belfast, and

the production intensified the sense of an uncanny slippage of time scales, as the audience climbed the winding stairs, past the narrow foyer serving tea and coffee in china cups and saucers, noticing a poster advertising the interval raffle for the prize of a year's supply of tea.

The narrative started with a St. Patrick's Day gig in England towards the end of Ruby's life when her career was in decline and her addiction to alcohol was destroying her health and her second marriage. The rest of the play flashed back to her childhood in working class Belfast on the eve of World War II and her rise to fame as a husky-voiced heartthrob. The central character was played by Julia Deardon with engaging, wide-eyed, warm-hearted naïveté, and all the other characters were played by Brenda Winter, Dan Gordon, and Sean Kearns with great verve and vibrancy. The first half luxuri-



PHIL SAYTH

**A WOMAN IN DECLINE:** *Julia Deardon in the title role of Ruby*

ated in Ruby's rags-to-riches story, harnessing to the full the outrageous theatricality of holiday variety shows, including a ludicrously melodramatic *Frankenstein* scene, and a manic tap dance from Kearns. At a later stage, when Ruby has made it to London, Kearns and Gordon brought the house down with their playing of a cameo meeting between Eric Morecambe and Norman Wisdom. The tone continually changed, though, whenever Ruby sang one of her haunting ballads, including "Softly Softly" or "Let Me Go Lover" (all the songs were recordings of Murray's voice, save two, which Dearden sang herself live).

The second half uncovered the darker side of Ruby's life — her financial exploitation by an unscrupulous manager, her unhappiness within the confines of her first marriage and motherhood, her turning to alcohol, and the decline of her career once rock 'n' roll began to dominate the charts. Before leaving her family she feels that she is "lost in a special place" that she can only inhabit when singing, but the show rushed through each episode in her life so that there was little time to explore the complexities that were hinted at. We wondered at the wee Belfast cuddly off to Harrods to buy her mother a fur coat, and felt sorry for the self-destructive lush who drowns career, love, and longing in Bushmills whiskey.

But what do we take from these glimpses? A nostalgic affirmation of the working-class Belfast roots that Ruby is only too happy to fly from? (The play does, however, present the father as both supportive and manipulative as well as fond of the drink.) The sense of a woman with a great talent exiled from place, time, and self who never comes to full life anywhere but on the stage and in song? These questions haunt the play because only partially posed — as my theatre

neighbour, who seemed to have known Ruby the woman as well as the voice, remarked to me, "it's so difficult to portray her life."

While the theatrical context of the '50s holiday rep companies was uproariously reinvented to the delight of young and old, and the ambience of the small local community venues where the working-class Belfast girl started and ended her career was vividly evoked, I felt that the life of Ruby Murray was not fully incarnated on stage, but exhibited in a series of intriguing, but rather two-dimensional snapshots. Nevertheless, I left the theatre palpably touched by the past, with a mission to discover more about the singer, to hear again that voice of rough silk.

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*Anna McMullan lectures in the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin.*

## SALOME

**by Oscar Wilde**

The Gate Theatre

3 April - 20 May 2000; reviewed  
on 3 May BY DEIRDRE MULROONEY

THE GATE THEATRE'S RENDITION OF Oscar Wilde's version of *Salome* was a deliberately decadent affair. We paid our money, and then sat in the dark, peeping at Fiona O'Shaughnessy seemingly making Wilde's wanton protagonist all her own. But was it her own?

Much as Wilde stole his tale from the Bible, the Gate borrowed the staging of this *Salome* 2000 from Steven Berkoff's acclaimed production, first staged at the Gate in 1988. Curiously, though Berkoff was credited as director — in absentia — it was Alan Stanford who actually was in charge of this production, earning him a "staged by" programme credit. When choreographers do this sort of thing —



DECLAN SHANAHAN

**WILDE ABOUT THE GIRL:** Fiona O'Shaughnessy as Salome

restaging existing repertory — no-one bats an eyelid. But this practice is relatively unknown in the non-musical theatre, and, as this exercise proved, not unproblematic.

While Wilde was saying something new with the complex web of gazes and desires he twisted so fantastically out of an ancient biblical tale, Stanford's reproduction of a not-so-ancient show did not seem to have much of a new slant to offer. Except, problematically, for Salome's dance.

Nymph-like, her voice all a purr, O'Shaughnessy took a slinky feline approach to the wilful girl/woman. When it came to that dance, the Galway actress offered a straightforward mime of a striptease. Wilde's fascinating exploration of the interstices between the erotic and the spiritual happened centre-stage, with John the Baptist cowering in its shadow. Little was left to the imagination. Riddled

with pelvic thrusts, the dance became anything but elusive, as Salome threw her last imaginary garment (a glove) towards the helplessly salivating Herod. Unsurprising in its titillation, the dance struck a note somewhere between lap dancing (as seen in Atom Egoyan's film *Exotica*, and elsewhere) and *9 1/2 Weeks*. It seems fair to ask, in a production which invites comparison, if the original Salome, Olwen Fouere, would give in to such clichés? I doubt she would. But it also leaves one wondering, how much this production was trying (in spite of itself) to be different from Berkoff's.

Roger Doyle held the production's hand as he played his score from the original production onstage. With this careful impetus (for sale in the foyer as the Gate's first CD), most of Berkoff's powerfully focussed ideas for staging this strange play could not but shine through. Despite some awkward block-

ing at the outset, including Salome's perplexing relegation to one side of the long upstage dinner table, the clear black and white of Berkoff's streamlined aesthetic burst forth. The starkness of Robert Ballagh's palette and Nigel Boyd's 1930's monochrome evening wear (designed for the original production) were relieved only by John the Baptist's rastafarian dreadlocks, draping over Karl Shiels' bare chest, and O'Shaughnessy's anaemically diaphanous frock.

Stanford's Herod convinced as a flaccid, weak, lascivious old man to Barbara Brennan's too-much-lived Herodias. Shiels' prophet ranted and raved in a more elementally naturalistic style than the others, but did not live up to the standard he set himself in *Howie the Rookie*. While Mark O'Halloran, as a love-struck Syrian, proved himself to be a natural at this highly stylised acting, others in the cast struggled a little with the sculptural, chiselled movement style. There was a sense of superficiality and emotional detachment to the performance, a likely result of the fact that the actors were pouring themselves into a pre-existing performance plastercast. But of course, ironically, this aspect is faithful to the decadent aesthetic of Wilde's play.

On the one hand, as someone who missed the original, I was glad to get a glimpse of Berkoff's production, however diluted, in this environmentally friendly recycling exercise. At last, I would have a clear picture what everyone was talking about when Berkoff's *Salome* was alluded to! On the other hand, if the criterion for this production was allegiance to the original, those who had seen Berkoff's legendary production were entitled to feel disappointed. Bafflingly the programme accreditation set up the wrong goalposts for appreciation of this *Salome*'s difference.

That is how, in seeking to provide an

enjoyable evening's entertainment, the Gate Theatre veered beyond decadence into the realm of the deadly.

Deirdre Mulrooney's website is [www.deir.ie](http://www.deir.ie).

### THE STARVING

by Andy Hinds

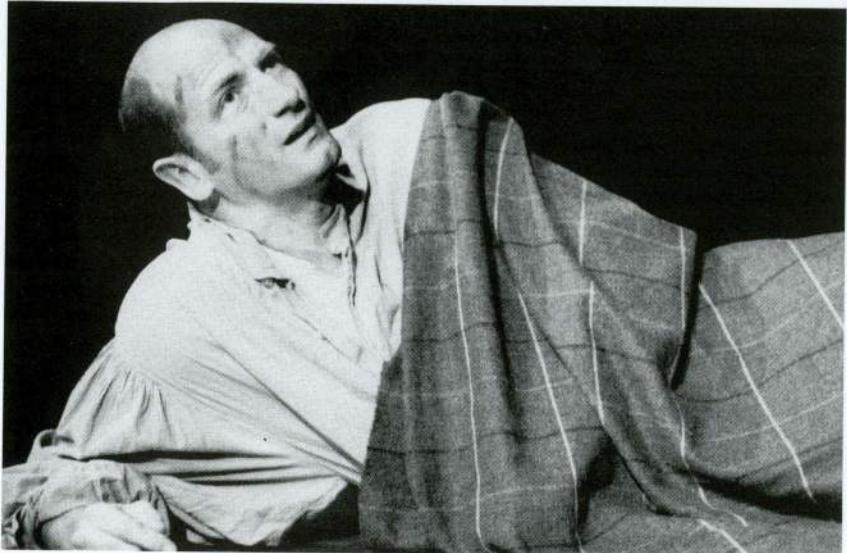
Open House Theatre Company  
Andrew's Lane Theatre, Dublin  
3 - 22 April 2000; reviewed on 5 April

BY CLAIRE PRIOR

A SUCCESS IN THE 1998 DUBLIN Fringe Festival, *The Starving* made a welcome return in April to Andrew's Lane Theatre for a limited run before transferring to London as part of an international season of new work at the Drill Hall. The one-man show was again directed by its author, Andy Hinds, this time with Scots actor Graham McTavish taking on the dual roles first tackled by Conleth Hill.

*The Starving* is a complex and intellectually provocative play set around the events of the Siege of Derry in 1689. With such a heightened historical backdrop, one might expect an openly political play, but the central theme is deeply personal — that of love and its capacity to provide both emotional sustenance and, when absent, starvation. The action is divided into two separate monologues, the first delivered by cobbler Arthur Cobham, who has been imprisoned while attempting to break into the city during the Siege, and the second by aspiring industrialist Harry Thompson, who is fighting a lonely rearguard battle against the Papists just after the siege has ended.

The connection between these two characters is their love of the same man, Peter, though their experiences of that love are vastly different. The cobbler's monologue expresses love's redemptive



**KEEPING HIS MEMORIES ALIVE:** *Graham McTavish in The Starving*

power. Alone in his cell, facing the imminent prospect of execution as punishment for spying, he is desperate to unburden his soul to his absent lover. He has broken into the city to explain to Peter why after one impassioned encounter he rejected him, filled with repulsion and shame at his betrayal of wife and children. As he recalls their love affair, his emotions reel with the strength of his recollections, and he struggles to retain his emotional equilibrium when a letter brings him the news he dreads — that Peter has died.

McTavish brings a wonderfully open quality to his characterisation of the Yorkshireman. Hinds' writing is at times quite dense, yet McTavish never allows it to seem unwieldy in the cobbler's mouth. His exposition of the lovers' one physical encounter is both eloquent and passionate.

After the interval the actor reappears,

effectively transformed, courtesy of a frock-coat and coiffed wig, from rough-hewn cobbler into gentleman Thompson. It's through this monologue that Hinds weaves together the complex threads of the love triangle. For the brittle and abrasive Thompson, love has also had a transformative power, but has brought no emotional peace. Finding his love for Peter unrequited, he struggled to find satisfaction in being Peter's confidante and helpmate, and ultimately his nurse. The legacy of love for him is bitterness and an uneasy devotion to his duty in carrying out Peter's final wishes.

There is a contemplative air to Hinds' writing which is complemented by muted lighting and a spare setting, effectively converted during the interval from dank prison cell to austere country house. But the play is not without its frustrations. We learn very little

from either character about why the absent Peter inspired such depth of feeling, and the lack of such insight creates a vacuum in the narrative. It is also unclear what significance Hinds intends for the historical placing of his characters, as the siege seems more of a footnote to the play's events than truly pivotal. Nonetheless *The Starving* is compelling and original, its language lyrical, and its central performance outstanding.

Claire Prior is a freelance journalist and critic who regularly writes for the entertainment website [www.wow.ie](http://www.wow.ie).

#### TREEHOUSES

by Elizabeth Kuti

The Peacock Theatre

5 April - 13 May 2000; reviewed  
on 20 April BY HELEN MEANY

IT SEEMED APT THAT THE PROGRAMME for the Peacock's production of Elizabeth Kuti's *Treehouses* included the text of the play, published in the Abbey Theatre Playscript Series. This, Kuti's first full-length play (following *The Whisperers*, her adaptation of Frances Sheridan's *A Trip To Bath*) reads well, is formally ambitious and delicately wrought, with many lyrical observations on time and memory. Transposed to the stage, however, it comes across as a bit too delicate, too wistful, and above all, too static.

Magda (Stella McCusker) is an elderly woman in a nursing home who is immersed in memories of her Middle European girlhood during the Second World War. We see those memories enacted, as the tranquil life of the young Magda (Gertrude Montgomery) on her father's farm is troubled by the arrival of a Jewish Boy (Sean McDonagh) whom

they hide in their barn. Her feelings for her boyfriend, Stephen (Robert Price), whom she has been keeping at arm's length, are complicated by her growing attraction to the young refugee. ("Oh the little things of love, the little things," sighs Old Magda.)

As Old Magda's memories of these difficult days are enacted on stage, they are intercut with the present-day monologue of Eva (Morna Regan), a 30-year-old woman who is mourning her father on the day of his funeral and recalling her acute feelings of betrayal as a young girl, when he remarried. Eva's jealous account of her father's courtship of his new wife is intercut with Old Magda's speculations about the Boy, whom she almost ran away with. "How many chances are we given in love, I wonder? Three or four in a lifetime? Two? One?" This question, which recurs, is pertinent to both narrative strands, which are intertwined, and are linked by recurring images and motifs, such as the treehouse Eva's father built her as a hide away, and the barn where the Boy takes refuge.

The problem for the audience is that as we become drawn into the unfolding drama of young Magda, Stephen and the Boy, which is beautifully performed by all three, Eva's interpolations seem distracting, relatively trivial and even irritating — a sort of unintelligible choral commentary. Without any clues as to how the two strands are connected, the interwoven monologues of Old Magda and Eva become static and self-conscious, overly literary. Meanwhile the tension mounts in the flashbacks as Young Magda has to choose between Stephen, whom she has agreed to marry, and the Boy, and it culminates in a beautifully choreographed, tautly paced and moving sequence at the harvest festival dance. Kuti's confident handling of dia-

logue, characterisation, and emotional nuances inspire confidence in her future as a playwright.

However, although Jason Byrne elicited fine performances from the cast, he did not quite succeed in animating the play. To an extent he was hampered by the form. It is not until the end of the second act that the link between the two narrative strands is revealed, through the device of a music box, which belonged to the Boy, and which Eva discovers among her dead father's belongings. For the audience, this moment of illumination comes too late. In addition, the production, including Johanna Connor's design, would have been more effective if it had worked against the script's poignancy and wistfulness. This is of course a memory play, but the projected images of family portraits on the back wall of the stage and the plaintive violin motif created an excessive sense of period nostalgia. Now

that we have so many received, cinematic images of the Holocaust, and as it recedes in time, there is a danger of succumbing to a sepia-tinted vision of it, which reduces its horror.

Helen Meany is an Irish Times journalist.

### THE TRIAL OF JESUS

by Cónal Creedon

Corcadorka Theatre Company

Saint Patrick's Hill, Cork

Reviewed on 21 April 2000

BY DEIRDRE MULROONEY

AFTER DARK LAST GOOD FRIDAY, Corcadorka (from *Corcaigh Dorcha: Dark Cork*) plunged its city back into the spirit of the medieval mystery play, and to the very origins of theatre itself in community ritual.

In the Middle Ages, (and to a certain degree today, in pockets throughout Europe) the whole community would be involved in the annual event of the mystery plays. Each "pageant wagon," on which a story from the Bible was re-enacted by amateurs, would be produced by one of the town's guilds. Medieval product placement meant that the Crucifixion might be sponsored by the ironmongers, or the pinners and painters, and so on for each episode.

Similarly, Corcadorka's *The Trial of Jesus* was sponsored, to the tune of £80,000.00 (8% of which came from local sources). Apart from the principal actors, the majority of the

ANELIA STEIN



**STORYTELLING:** Treehouses



**CORK AS CALVARY:** *the climax of The Trial of Jesus*

200 people involved were volunteers. The audience of 2,000 had a small price to pay for their admittance — participation as living set and extras. The vertiginously steep and narrow Saint Patrick's Hill, flanked by market stalls that were laden with copious bunches of bananas and scarves, seemed surprisingly like the Jerusalem it was mimicking. Even the rain held off.

Drowning out stray noises of the city, Cormac O'Connor created a consistently ominous atmosphere from loud contemporary sounds and music. Cónal Creedon's skeletal script alighted strategically upon select moments of this famous story; the featured actors' voices were amplified using remote microphones.

Rage at the temple traders gave way to Jesus' addition of "love thy neighbour" to the commandments. A spartan Last Supper, high up on a temporary scaffold, made Da Vinci's depiction look positively plush. Jesus and his 12 apostles

furtively munched some crusts moments before Pilate charged through the crowds flanked by Roman soldiers flashing invasive searchlights. Forgotten was the proscenium arch as a fugitive Jesus of Nazareth (Mark D'Aughton), scurried underfoot.

This noisy jostling and pushing was brought to a halt with Mafioso-style bravado: "Don't look at me as if it was me who betrayed you! It was you who betrayed me! This is not about 30 pieces of silver!... This is about you and me!" Huh? Surprisingly, Creedon zoned in on Myles Horgan's unusually principled Judas Iscariot, inviting empathy for a troubled man. Many of Creedon's spare, precious words were spilt when Judas joined his subversive leader on another dais, representing Gethsemene. Punctuating his words with a long, slow kiss, this character, whose name has become synonymous with betrayal, was allowed to reprimand and reason: "what

you seem to forget is that they are my high priests, my elders, and when you challenge them, you challenge me."

There were more plants in the audience than in *Questions & Answers* as up to 2,000 heads craned up Saint Patrick's Hill for the trial. Amid heckles and cries of "crucify him!" came a lone, Monty-Pythonesque "free him!" Director Pat Kiernan's proxemically incendiary strategies, with actors/extras among the crowd, multiple points of focus, and action erupting on various raised stages brought the euphoria of Ariane Mnouchkine's popular 1789 to mind.

The wooden beam strapped on Jesus' faltering shoulders, and a blithe Barrabas freed, heralded the end of talk. We all followed the dimly lit body that could have walked straight out of Grotowski's Poor Theatre up the Via Dolorosa. (Grotowski's analogy for theatre was the mass.) This nonetheless secular procession proceeded through a steep medieval phantasmogoria, littered with volunteer prostitutes(!), haranguing and selling their wares; a leper colony; prisoners; and finally the strange fruit of Judas' corpse hanging at the entrance to "Calvary." Not even the lovely houses the whole way up, with many Corkonians hanging out of their windows, jarred or jolted spectators from Corcadorca's spell.

At the summit, Bell's Field spread out before us, an Armageddon-esque scene of burning barrels and crosses adorned with shrivelled corpses. As the crowd settled in, Jesus added himself to their forgotten number. He gasped his last with neither good nor bad thief at his side (as referred to in *Waiting for Godot*), nor Salome at the foot of the cross, lapping up the forgiveness promised her by Jokanaan (in another version of the gospel).

After the crucifixion and laying out,

D'Aughton, divest of his death shroud, skipped off a newly glowing plinth and disappeared *a la Seventh Seal* over the hill's crest. Corcadorca's silence here allowed the panoramic backdrop of Cork's numerous lit church spires to provide a more eloquent verdict to this trial than any script could. If you ever wondered, in that Peter Brookian way, "why theatre at all?" Corcadorca provided a good answer here.

#### TWO PLAYS BY MIKE LEIGH

**ECSTASY** presented by Sidetrack Theatre

Company at the Crypt Arts Centre,  
30 March - 15 April 2000; and

**ABIGAIL'S PARTY** presented by Plush Productions at the New Theatre,  
28 February - 15 April 2000  
*Ecstasy* reviewed on 14 April and  
*Abigail's Party* reviewed on 22 March

BY DAVID WALLACE

AS MIKE LEIGH'S FILM *TOPSY TURVY* played at Dublin's Screen cinema last March and April, two independent Dublin theatre companies coincidentally presented works by the celebrated writer-filmmaker. Leigh works through a devising process when writing both his plays and his films, and this presents a potential difficulty for revivals of his work. As Stephen Rea, who created the role of Mick in *Ecstasy*, has said: "The text with Mike [Leigh] is just the result of everything you have investigated before." Actors who encounter the text without the benefit of this investigation are at a serious disadvantage, and Leigh's plays can appear clumsy when they're performed outside his prescribed creative conditions — long rehearsal periods, actor input into content, and so forth.

These two young Dublin companies navigated these potential pitfalls with



**TWO TAKES:** The cast of *Abigail's Party*, and Liz Schwartz in *Ecstasy*

rather different results: Plush Productions delivered a polished *Abigail's Party* that nevertheless failed to convince of the contemporary relevance of this very '70s text. Sidetrack Theatre Company, on the other hand, showed in their production of *Ecstasy* just how powerful Leigh's works can be when performance is focussed on as their driving force.

Both plays are set in London, both concern the lives of displaced people, and both have drink-fuelled parties at their heart. *Abigail's Party* opens with Beverly (the role devised by Alison Steadman in the original production) preparing for a party in her suburban home. The second act of *Ecstasy*, and the largest portion of the play, involves a group of old friends drinking, singing, and telling stories in Jean's bedsit in Kilburn. While the revellers at Beverly's party barely know each other or anyone else on their estate, Jean's guests are old friends who have drifted apart. The strained nature of the relationships at both these parties means that they both require cheerleaders. Beverly enlists the help of her new neighbour Angela, while Mick, a displaced

Cork man, helps Jean's get-together along with songs, stories, jokes, and copious amounts of alcohol. Both parties represent a search for community by people living in an unforgiving city.

Dennis Potter said of the television version of *Abigail's Party* that it was "a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred, about the dreadful suburban tastes of the dreadful lower middle classes." This is a common criticism of Leigh's work, and one that could well be aimed at Plush's Dublin production. Jean O'Dwyer's direction emphasises the grotesque nature of the characters and plays up the comedy without providing a firm basis for it. Jennifer Moonan and Sinead O'Hanlon provide a setting that is a pastiche of '70s interior design, complete with beauty board, leatherette sofas, and fake-fur rugs, but they fail to create a home.

Gabrielle Breathnach makes the task of delivering Angela's constant stream of *faux pas* even harder by playing against the characteristics associated with her fictional profession of nurse's assistant — there is little sense of caring or dedication

about her. Julie Hale impersonates Alison Steadman very well but cannot reconcile Beverly's social pretensions with her sexual audacity and insensitivity at the end of the play. Ross Flannery as Beverly's husband Lawrence carefully walks the tightrope between fascist and hardworking man, but he cannot cope with Leigh's determination to provide a dramatic ending by giving him a heart attack. Only Larry Lowry delivers a truly grounded performance as he simmers with violence as Angela's husband Tony.

David Horan, in his direction of *Ecstasy*, emphasises the gritty qualities of the play, and finds comedy in the everyday struggles of Leigh's characters. Melanie Rodger's design lacks the polish of Plush's set, but provides us with a lived-in bedsit that echoes the disorder in its tenant's life. Liz Schwartz delivers an edgy, vulnerable performance as Jean, the quiet garage attendant who secretly drinks and des-

perately sleeps around. Mick Mulcahy drives the second act with a very funny portrayal of Mick, the life-of-the-party Cork immigrant, content to remain a labourer. *Ecstasy's* ability to speak to an Irish audience through this character gives it a head start over *Abigail's Party*; but Horan's decision to treat Leigh's characters seriously doubles that advantage.

*David Wallace is a freelance journalist and critic.*

#### WE OURSELVES

by Paul Mercier

The Passion Machine

On tour; reviewed on 15 May 2000  
at Vicar Street, Dublin

BY HELEN MEANY

THE TITLE IMMEDIATELY SUGGESTS A BOUT of whether-the-nation soul searching; in fact, for the most part, Paul Mercier's lat-



**THE LONE EUROC RAT:** Liam Carney in *We Ourselves*

est play manages to break free of this burden. The sheer energy of this *Passion Machine* production and the conviction of the performances almost succeed in transcending the sociological aspirations and structural limitations of the script. As seven characters deliver consecutive monologues at a breakneck pace over two-and-a-quarter hours, it's a hectic relay race through time. Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Ireland, the play spans the years from the late 1970s when seven young Irish friends spent a summer working in a cannery factory in Germany, to the present day, when they are reunited for the funeral of one of them. Each monologue adds another layer to the unfolding story of their shared history, simultaneously revisiting the past and moving the narrative forward, with a cumulative significance.

It's a clever construction, with each character busily transforming the stage space and adjusting the props in preparation for the next character who bursts through the doors of Anne Gately and Paul Mercier's set. Making and unmaking beds, tidying and cleaning, undressing, changing into outrageous costumes, the seven actors are constantly in motion, as Mercier and Jean O'Dwyer's direction tries to compensate through sheer busyness for what the script lacks in dramatic action. Yet, for all the hectic activity, this remains an extremely wordy, dense play, which illustrates the limitations of the monologue form.

As audience members we are dependent on what we are being told, in narratives that are thick with details of time, place and incident, while what we are watching on stage is a series of well executed comic turns. The drama is described rather than enacted; while the unfolding stories of the relationships

between the scattered friends become increasingly complex, this complexity is expressed through a literary rather than a theatrical language. (Unlike, for example, John Crowley's devised plays, *True Lines* and *Double Helix*, which tackled similar themes.)

At several points we want to shout "stop," so that we can rewind to the first two scene-setting monologues, those of the idealistic student Sarah (Pia McInerney) and the frustrated secondary school-teacher Mikey (Conor O'Byrne), which only become clear as we are introduced to the other characters. Sarah and Declan (Liam Carney) are at the centre of the group, and their monologues bookend the play. By the time Declan makes his drunken appearance in a present-day Dublin hotel room, a collage has been created, through a series of snapshots, of seven Irish people's experience of the years of young adulthood during the past two decades — of travel, of career ambitions and disappointments (Una, the aspiring actress played by Gabrielle Breathnach), of sexual experimentation and freedom (Aonghus, marching in the New York Gay Pride parade as a majorette, superbly performed by Gerry McCann).

Although the Brussels-based Eurocrat, Declan, makes some general observations about the changes in Ireland ("we're the last generation to feel inferior!"), the play's strength lies in its treatment of the personal realm, of individual experience. Despite its essentially undramatic conception, *We Ourselves* presents a sympathetic portrayal of aging, of the inevitable experience of finding yourself aged 40 rather than 20, and wondering whatever happened to the hopes, dreams, and friends of youth. It could have been called *Our Generation*.

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who are entirely disconnected from community — and indeed a lead character who attempts to destroy the landscape around him. What that might say about the future of Irish theatre and the future of Ireland I will leave to you.

**KAREN FRICKER** [editor in chief, *Irish theatre magazine*]: ... As a newcomer to Ireland three years ago I was struck by the sexual confidence of its young people. They appeared not to be held down by the traditional weight of being Irish that seems to hang around the shoulders of their parents and grandparents... so how is that confidence finding its way onto Irish stages? ... What's particularly interesting is how the worlds that many young Irish playwrights are creating don't foreground traditional images of Irishness. Take the young Dublin-dwellers in Alex Johnston's *Melonfarmer* — this was an internationally recognisable depiction of the slacker generation, with an only incidental Irish inflection. Sexuality here was casual; whatever "deviance" went on had more to do with people exploring possibilities than subverting national agendas... One of the many striking things about Calipo Theatre Company's *Love is the Drug*, a multi-media, free-form exploration of dating in twenty-something Ireland, was the sweetness, almost the naïveté in the way that the company portrayed sexual discovery. It felt like they were charting uncharted territory, and in a way they were: to look at romance in Ireland without referencing guilt, pain, loss, and family was to subvert a world of traditions... I look forward to observing further how this generation express themselves and their sexualities — but I can't help but feel a little uneasy about what might be being lost. As the traditional referents of Irishness are dropped, what is going to make Irish drama unique?

**COLM TÓIBÍN** [novelist, journalist]: ... All the monuments, all the plaques in Wexford have to do with 1798. That was our dramatic event. If you ask people what has happened since, they would say, well, a lot of things, but there has been no real drama... I want you then to imagine the playwright Billy Roche, starting to write plays about Wexford — as almost a way of quietly trampling on the Wexford piety that says, "This is our story, there is no other story." Billy Roche said no: the stories of the people who work in the small shops, of things that happened to them just ten years ago — that is the drama of Wexford... With *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, here was Frank McGuinness trying to set into the heart of the nation a play about a part of Irish history which people in the Republic of Ireland feel threatened by and seek to ignore. And what if this play, about a group of Protestants who go to the Somme, had two characters who were gay and who enacted their relationship on stage: so there are two things that are trampled on in this play... And when it comes to be asked, what about that terrible brightness in Ireland, when everyone went around with two mobile phones talking to themselves, when that constant self-congratulation was going on, was there anyone who wrote about the darkness that the brightness made more obscure? In the 1990s it was a playwright [Marina Carr], a playwright whose work became even more powerful because she released amateur rights to her work very early in Ireland, much earlier than most, so that her work is being done in halls all over Ireland.... What I am saying is, if you are to characterise what has happened in Irish drama over the last century, you have to begin with idea of the writer's relationship with trampling on things.

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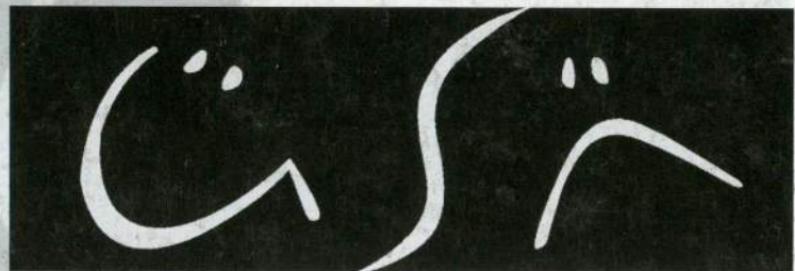
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