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Patrick Lonergan



## Half-Hearted: Irish Theater, 2003

Irish theater experienced an unusually quiet period in 2003. Although the year was free of the controversies that have overshadowed recent years, it was also too frequently free of excitement, creativity, and originality. Whether this was a sign of artistic inertia or overcautious restraint was often difficult to judge. This, after all, was the year before the Abbey Centenary, and there were strong indications that many theater companies were holding back their best work for the 2004 celebrations. But it was also the year in which—after more than a decade of investment—the Arts Council implemented major funding cuts to its theater program. Many companies learned in December, 2002, that their grants for the following year would be significantly reduced—in some cases by as much as 40 percent—leading many into a hasty reorganization of their 2003 schedules: tours were cancelled, productions scaled back or postponed indefinitely, and company administrators were made redundant. This created a sense of gloom that translated, in many instances, into conservative programming and half-hearted productions.

However, financial difficulties can only partially explain the generally negative reactions that new work provoked during the year, with plays by many of Ireland's leading writers—Friel, Kilroy, Murphy, and Marie Jones—leaving audiences disappointed. Similarly, although many companies presented themselves as championing the development of new Irish writing, plays by young authors were too often staged prematurely during 2003. The year was not without some notable developments, however, particularly the growing popularity of international work in Ireland, the use of new media in theatrical productions, the development of dance and choreography, and the increasing sophistication of Irish theater criticism and publishing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in keeping up with Irish theater on the internet should consult the following web sites: The Irish Playography Project—[www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com); The Irish Theatre Diaspora Project—[www.itd.tcd.ie](http://www.itd.tcd.ie); and IASIL's Irish Theatre Links—[www.iasil.org/links/theatre.html](http://www.iasil.org/links/theatre.html).

Brian Friel's *Performances* was probably the most severely criticized new play by a major Irish writer. This criticism was due at least partially to the play's marketing campaign, which seemed to generate the expectation among audiences that they would be seeing a major new work from Ireland's leading dramatist. What they got instead was a sixty-minute chamber piece with no plot or dramatic action, and an ending that some found inconclusive. The attendant disappointment was understandable, if regrettable: while *Performances* is by no means equal in substance to Friel's longer works, it is a significant work in many ways.

The play is balanced between two performances: the performance of a dialogue between the Czech composer Janaček and a student of his work, and the performance at the conclusion of the play of a piece of Janaček's music, which powerfully recontextualizes the debate that precedes it. This contrast between inconclusive dialogue and expressive musical performance allows Friel to dramatize his longstanding preoccupations about creativity and responsibility, and the public and private duties of the artist. More important, that contrast invites us to reconsider much of what we know about Friel himself: in the course of his dialogue, Janaček makes a number of assertive statements about the role of the artist—statements which in many cases closely resemble Friel's own public ruminations on that subject—yet the conclusion of the piece implies that Janaček does not fully believe his own arguments. The gradual unmasking of Janaček the artist to reveal the private man can thus be seen as a reassessment by Friel of his own status as an artist, particularly in relation to the place posterity will award his writing. With echoes of *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Performances* offers many interesting new ways to think about Friel's work.

Notwithstanding the value of *Performances* to scholars of Friel, the play's brevity meant that it was regarded by many audiences as a rather poor return on the cost of a full-price ticket to the Gate Theatre; it might have been better received if produced with a longer piece, such as *Aristocrats* (1979), or with some of Friel's recent short works—*The Yalta Game* (2001), for example, might have been appropriate. Audiences also complained about the presence onstage of a live string quartet: their musical performance at the play's conclusion was faultless, but they were also required to deliver lines during the action and, lacking professional training in acting, they often did so poorly. One defender of the play was Fintan O'Toole, who suggested that Irish audiences ought to be grateful that Friel is, at seventy-four, producing any kind of new work. But this rather missed the point: the piece of music that concludes the play was written when Janaček was himself aged seventy-four—and it is a fully realized work of art in many of the ways that *Performances* itself is not. Whether Friel delivers the

longer, more developed work that *Performances* seems to call for remains to be seen; certainly, the appetite for such a work exists among Irish audiences.

Premiered at the Abbey while *Performances* played at the Gate, Thomas Kilroy's *Shape of Metal* earned the criticism that has greeted most of the Abbey's recent new plays: it was considered in need of more work. Kilroy focuses on the relationship of an aging Anglo-Irish sculptor with her two daughters, one of whom suffers from mental illness. Like Friel's play, *The Shape of Metal* considers the public and private responsibilities of the artist—doing so in a way that is reminiscent of many modern Irish plays, notably Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985), but also *The Bird Sanctuary* (1993). The main criticism directed against the play was that it was uneven and inconclusive, which Kilroy countered by explaining that his characters experience life as uneven and inconclusive, and that his aim had been to reproduce on stage the effects that a child's mental illness can have on a family. A reading of the script supports such an interpretation; the difficulty was that the production, directed by Lynne Parker, did not make Kilroy's intentions clear to his audience.

Parker was praised, however, for her direction of one of most popular works of the year, Tom Murphy's adaptation of the nineteenth-century American melodrama *The Drunkard*. Gloriously staged and performed, the play was presented by B\*spoke Theatre (headed by Murphy's partner Jane Brennan), which is fast emerging as one of Ireland's most exciting new companies. Although B\*spoke stated the play was chosen simply to allow its cast the opportunity to perform melodrama, its treatment of the damaging effects of alcoholism resonated with Irish audiences. The excellent cast enjoyed themselves thoroughly and so did audiences in Dublin and Galway, where the play was performed. While *The Drunkard* was unusually funny for a work by Murphy, it also had an unsettling emotional undercurrent that made the action engaging and rewarding. Some commentators did, however, express regret that Murphy had produced a commercialized adaptation of a melodrama, rather than an original new work.

Marie Jones's *The Blind Fiddler*, which premiered at the Lyric in Belfast, was also accused of being excessively commercialized. A reworking of an earlier one-act play that Jones wrote with Charabanc, *The Blind Fiddler* focuses on the attempts of a middle-aged Belfast woman to come to terms with the recent death of her father. Although the play is not without its sentimental moments—particularly a final ten-minute spell that had entire audiences reaching for their sick-bags—it was surprisingly underrated. At its center is a consideration of Catholic notions of sacrifice, with Jones paralleling the penance of Lough Derg pilgrims with the compromises made for the sake of their children's prosperity by a Catholic couple in 1960s Belfast. *The Blind Fiddler* offers a thoughtful

presentation of how sectarianism and social class are intertwined in Northern Ireland and, by placing traditional Irish music at the heart of its action, it can be seen as an important act of cultural reclamation. Particularly interesting was Jones's decision to locate this treatment of sectarianism in a deeper historical context, presenting the actions around the "Troubles" by flashing back to the 1960s from Ulster after the cease-fire. However, Belfast audiences did not seem impressed by the play's thematic complexity, and it was widely dismissed as a cynical attempt to reproduce the success of *Stones in His Pockets*.

The general attitude to new work by Ireland's major writers in 2003 was that it appeared to lack conviction: Jones recycled an old play; Friel presented a chamber piece; Murphy produced an adaptation; and Kilroy's work was disappointingly staged. One senses that this situation arises not from underachievement on the part of these writers, but rather from a hesitancy about how, or whether, they can move forward. This lack of conviction was also evident in new works by younger authors.

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Arguably the most important—and certainly the most divisive—play of 2003 was Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall*. Produced at the Gate and directed by Garry Hynes, it presents three successive monologues by women living in the fictitious Irish town of Crestfall. While the acting of the three performers—Aisling O'Sullivan, Marie Mullen, and Eileen Walsh—was universally praised, many found O'Rowe's writing excessively brutal: one character narrates a story in which a child is forced to witness a horse being beaten to death by a mob, while another vividly describes how she was sexually assaulted by a dog. Some audiences found this material stunning, others thought it overwhelming, and some just found it repulsive and pointless—but *Crestfall* demonstrates that O'Rowe is one of the most technically gifted writers currently working in Ireland. It is worth noting, however, that much of the commentary on the play focused on O'Rowe's use of the monologue form, which is now regarded as utterly exhausted in Irish drama. Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that the Gate deserved praise for its willingness to present work that most Irish theaters would find too extreme for production—a willingness that is particularly admirable in the context of the Gate's normally conservative output: it spent much of the remainder of the year churning out adaptations of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen.

The Gate's *Crestfall* was a good example of the kind of theatrical risk-taking sadly absent from the Abbey's production of Hilary Fannin's *Doldrum Bay*, a comedy about two advertisers hired to devise a recruitment campaign for the Christian Brothers. Fannin shows a strong talent for comic dialogue, and an ability to represent sensitively middle-aged masculinity. But, while she impress-

es when her characters express their sense of incredulous outrage at the Christian Brothers, she tries too hard to bring balance to that representation by interpolating unrealistic dialogue about how the order did many good things for Irish society. While the Irish church has certainly become a target for cheap shots throughout Irish society, Fannin's attempt to bring a quasi-journalistic sense of fairness to *Doldrum Bay* was unfortunate, if admirable. Her play worked best when dealing with her characters' feelings of anger and abandonment in the face of clerical scandal, but authorial editorializing robbed the action of much of its balance and credibility. As shown by her earlier *Mackerel Sky*, Fannin is a writer with great potential, but one sensed that she had not resolved all of the problems that *Doldrum Bay* presented to her.

The other new play at the Abbey in 2003 was Stella Feehily's *Duck*, a coproduction with the English company Out of Joint and London's Royal Court Theatre. Again, the impression created was of talent being inappropriately channeled. Directed by Max Stafford Clarke, *Duck* bears a strong resemblance to his earlier find, Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982). It presents two working-class teenage girls, living in Dublin—one preparing to go to university, the other unsure of her future. Although the play was well received in London and Edinburgh, many Irish audiences found the presentation of working-class Dublin exploitative and stereotypical, often offensively so. *Duck* was further weakened for Dublin audiences by including among its characters a writer whose superficial qualities closely resemble those of a prominent Irish playwright, prompting speculation that Feehily's play might be autobiographical, although no evidence exists that the resemblance was intentional. Yet, as the play's popularity in London and Edinburgh attests, some of Feehily's achievements in *Duck* are outstanding. A series of interlinking scenes in which the protagonist shares a bath with three different people displays Feehily's excellent sense of staging; her characterization is often movingly truthful, and she is ambitious in her range of themes and settings. One hopes that the success of *Duck* will encourage her to develop these strengths.

Some notable new plays came from the independent sector. Declan Hughes's *Shiver* from Rough Magic is a counterpoint to the 1990 *Digging for Fire*, and offers an interesting take on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. And *Charlie* by John Breen takes up a subject that in 2002 was controversially tackled by Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr—the career of Charles Haughey. Presented in mock-documentary format and using the versatile staging style that earned praise for *Alone it Stands* (1999), *Charlie* confirms Breen as a director with a notable affinity with his Irish audiences.

The year's biggest surprise was the success of Joe O'Byrne, whose 2002 *En Suite* was so poorly received that many thought he would struggle to be pro-

duced again. Yet he rebounded quickly, collaborating with Roddy Doyle on a stage adaptation of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, which was a popular summer success for Dublin City University's new Helix Theatre. And only months later, O'Byrne's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* was one of the hits of the Kilkenny Arts Festival. Many commentators have drawn attention to the growing tendency in Irish theater for producers to commission adaptations of works that have been successful in other media—a tendency often cited as an example of conservatism in Irish theater. O'Byrne showed how adaptations can shed new light on already familiar works, enriching audiences' appreciation of both the theatrical experience and the original source material.

Does the development of new writing in 2003 demonstrate a renewed fetishization of authorship in Irish theater? Perhaps. Take for example a production from Fishamble called *Shorts*, which presented fourteen ten-minute plays from first-time writers. Each of the fourteen plays was too insubstantial to establish whether any of the writers might have talent worth developing, and the experience was unrewarding for audiences—yet Fishamble's promotion of itself as a developer of new work went largely unchallenged. This reveals perfectly the “quantity over quality” approach to new writing in Ireland, which was also apparent in the manner in which Abbey Artistic Director Ben Barnes side-stepped criticism of the quality of the three new plays the Abbey produced in 2003, but repeatedly highlighted the thirty plays the theatre currently has under commission. It is hard to resist the suspicion that Irish theaters would benefit by devoting closer attention to fewer plays.

Such a proposition is supported by the observation that the year's most accomplished Irish dramas emerged not from Ireland, but from London's Royal National Theatre, which places strong emphasis on—and invests appropriate funds in—dramaturgy. Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture* jumped through the intertwining lives of several Belfast families, giving us a technically ambitious and thematically mature play from a writer who, since the mid-1990s, has quietly been assembling a body of consistently impressive work. Also at the National was Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, a “new” play that was, in fact, staged as a reading by Druid in 1997. The inclusion of a scene in which a young girl is crucified shows that McDonagh remains a writer not particularly noted for subtlety or compassion—but his consideration of whether writers can be held responsible for the interpretation of their works is dramatically very powerful. This theme will undoubtedly reanimate debates about the issue of representation and authenticity in McDonagh's work. Furthermore, the first McDonagh play not set in Ireland may enable us to form a clearer idea of McDonagh's place in Irish theater by allowing us to consider the quality of his

writing without worrying about whether he is undermining or reinforcing Irish stereotypes.

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The present state of Irish drama may seem disappointing, but there are some reasons to be optimistic. The first is the growing presence of international drama on the Irish stage. A glance at the production history of most Irish theater companies will show that the periods in which writing is strong are almost always preceded by periods in which emphasis is placed on the production of international work. Before Druid produced Murphy and McDonagh, it produced Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard; before Rough Magic premiered Hughes and Moxley, it presented Caryl Churchill and Wallace Shawn. The strong presence of international work in the Irish repertoire in 2003 is in its own right a positive development, and one hopes that it will stimulate the development of new writing.

An early highlight of the year was Conal Morisson's *Antigone*, which the playwright relocated to the present-day Middle East. Using music and projections to comment upon and underline the action on stage, Morisson directed his actors to deliver their lines in Northern Irish accents. This dynamic approach to the staging of the work proved surprisingly effective, allowing him to convincingly explore the links between the Irish and Israeli-Palestinian experiences—a parallel too often invoked superficially. Less successful, however, was Morisson's relocation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* from Norway to Northern Ireland for a summer production at the Lyric. Nevertheless, the re-emergence of Morisson as director and playwright is good news.

Another Ibsen play—*The Wild Duck*, adapted by Frank McGuinness—was one of the highlights of the Peacock Theatre's season. The translation provided was refreshingly free of McGuinnessisms—no one tells anyone else to “get out of my road,” or uses the word “boy” as a term of abuse—and this decision not to Hibernicize the play proved a good one: the dialogue was presented in a standardized English that allowed the audience to concentrate fully on the dramatic action. The Hungarian director Lazlo Marton used nearly monochromatic design and lighting to draw out Ibsen's use of photography in the play, and this association was developed with some beautifully subtle tableaux, organized to appear like nineteenth-century portraiture. This visual representation reinforced an important thematic aspect of the play; and it also added strongly to an atmosphere of dread and imminent tragedy. In short, *The Wild Duck* gave us a standard of direction that far surpassed anything usually seen in Ireland.

Also at the Peacock was an important season of once-off readings of major

new American plays. The American actor Ethan Hawke performed in Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*, and an all-white Irish cast provided a blistering reading of Suzan Lori-Parks's *Fucking A*. Tony Kushner's *Homebody* was elevated to a full production in late 2003, as was David Hancock's *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*. And there were many other international highlights. A Prime Cut production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin* was very popular in Belfast and Dublin, owing in part to the presence in its cast of Conleth Hill, one of the rising stars of Irish theater. The growth of interest in international work was also evident with the Focus Theatre's production of David Auburn's *Proof*, which was a surprise hit in late 2003. This was very good news for lovers of Irish theater: after the death of Deirdre O'Connell, who founded the Focus and its adjoining Stanislavski studio, many feared that the theater would decline or disappear. *Proof*, together with a popular Irish tour of Malachy McKenna's wonderful *Tilsonburg* (2001)—showed that the Focus is revitalizing under the new artistic directorship of Joe Devlin.

The biggest theatrical success of 2003 was, surprisingly, Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*, which played at the 2003 Dublin Theatre Festival. The Festival bravely programmed the play to run for two weeks (most international plays at the Festival usually have a maximum of five performances), hoping that word-of-mouth would generate support for it. The risk paid off; within days of opening, Dublin was full of talk about "the Lepage," tickets for which were proving scarce. Theater professionals praised the show's sophisticated staging and the quality of leading actor Yves Jacques's performances; and audiences generally responded to its rich and engaging narrative. The success of Lepage's show confirmed for many the growing belief that Irish audiences are becoming more open-minded in their attitudes to work from abroad.

The Irish success story of the Dublin Theatre Festival was also somewhat unconventional. Michael Keegan Dolan's *Giselle* mixed dance with theater, relocating the Giselle myth to the Irish midlands. Beginning with naturalistic narrative, speech gradually gave way to music and movement, the play's final scene being performed entirely through dance. Irish midland accents blended with Texan drawls, Slovakian folk dancing merged with traditional Irish music—and, surprisingly, it all cohered. The success of *Giselle* may mark a turning point for dance theater in Ireland, which has been growing steadily in recent years. Add to this the growing profile of companies like Blue Raincoat and Loose Canon, and the notion that Irish theater is overdependent on text seems increasingly untenable.

Another company exploring new ways of performing is Gúna Nua, which in March, 2003, produced *Skin Deep*, a new play by company cofounder Paul Meade. Like Patrick Marber's *Closer*, *Skin Deep* considers the relations of two

men and two women in the context of the increased commercialization of human life. However, the play also uses a range of new media technologies to present, frame, and comment upon the action. This was not gimmicky innovation for its own sake: the use of these techniques was an integral part of the narrative and the staging of the play. The result was a highly ambitious consideration of surveillance, visual culture, and commodification in contemporary Irish society.

Another issue of great importance in Irish society is the growth of multiculturalism, which resulted in some interesting offerings from Irish theatre companies during the year. Barrabas gave us *Hurl*, a play about a multi-ethnic hurling team, which was (perhaps ironically) let down ultimately by its representation of rural Irish characters as backward, ignorant “muck savages.” The appearance of plays like *Hurl* is of course generally to be supported, but it is important not to exaggerate the value of white middle-class writers producing plays for white middle-class audiences about the marginalization of Ireland’s most recent immigrants. Accordingly, one of the more exciting developments during the year was the production during the Fringe Festival of Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not To Blame* by Arambe, Ireland’s first African theater company.

Arguably the most positive development in 2003 is the consolidation of Irish theater criticism and publishing. Most of the major Irish plays of 2003 were published, with Nick Hern Books in particular doing excellent work in bringing younger writers into print. In Ireland, Gallery Press continues to publish new work by Friel, and in 2003, completed its project of bringing all of Thomas Kilroy’s plays into print. Carysfort Press, a dedicated publisher of Irish theater criticism, published new work on Marina Carr and Frank McGuinness in 2003, and issued a collection of Fintan O’Toole’s theater reviews. The Irish Theatrical Diaspora project was firmly established with the launch of a dedicated web site, and the announcement of plans for an inaugural conference in 2004. And *Irish Theatre Magazine* celebrated its fifth birthday by staging an international conference on theater criticism in Liberty Hall. But by far the most significant development in 2003 was the launch of the Irish Playography, an on-line database that lists every Irish play produced since 1980, with links to assist scholars in sourcing scripts. The project aims ultimately to record every Irish play produced since 1904. Put simply, it has the potential to transform the manner in which Irish theater scholarship is carried out, and deserves the widest support.

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Irish theater in 2003 might best be characterized as suffering from hesitancy occasioned by funding cuts. Like most other aspects of Irish society, our theater appears to be undergoing a hangover from the Celtic Tiger bender. It remains

to be seen whether the Abbey Theatre Centenary will improve matters: 2004 will provide Irish theatre with a valuable opportunity to raise its profile, but this may inhibit rather than promote innovation—and it is worrying that so much of the discourse around the centenary is focused on brands, budgets, and bottom lines.

It is difficult to tell whether Irish theater's current hesitancy will result in another great leap forward, or a lapse into stagnation. There is evidence in support of both propositions. It is disappointing that some theater producers reacted defensively to the genuine concerns audiences and critics have about the authorial underachievement and substandard production values that were evident in 2003, with the "creative right to failure" too frequently being inappropriately invoked to excuse all kinds of inadequacies. But many outlets now exist in which these problems may be highlighted and debated, and this at least is a positive development. We can only hope that the innovation and imagination displayed in plays like *Crestfall*, *Giselle*, and *Skin Deep*—together with programming as brave as that which brought Robert Lepage to Dublin for two weeks—will be built upon in 2004. The risk is that it will be washed away by the forthcoming flood of nostalgia.

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