

Dublin Theatre Festival 1957-2016

A personal selection, with help from the reminiscences published in the Festival's 21st Anniversary brochure in 1979, particularly the reflections of the late Dr. Brendan Smith.
By Andrew Parkes, Friend of the Festival

Dublin Theatre Festival was created as part of "An Tóstal", a celebration mainly designed to bring tourists to Ireland in the Springtime. Following on from his production of a successful pageant *Chuchulainn* in Croke Park in 1956, Brendan Smith prepared a blueprint for consideration by Bord Fáilte Eireann (the Irish Tourist Board). Brendan Smith had opened his theatre academy a dozen years earlier and was known as a dramatist, actor, producer, director, critic and impresario. His proposal was accepted by Bord Fáilte, headed by Dr. T. J. O'Driscoll¹, and a grant of £15,000 was made. The Dublin International Theatre Festival came into being with Brendan Smith as director and a Theatre Festival Committee linked to the Dublin Tóstal Council.

May 1957, the first Festival.

The inaugural programme was remarkable. In a very rare event for Dublin in the 1950s, Jean Vilar's Théâtre Nationale Populaire came to the Olympia in '*Le Faiseur*' by Balzac and '*Le Malade Imaginaire*' by Molière. Margaret Rutherford also played at the Olympia in '*The Importance of Being Earnest*'. The Royal Ballet, starring Margot Fonteyn, was at the great Theatre Royal with the full Covent Garden Orchestra. The Dublin Grand Opera Society's season at the Gaiety was included in the Festival.

Brendan Smith was able to bring the estranged Longford and Edwards/MacLiammóir companies together at the Gate Theatre for '*The Old Lady Says 'No!'*' by Denis Johnston, in which Micheál MacLiammóir appeared for the last time as Robert Emmet, the part that he had created at the first production in 1929. The Abbey - then at the big Queen's Theatre in Pearse Street - offered two repertory classics: '*The Playboy of the Western World*', with Ray McAnally as Christy Mahon, and '*Juno and the Paycock*', with Eileen Crowe as Juno, supported by the regular Abbey company. The Globe Theatre Company, in the little gem of a theatre attached to the Gas Company showrooms in Dún Laoghaire, presented seven Yeats plays for the occasion.

But major controversy was provided by the Pike Theatre production of '*The Rose Tattoo*' by Tennessee Williams, which opened the Festival on Sunday 12th May 1957. The tiny Pike had already given Dublin the Irish première of Samuel Beckett's '*Waiting for Godot*' and the world première of Brendan Behan's '*The Quare Fellow*'. Now it was presenting the first European English-language production of '*The Rose Tattoo*', directed by Alan Simpson, with Anna Manahan and Pat Nolan in the lead roles. Pat Nolan was expected to drop a contraceptive (then illegal) on the stage, although this action was deftly mimed. A Garda warning was issued that the director would be liable to arrest if he did not drop the play, because it contained "objectionable passages". The passages were not specified and Alan Simpson refused to stop the performance. Gardaí were sent to the Pike for several evenings. The acclaimed production completed its run but the director was arrested, held overnight in the Bridewell and charged with having 'produced for gain an indecent and profane performance'. The prosecution was directed against the play as a whole, not just the supposed incident with a condom. The case dragged on for over a year, going to the Supreme Court on the question whether the police could claim 'privilege' about what their

¹ Dr. O'Driscoll was again to play an important role as Vice-Chairman of the Theatre Festival Council from 1974 and then as Chairman from 1983 to 1989.

instructions had been. Finally Alan Simpson was acquitted in the District Court but the cost in both money and reputation had taken a heavy toll on him and the Pike Theatre.

1958, the year of cancellation

The second Festival was in preparation while the *'Rose Tattoo'* case was still before the courts. Three highlights were planned: *'Bloomsday'*, adapted from Joyce's *'Ulysses'* by Allan McClelland; a trio of mime plays by Samuel Beckett together with a reading of *'All That Fall'*; and the world première of *'The Drums of Father Ned'* by Sean O'Casey. The new O'Casey play would have followed just 3 years after the first production of *'The Bishop's Bonfire'*, which had caused controversy amid allegations of anti-clericalism in 1955.

It had been customary for the Tóstal to be marked by an official opening Mass. On this occasion, a special Votive Mass had been requested. However the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. McQuaid, having learned from the Dublin Tóstal Council that it had sanctioned the production of works by Joyce and O'Casey, withdrew permission for any religious ceremony. Opposition to the programme grew. The Dublin Council of Irish Unions decided to protest against "plays of an objectionable nature". In early February 1958 a spokesman for the Dublin Tóstal Council said that through its festival director it had rejected the O'Casey play because it was not allowed to make "structural alterations to make it suitable for the Dublin public". O'Casey simultaneously announced that he was withdrawing it.² Three days later the Council decided to drop the dramatization of *'Ulysses'* also. Samuel Beckett withdrew his plays in protest. The 1958 Festival was cancelled.

1959, the festival re-born

Brendan Smith did not give up. In early 1959 a meeting of Dublin Theatre and Production Managements decided that the Festival must go on but that it would take place in the autumn, independent from the Tóstal. Brendan Smith was re-appointed as director and a Festival Committee was set up, subsequently formalised as Dublin International Theatre Festival Limited. The first Chairman was Lord Killanin, who held that position until 1972 when he was elected President of the International Olympic Committee. Mr. Justice Cearbhall O'Dalaigh (later to become President of Ireland) was the Vice-Chairman.

Two of the legendary actor-managers graced this second – crucially important - Festival. Anew McMaster was at the Gaiety with Jimmy O'Dea and Milo O'Shea in Bernard Shaw's *'The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles'*. Sir Donald Wolfit came to the Olympia in the world première of a play called *'Landscape with Figures'* by the photographer Cecil Beaton about the life of Gainsborough. Ballet again featured at the Theatre Royal with the Festival Ballet accompanied by the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Lotte Goslar came from the USA with her dance/mime company.

The Gas Company theatre saw the stage première of *'The Lady Spider'*, a play in verse by Donagh MacDonagh about the Deirdre legend. Denis Johnston provided Hilton Edwards with a new version of *'Dreaming Dust'*, his play about Swift. The Abbey at the Queen's Theatre presented a new Irish play, *'Leave it to the Doctor'* by Ann Daly. And the Pike courageously returned with the English language stage première of *'Inquisition'* by Diego Fabbri translated by Carolyn Swift, directed by Alan Simpson and again starring Anna Manahan.

² The Irish Times, 10 January and 12 February 1958, quoted in *'Sean O'Casey – the man and his work'* by David Krause, Macgibbon and Kee, London, 1960

1960, the first “hits” of the Festival

'The Playboy of the Western World' was presented again in 1960, but this time in a special Festival production at the Gaiety directed by Shelah Richards, with Siobhán McKenna as Pegeen Mike and Donal Donnelly as Christy Mahon. Brendan Smith remembered it as being “regarded by most people as the definitive production of this Irish classic”³. He took it on a tour of Europe followed by a long West-End season in London. But an even bigger hit was to come, also at the Gaiety. Micheál MacLiammóir’s performance in *'The Importance of Being Oscar'*, directed by Hilton Edwards, was an enormous success. Described in the Festival brochure as “a recital”, the evening consisted of MacLiammóir talking about Oscar Wilde, with excerpts from early poems and the plays in the first half and from *'De Profundis'* and *'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'* in the second. The trials were supposed to have taken place during the interval. The show transferred almost immediately to London and toured in Britain. In subsequent years MacLiammóir performed it to acclaim around the world.

The 1960 Festival was also notable for the strength of new Irish writing. Hugh Leonard’s *'A Walk on the Water'* was his first Festival play, to be followed by seventeen others presented at the Festival over the next 26 years. *'The Highest House on the Mountain'* introduced the work of John B. Keane to Dublin audiences. *'The Voices of Doolin'* by Walter Macken, *'Song of the Anvil'* by Bryan McMahon and *'Mourn the Ivy Leaf'* by G.P. Gallivan all received world premières. Sean ó Riada contributed the music for *'Spailpin A Ruin'*, a musical play based on the life of Eoghan Rua ó Súilleabháin. Pike Theatre Productions took over a Lecture Hall in Abbey Street to perform *'The Scatterin'* by the sculptor James McKenna, with music by A. J. Potter, electric guitar backing, and a large cast of actors and singers as well as dancers from National Ballet, all directed by Alan Simpson. Described in hindsight as “a theatrical landmark and, arguably, the world’s first rock musical”⁴, it portrayed Irish emigration in the Teddyboy era of the 1950s in a way that broadened the horizons for Irish theatre. It later transferred to London.

The Sixties

Hugh Leonard relocated Ibsen’s *'Peer Gynt'* to an Irish setting as *'The Passion of Peter Ginty'* for the 1961 Festival. However Leonard’s first big Festival success came in 1962 with *'Stephen D'*, adapted from James Joyce’s *'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'* and its unfinished first draft *'Stephen Hero'*. This dramatisation was given thrilling direction by Jim Fitzgerald and a star performance by Norman Rodway as Stephen. It transferred to London where it was billed as “The 1962 Dublin Theatre Festival success as originally presented by Gemini Productions”. The name of Gemini, with Phyllis Ryan as its Artistic Director, was to feature in Festival programmes over a long period.

The London programme for *'Stephen D'* included a note about the Dublin Theatre Festival that concluded as follows:

“Within a period of five years, it has taken a proud place among the great international festivals enjoying the distinction of being the world’s largest drama festival with the smallest budget.”

The première of a new Irish Musical was a big occasion. *'Carrie'* by Wesley Burrows and Michael Coffey, with Ray McAnally and Milo O’Shea in the cast, was an exciting success in 1963.

³ ‘Reflections on a 21st Anniversary’ by Festival Director Brendan Smith in the 1979 Festival brochure.

⁴ John Ryan, ‘Remembering how we Stood’ 1975

1964 was one of the finest years. Brian Friel's *'Philadelphia, Here I Come'* had its world première, directed by Hilton Edwards with Patrick Bedford and Donal Donnelly creating the roles of Gar Public and Gar Private, later to be seen on Broadway. Eugene McCabe's powerful drama *'King of the Castle'*, about a successful but impotent farmer, created controversy, as did Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *'An Triail'*, a play in Irish about an unmarried mother rejected by her family and abandoned by the child's father. *'King of the Castle'* won the Irish life Award for the Festival. Four other new Irish plays and a musical were premièred that year. Sir John Gielgud was seen – and more importantly heard – in his famous recital of Shakespeare's *'Ages of Man'*.

In 1966, the Abbey marked its first year in its new building with *'One for the Grave'*, a modern morality play by Louis MacNeice. The Festival also produced *'Breakdown'* by Eugene McCabe, set in a small town but concerned with the moral dilemma of an accountant asked to "cook the books" for a former friend.

1967 brought the adaptation by Frank MacMahon of Brendan Behan's autobiographical novel *'Borstal Boy'*, directed by Tomás MacAnna at the Abbey with Frank Grimes as the young Behan and Niall Toibin as the older. The play went on to win a Tony Award and New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1969-70. Grimes was nominated for a Tony and Toibin won a Drama Desk Award for their performances.

Brendan Smith recognised the merit of Thomas Kilroy's *'The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche'* and introduced it at the Festival of 1968. That year also saw a memorable production of *'The Cherry Orchard'* at the Abbey, directed by Maria Knebel from the Moscow Art Theatre and featuring Siobhán McKenna and Cyril Cusack. In addition, Dublin had the opportunity to see the magical effects created by the black-clad actor/manipulators of The Black Theatre of Prague.

The 1970s

There was no Festival in 1970. The event was to be moved from autumn to spring for 1971 and so September/October 1970 would have been too close in time. After two seasons in March 1971 and 1972, the Festival reverted to autumn in 1973.

Tom Murphy's plays had a series of premières at the Festival: *'The Morning after Optimism'* (1971), *'The White House'* (1972) and *'The Sanctuary Lamp'* (1975). His first play *'On the Outside'*, written with Noel O'Donoghue back in 1959, was also in the Festival programme as *'Outside'* in 1974. New work by Thomas Kilroy was also launched: *'Tea and Sex and Shakespeare'* (1976) and *'Talbot's Box'* (1977).

Hugh Leonard's *'Da'* had been premièred in America but it had its first Irish production a few weeks later at the 1973 Festival with John McGiver outstanding in the title role that he had created. A different production of the play won four Awards on Broadway in 1977-78. *'Summer'*, Leonard's next perceptive and funny look at life, memorably set on "a hillside overlooking Dublin", had its European première at the 1974 Festival. Then in 1979 came the world première at the Abbey of another great Leonard success, *'A Life'*, which was also produced on Broadway and received a Tony nomination.

A play that left a strong impression was *'Mr. Joyce is Leaving Paris'* (1971) by Scottish playwright Tom Gallacher in which Robert Bernal brought the character of Joyce vividly to life on the stage of the Eblana, in the basement of Busáras. *'The True Story of the Horrid Popish Plot'* (1972) by Desmond Forristal explored the history of the alleged plot that led to

the execution of Dr. Oliver Plunkett in 1681. Stewart Parker's first stage play *'Spokesong'* (1975) with music by Jimmy Kennedy, was a highly original piece, set in a Belfast bicycle shop. Gerard Mannix Flynn collaborated with Peter Sheridan in writing *'The Liberty Suit'* (1977) and also acted in it with a large cast, directed by Jim Sheridan. Life in a juvenile prison was laid bare.

Noel Pearson introduced Dublin to the songs of Jacques Brel when he presented the Off-Broadway show *'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris'* (1974). Ballet returned to the Festival in 1978 with the Irish National Ballet's version of *'The Playboy of the Western World'* choreographed by Joan Denise Moriarty to music by the Chieftains, later presented in New York and London. 1978 also saw an acclaimed production of *'Uncle Vanya'* at the Abbey with Cyril Cusack, directed by Vladimir Monachov from Moscow.

In 1979, the National Theatre of Great Britain came to the Festival with Simon Gray's *'Close of Play'* directed by Harold Pinter, in which an ailing Michael Redgrave dominated the stage without saying a word, sitting in the midst of an outstanding cast that included Michael Gambon. In that year the Festival itself presented *'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour'*, a piece for actors and orchestra by Tom Stoppard with music by André Previn. Set in a mental institution in the (then) Soviet Union, it involved confusion between a confined political dissident and a genuine patient who imagined that he was playing in an orchestra – which required the presence of the Festival Orchestra conducted by Proinnsias Ó Duinn. Ray McAnally and Des Cave headed the cast in this ambitious production.

The 1980s

There was no Festival in 1984; some theatre productions were included in ContemporeÉire which took place in October of that year.

Two influential events of the early 1980s were the visits of the Wroclaw Contemporary Theatre from Poland, directed by Kazimierz Braun. They brought *'Birthrate'* (1981), a collective improvisation based on a work of poet Tadeuz Rosewicz and *'Anna Livia'* (1982), a stage poem by Maciej Slomczynnski adapted from *'Finnegan's Wake'* - "speaking through pictures, rhythms, melodies ...the universal language of the theatre". Braun returned in 1983 to direct a production of *'The Old Woman Broods'* by Rosewicz with Irish actors. Both the gallery space and the theatre of the old Project were used in showing Braun's very visual approach to theatre. The Festival brochure pointed out that one of the reasons for including international theatre in the programme was for "inspiring Irish writers, actors and directors to experiment with new ideas and with forms of theatre that are not purely literary".

A member of the Wroclaw company, Maciek Reszczynski, came to live in Ireland and was a founder of Theatre Unlimited in Kilkenny. They continued to explore the visual manner in *'The Murder of Gonzago'*, after Shakespeare (1986), and Reszczynski's *'Penelope'* (1988), inspired by the Greek myth but looking at Irish myths and obsessions.

Orion Teatern from Sweden provided another contemporary approach with an irreverent production of Shaw's *'Pygmalion'* (1987) in the full space of the Tivoli. The audience entered at the back wall and watched the Covent Garden scene from the shelter of the Opera House portico while the cast were getting wet in pouring rain a few feet away. The audience then moved forward to sit down but the spread of water continued as Eliza resisted Mrs. Pearce's attempts to get her to take a bath on one part of the open acting area while the gentlemen discussed her future in another. Elements of music hall kept entering into the story without subverting it. This was an evening to treasure.

Classical theatre at its most distinguished was seen during the first visit to Ireland of the Moscow Art Theatre with Chekhov's *'The Seagull'* (1989). The Royal Shakespeare Company brought Mark Rylance as *'Hamlet'* (1988). Cheek-by-Jowl delighted with *'Twelfth Night'* directed by Declan Donnellan (1986).

Introduction to a different tradition of performance came with the Peking Opera (1986), one of the oldest dramatic forms in the world. The brightly-coloured costumes and head-dresses, painted faces, stage-fighting, acrobatics, songs and dance to the sound of traditional Chinese music could be viewed as spectacle or understood as the telling of favourite stories. Circus skills and mime were combined in an entrancing way by Victoria Chaplin and Jean Baptiste Thierrée in *'Le Cirque Imaginaire'* (1980). Spectacular group circus routines were displayed by Ra-Ra Zoo in *'Domestic Bliss'* (1987). Traditional trapeze and juggling acts competed with comedy in *'Circus Oz'* (1988).

A dazzling example of homegrown theatre was *'Torchlight and Laser Beams'* (1988) based on the writings of Christopher Nolan and brought to the stage by him and Michael Scott. The emergence of the writer from a childhood suffering from cerebral palsy was symbolised by the contrast between the weakness of torchlight as he struggled to communicate and intensity of laser beams as his voice came to be heard.

Tom Murphy continued to launch new work at the Festival: *'The Informer'* (1981) adapted from Liam O'Flaherty's novel, with Liam Neeson as Gypo Nolan; *'Too Late for Logic'* (1989); and the astonishing first production of *'The Gigli Concert'* (1983), directed by Patrick Mason, with Tom Hickey and Godfrey Quigley conquering its complexities. Frank McGuinness also excited with *'Innocence'* (1986), his exploration of the light and darkness in the life as well as the work of Caravaggio, and *'Carthaginians'* (1988), his "elegy to the dead and living of Derry" in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. Donal O'Kelly both wrote and performed *'Bat the Father, Rabbit the Son'* (1988), an extraordinary tour-de-force of storytelling. Barry McGovern launched his one-man play *'I'll Go On'* (1985) selected from Samuel Beckett novels by McGovern and Gerry Duke, a superb performance piece later to be seen around the world to great acclaim. Dermot Bolger's *'The Lament for Arthur Cleary'* (1989) closed the decade with an examination of the underside of Ireland in the time of unemployment and emigration.

1990s

A highlight of the decade was *'The Street of Crocodiles'* (1994) presented by Theatre de Complicite. Devised from stories of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz and directed by Simon McBurney, it entranced with a child's vision of a street of memories and dreams in which both objects and people exchanged forms in an anarchic manner, but with a hint that the Holocaust was to come. The opening scene in which the cast erupted from baths and crates of books while one walked down the back wall of the set was only the beginning of this marvellous display of imagination.

Another unforgettable occasion was the 5-hour performance of *'Cloudstreet'* (1999) at the SFX, with a break for supper on the spot. Company B Belvoir from Australia, directed by Neil Armfield, told the epic story of 2 families sharing a run-down house over a 20-year period with a most appealing sense of innocence and humanity.

Cheek by Jowl's *'As You Like It'* (1991) at the Riverbank Theatre (otherwise known as St. Anthony's, on Merchants' Quay) would rank as a great favourite. Among an all-male

company, the tall black actor Adrian Lester as Rosalind gave us a man playing a woman playing a man with gender nuances that were captivating. This was Shakespeare made fresh. The Schiller Theater, Berlin, also came that year with an acclaimed and highly visual production of *'Macbeth'* directed by Katharina Thalbach.

A major impression was made by two productions from Romania, both directed by Silviu Purcarete. *'Decameron 646'* was a selection of a dozen bawdily exuberant tales from Boccaccio's 14th century novel, played in traverse on the floor of the Tivoli (1994). To reach their seats, half of the audience stepped past the recumbent cast lying on a painted cloth around a large wooden chest. Later as the stories were told in a simple earthy style using "tasteful innuendo and nudity", the chest served to conceal many intimate moments. This was comedy of the highest order. Then in 1996 Purcarete returned with the largest theatrical presentation seen in Ireland: *'Les Danaïdes'*, a sombre reconstruction of a play by Aeschylus, with a cast of 110 taking over the National Basketball Arena in Tallaght. Six supercilious gods oversaw the bloody conflict between 50 daughters of Danaos and their 50 unwanted suitors. The chorus of identically-dressed women, fleeing for their lives, carried suitcases that not only emphasised contemporary relevance but were also used to create much of the setting including the walls through which the men stormed. The visual effects were superb.

Tallaght was also the setting for one of the Festival's spectacular failures, the Archaos presentation of *'Metal Clown'* (1991). This raucous and exhilarating circus was played in a tent beside The Square with chain saw jugglers, dancers, a rock band, a Brazilian band, JCBs and motorbikes roaring through. The publicity said: "Blows the Big Top into the 21st Century". Unfortunately the wind from the Dublin Mountains blew the big top to pieces, performances were cancelled and 'chaos' seemed to be the right description.

Iveagh Gardens proved to be a much more amenable venue for a tent when Footsbarn brought their travelling theatre there for a joyful production of *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* (1990). The mixture of styles and nationalities and the energy of performance created a carnival atmosphere in which the magic of the Dream seemed perfectly natural. The company's return in 1995 with *'The Odyssey'* after Homer was equally impressive as spectacle although more demanding on the audience because of the great episodic sweep of the story.

A suitably stark venue had to be found for Fiona Shaw's interpretation of T.S. Eliot's *'The Waste Land'* (1995), directed by Deborah Warner. Eventually the Magazine Fort in Phoenix Park was selected as right for the bleak nature of the epic poem and the intensity of Shaw's performance. Deborah Warner was also the director for the world première of *'The Diary of One Who Vanished'* (1999), a new version by Seamus Heaney of Czech poems in a deeply personal Janáček song cycle. This was memorable for superb singing by Ian Bostridge but the attempt to stage it as a drama was unsatisfactory.

Robert Lepage's mastery of dazzling theatre technology was first seen in *'Elsinore'* (1997), in which a single performer represented all the main characters of *'Hamlet'* against a complex shifting set and multimedia effects. Pure delight was provided by Russia's great clown, Slava Polunin, in *'Snowshow'* (1996), which memorably included a fight with a spider's web and a wonderful finale in a blizzard. The Philippe Genty Company from France achieved enchanting effects with big puppets that had lives of their own (1991 and 1992).

Among the many new Irish plays premiered at the Festival, Marina Carr caught attention with the originality of her writing when telling the mythic story of three generations of women in *'The Mai'* (1994) and then the re-creation of Greek tragedy in the Irish Midlands with *'By the Bog of Cats'* (1998). Jimmy Murphy's *'Brothers of the Brush'* (1993) brought three working men (house painters) vividly to life in a dramatic struggle not only for respect from others but also between themselves. Bernard Farrell, who had had shows in the Festival as far back as 1979 (*'Legs 11'*) and 1980 (*'Canaries'*), enjoyed great success with *'Stella by Starlight'* (1996), a comic look at the spread of suburbia into the Wicklow Hills. The untold side of Oscar Wilde's family life was explored by Thomas Kilroy in *'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde'* (1997) in a production directed by Patrick Mason that distanced emotional conflict with a stylised intervention by large masked puppet figures. Three kaleidoscopic plays about everyday Dublin life written and directed by Paul Mercier for Passion Machine, *'Buddleia'* (1995), *'Kitchensink'* (1996) and *'Native City'* (1998), were presented together at the 1998 Festival as the Dublin Trilogy and received the ESB Irish Theatre Award for Best Production in that year.

In 1991, the Gate presented nine plays of Samuel Beckett in the first of its now-famous Beckett Festivals. In the same year, the Abbey brought in Brian Dennehy to star in a powerful production of *'The Iceman Cometh'* by Eugene O'Neill. Anne Bogart's SITI company from New York showed the director's mastery of expressionist performance in *'The Medium'* (1995), looking back at the prophecies of Marshall McLuhan. Bickerstaffe arrived from Kilkenny with *'True Lines'* (1994), a piece of physical theatre devised by the cast and the director John Crowley, that picked up experiences of Irish emigrants in various parts of the world and made them flow together in a work of striking imagination. And Druid came from Galway with Garry Hynes' production of *'The Leenane Trilogy'* (1997) by Martin McDonagh that gave Festival-goers the opportunity to spend a whole Saturday in the Olympia as the comedy got blacker and the drama heightened until the fall of night.

From 2000- 2006

One clear highlight of these years was *'Giselle'* (2003), the brilliant piece of dance theatre created by Michael Keegan-Dolan for Fabulous Beast Dance Company and the Theatre Festival. Based upon the 19th century romantic ballet but transferred to a grim and violent Irish setting, with electronic music by Philip Feeney, this demanded vocal and acting ability from the international group of dancers as well as great physical prowess. When the show went to the Barbican in London in 2005, Keegan-Dolan was nominated for an Olivier Award in the Best New Dance Production category.

Rough Magic's musical satire *'Improbable Frequency'* (2004), very cleverly written by Arthur Riordan with music by Bell Helicopter and direction by Lynne Parker, told a daft but highly entertaining tale of Dublin during "The Emergency". It was an immediate hit, going on to a run in the Abbey and then to the Edinburgh Fringe.

The Festival commissioned Enda Walsh's *'Bedbound'* (2000), a most disturbing piece of superb writing, as a murderous Dad and his disabled Daughter talked frantically on a bed in a tiny room. The play, premièred in the intense confined space of the New Theatre, was later seen in Andrew's Lane, in Edinburgh, at the Royal Court in London, in New York and across Europe.

Six years after *'Elsinore'*, Robert Lepage from Quebec again used technical wizardry in *'The Far Side of the Moon'* (2003) but this time it enhanced the scenes without dominating the show. A private tale of two estranged brothers (played, like all the other parts, in a virtuoso

performance by one actor, Yves Jacques) was combined with a public look at space exploration in the time of Soviet/US competition. Laurie Anderson provided the music, particularly for the space episodes. A round window in the set served at one moment as a domestic washing machine and at another as a portal into a spaceship. A mirror angled above the stage created an extraordinary live image of space walking. This was an unforgettable evening in the theatre.

In contrast, a Robert Wilson production, *'Woyzeck'* (2001) presented in Danish by the Betty Nansen Company with songs by Tom Waits, was much less accessible, partly because of language difficulties without surtitles and partly because of the Wilson style. However the visual effects were remarkable, with every scene viewed as an artwork created by the lighting, the setting and the manipulated cast.

Peter Brook showed a completely different approach to theatre with the simple directness of *'Le Costume'* (2001) from the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (Paris). This township tale of 1950s South Africa had a sweet surface that hid a terrible personal cruelty.

The use of a stunning modern setting to bring out new ideas from a classic text was seen in *'Hedda Gabler'* (2006) directed by Thomas Ostermeier for the Schaubühne (Berlin). The revolving apartment with a big glass wall on which raindrops ran became, because of its very openness, a prison for Hedda. The coolness of young Katharina Schüttler's performance as she destroyed all about her gave a hard contemporary edge to Ibsen's play.

Shakespeare's Henry VI plays about the Wars of the Roses were given in a very exciting edited version under the name *'Rose Rage'* (2001), directed by Edward Hall and edited by him and Roger Warren. The company from The Watermill Theatre (Newbury) was all male, with Queen Margaret being played with only a touch of femininity but nevertheless clearly a woman even in her most militaristic scenes. The Cheek by Jowl team of Declan Donnellan as director and Nick Ormerod as designer showed what they could do with a Russian cast (again all male) from the Chekhov Festival bringing great fun to *'Twelfth Night'* (2004). A Lithuanian production of *'Romeo & Juliet'* (2005) from OKT/Vilnius City Theatre placed the warring families in competing pizza parlours and used dough and flour as weapons. The set, on which the agile cast fought, climbed, swung and romanced, was one of the stars of this most enjoyable show.

As verbatim theatre, *'Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Enquiry'* (2005) edited by Richard Norton-Taylor for the Tricycle Theatre (London) made a very powerful impression, particularly because of the contrast between the orderly atmosphere in which the Enquiry was conducted and the bloody chaos in Derry described by the witnesses. *'The Exonerated'* (2006) written by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen from the true stories of survivors of Death Row had a strong emotional impact, particularly when Sunny Jacobs was there on stage herself, quietly telling her own story.

The Abbey scheduled a season of Tom Murphy plays for the Festival in 2001, with two productions (plus a reading) on the main stage and three productions in the Peacock showing the extraordinary range of Murphy's imagination. For its centenary year (2004), the Abbey marked the Festival period with four contrasting plays premièred there over the previous quarter-century, plus a triple bill of one-act classics that included a stunning production of *'The Dandy Dolls'* by George Fitzmaurice, directed by Conall Morrison. In addition, a series of public readings of plays from each decade of the Abbey's first 100 years

provided a unique opportunity to hear some of the Abbey Players of former years working with new and emerging directors.

To mark Harold Pinter's 75th Birthday in 2005, the Gate in partnership with the Festival put on a Celebration that included two full productions of intriguing Pinter plays and a weekend of readings with renowned actors from London, crowned by a miscellany of short Pinter pieces in which the author himself took part. This was a great festive occasion.

From 2007-2016

The 50th Birthday of the Festival was marked by some looking back over history: *'The Case of the Rose Tattoo'* recounted the trial of Alan Simpson for the Pike Theatre production that had caused such controversy in 1957; other rehearsed readings included 5 plays that had been selected from the body of new writing staged during the 50 years; and the Abbey presented readings of three of O'Casey's later plays, including *'The Drums of Father Ned'* which had been a major factor in the cancellation of the 1958 Festival.

But the Festival programme for 2007 looked onwards and outwards. The innovative American director Anne Bogart came with her SITI Company to perform two pieces that included *'Radio Macbeth'* in which "the Scottish play" was rehearsed for a live broadcast by actors whose interaction in the studio revealed their own private ambitions. Peter Brook returned, also with two productions, including a compelling monologue *'The Grand Inquisitor'* drawn from Dostoyevsky and delivered with quiet authority by Bruce Myers. Back to Back Theatre from Australia took us to Mayor Square for *'small metal objects'* with a cast that included actors considered to have intellectual disabilities. Listening on our headphones and spotting the performers among the passing pedestrians, we were with them as outsiders.

The 6th decade of the Festival started, as it was to continue, with a reminder of the timeless treasury of Chekhov. Two Hungarian ensembles came with *'Ivanov'* and *'The Seagull'* while The Gate brought together a fine Irish cast for Brian Friel's version of *'Uncle Vanya'* [all 2007]. Subsequent Festivals featured *'Three Sisters'* in the original Russian, directed by Declan Donnellan of Cheek By Jowl [2009]; *'The Cherry Orchard'* in a clear modern Belgian version that included a rave as the background dancing of Act 3 [2015]; and *'The Seagull'*, given a refreshing twist by The Corn Exchange in changing the young poet (who loves Nina and is loved by Masha) into a girl [2016]. Chekhov also inspired a circus piece in *'Donka, a letter to Chekhov'* and a new play by Marina Carr called *'16 Possible Glimpses'* which explored the playwright's life [both 2011]. His work even emerged through the experimental re-imaginings of *'The Seagull and Other Birds'* [Pan, 2014] and *'Chekhov's First Play'* [Dead Centre, 2016].

Shakespeare, too, came in for some re-working. Schaubühne (Berlin) attacked *'Hamlet'* with an energy and raw physicality that divided opinions sharply [2014]. Pan also took Hamlet as text for *'The Rehearsal, Playing the Dane'* when audience members at the interval chose which of three auditioning actors was to play the title role in the second half of the production, as comedy slid into tragedy [2010]. Pan then came back with *'Everyone is King Lear in His Own Home'*, a perplexing and distressing exposure of old age and memory-loss in the relationship between a father and daughter [2012]. Lyric Hammersmith and Filter Theatre's irreverent production of *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* was driven forward by a rock group formed by the Mechanicals [2016]. Perhaps the purest Shakespeare was provided by Camille O'Sullivan in telling the story and singing the verse of *'The Rape of Lucrece'* to music by Fergal Murray [An RSC production, 2013].

The most powerful show of the decade was *'Blackwatch'*, a National Theatre of Scotland ensemble piece based on stories from soldiers who had served in Iraq [2008]. Another stand-out was *'Gatz'* by Elevator Repair Service from New York, in which the whole of *'The Great Gatsby'* was brought to life in an office setting over an enthralling period of 7 ½ hours [also 2008]. On a much smaller scale but horrifically memorable was *'KAMP'* from the Rotterdam company, Hotel Modern, using a miniature model of Auschwitz with thousands of hand-made puppets in striped pyjamas, whose life and death in the camp was observed by human performers moving around with hand-held cameras. With images and music but no words, the audience was drawn in to the atrocities [2009].

Particular performances that spring to mind include Vanessa Redgrave's embodiment of grief in *'The Year of Magical Thinking'*, a memoir by Joan Didion, from the National Theatre of Great Britain ("NTGB") [2008]; Fiona Shaw in dazzling command of the mound in Samuel Beckett's *'Happy Days'* [also NTGB 2008]; Olwen Fouéré in the full flow of *'riverrun'*, adapted by her from *Finnegan's Wake* for The Emergency Room and Galway Arts Festival [2013]; Aoife Duffin taking us intensely inside the head of the girl as created in the extraordinary language of Eimear McBride's *'A Girl is a Half-formed Thing'*, adapted and directed by Annie Ryan for The Corn Exchange [2014]; and Owen Roe bringing to distressing reality the confusion of dementia in the Gate Theatre production of *'The Father'* by Florian Zeller, translated by Christopher Hampton [2016].

The Festival's platform for new Irish writing has been important. Sebastian Barry's *'Pride of Parnell Street'*, directed by Jim Culleton for Fishamble, told the intimate tale of a broken marriage in North Dublin, together with memories of the 1974 bombings. It went on to great international success. The Corn Exchange gave us another hit in *'Freefall'*, written by Michael West with the company, which captured the distress of a man's memories in descent after a stroke. [2009]. Colm Tóibín's startlingly imaginative tale of Mary, the Mother of Christ, in Ephesus long after the crucifixion was premiered in Dublin as *'Testament'* with Marie Mullen directed by Garry Hynes [2011]. Later renderings under the name *'The Testament of Mary'* were nominated for awards on Broadway and as a novel.

Being ushered into a small bedroom in a B&B on Gardiner Place did not seem a promising start. But Mark O'Halloran's *'Trade'*, directed by Tom Creed for Thisispopbaby, proved to be an intensely moving encounter between rent boy and conflicted older man [2011]. In *'The Talk of the Town'*, Emma Donoghue interspersed the brittle life of Maeve Brennan in New York with extracts from Brennan's unhappy Dublin stories [2012]. This play, combined with Eamon Morrissey's *'Maeve's House'* [2013], aroused a strong interest in Brennan's writing. Rough Magic's *'The Train'* was a musical, and a most entertaining one too, but the very clever writing of Arthur Riordan, set to the music of Bill Whelan and under the direction of Lynne Parker, caught the serious absurdity of the 1971 situation when a group of women took the train to Belfast to buy contraceptives [2015]. A challenging subject for men, that of sexual abuse, was tackled quietly in *'Alien Documentary'* by Una McKeivitt, revealed during a work-place chat between three men assembling a stage platform [2016]. This deceptively simple piece of male conversation was rewarded by the Stewart Parker Trust with the New Playwright Bursary for Una McKeivitt. Her previous work had been documentary in nature, particularly a teacher's deeply personal story of theatre as therapy in *'565+'* [2010].

Great Irish work from earlier times was also celebrated. Three of Tom Murphy's plays under the banner *'DruidMurphy'*, directed by Garry Hynes with an outstanding company, showed the extraordinary stretch of the playwright's imagination [2012]. In particular, *'A Whistle in*

the Dark still delivered its fierce thump to the heart after more than 50 years since first seen. Druid brought Murphy again with Mommo's obsessional story-telling in *'Bailegangaire'* prefaced by a new piece *'Birgit'* which had a family connection but looked at a different obsession, that of an artist with his work [2014]. The Corn Exchange marked the end of copyright in James Joyce's works by filling the Gaiety stage with characters from *'Dubliners'*, adapted by Michael West and Annie Ryan in their own theatrical style [2012].

Physical theatre and dance featured strongly in broadening the definition of "theatre". *"Dodgems"* from CoisCéim Dance Theatre put a bumper track onto the stage of the O'Reilly Theatre and explored both the fun of the fair and the darkness of life for outsiders who create it [2008]. *"To Be Straight With You"* brought DV8 from the UK, directed by Lloyd Newsom, in a passionate combination of movement and images with verbatim stories of intolerance and homophobia [[2009]. Michael Keegan-Dolan created the hit of the 2016 Festival in *'Swan Lake/Loch na hEala'* which had elements of the classical ballet story woven with The Children of Lir and a contemporary dark tale, performed to Celtic/Nordic music by superb dancer/actors with Mikel Murfi in multiple roles as authority figures [2016]. And ANU and CoisCéim came together under the direction of David Bolger and Louise Lowe to mark the 1916 anniversary with *'These Rooms'* which immersed its audience members in reliving happenings from one hundred years ago within a frame from 50 years ago, while expressively blending art forms around an old building on Upper Dorset Street [2016].

ANU had brought its audience-challenging site-specific work in to the Festival in 2011 with *'Laundry'* the second part of Louise Lowe's Monto Cycle which played in combination with a restaging of the first part, *'World's End Lane'* from the 2010 Absolut Fringe. Anyone who went alone through the searing experience of *'Laundry'*, in the convent building on Sean McDermott Street that formerly housed a Magdalene Laundry, is unlikely to forget it. So many decisions to make: whether to talk to the young man locked in an ante room while waiting in vain to see one of the girls held inside; whether to help in unwrapping the binding around another girl taking a supervised bath; whether to enter the confessional in the serene chapel; whether to help a girl to escape out the main door; and whether to agree to being put into a taxi for an unknown destination – as it turned out, a launderette in a neighbouring street where audience members were relieved to be re-united among contemporary washing, although the voices of Magdalene women haunted us even there. ANU completed the Cycle with *'The Boys of Foley Street'* in 2012, requiring almost complicit observation of aggression, intimidation and struggles to survive in this part of the inner city in the 70s and early 80s when drugs took hold [2012]; and *'Vardo'*, which uncovered the harsh reality for sex workers and illegal immigrants in current times [2014]. The Monto Cycle, confrontational, disturbing and even frightening as it was for some individual audience members, was a landmark for the Festival in making compelling drama from the social history of a small part of the city.

Also strikingly innovative was the work of Brokentalkers, starting with *'Silver Stars'* performed by a diverse community chorus of gay men singing real stories based on interviews by Seán Millar [2009]. After a presentation at the Festival's valuable "In Development" showcase, the company led by Feidlim Cullen and Gary Keegan returned with *'The Blue Boy'* which combined live performance, recorded interviews and visual materials to communicate some of the raw hurt experienced by people who had been held as children in residential care homes [2011]. Then Feidlim Cannon brought his mother on stage in *'Have I No Mouth'*, where they were joined by their psychotherapist to examine the effect of two family tragedies on their relationship [2012]. This was uncomfortably honest. More recently, Brokentalkers turned to dance-theatre with *'The Circus Animals' Desertion'*, taking its

imagery from poetry and occult interests of W.B. Yeats, setting his notion of nationhood against the dangers of extreme nationalism [2016]. With choreography by Jessica Kennedy and music by Sean Millar, the surreal mix of text, clever mask-work and superb dance made a deep impression.

The Festival brought in many exciting and influential productions from other countries during the decade. The combination of circus skills and dance was seen at its breath-taking best in *'Circa'* [2010] and again with the same Australian company in *'Wunderkammer'* [2013]. Kneehigh from Cornwall filled the stage with mythic story-telling in *'The Wild Bride'* directed by Emma Rice [2011]. In complete contrast was the lone voice of Halina Reijn in a heart-breaking phone call during *'La Voix Humaine'* of Jean Cocteau, directed by Ivo van Hove [Toneelgroep Amsterdam, also 2011]. Stretching the concept of theatre, the BERLIN company from Belgium in *'Perhaps All the Dragons'* presented filmed monologues simultaneously on 30 screens, a random selection of which were viewed by audience members individually, creating an intense personal relationship with the people telling true but extraordinary stories [2014]. BERLIN were back in 2016 with *'ZVIZDAL (Chernobyl – so far so close)'* which was primarily a projected documentary recording the survival of a couple who had insisted in staying in the contaminated area near Chernobyl, interspersed with visual effects created around and in a model of their farm-stead which was present on stage. Another intriguing extension of theatre was *'By Heart'* in which 10 volunteers from the audience were challenged to learn a Shakespeare sonnet under the direction of Tiago Rodrigues while he wove stories about his grandmother, losing the ability to read, and the importance of remembered texts in storing and communicating ideas in times of disability or repression [Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, Portugal, 2015]. The final recitation of the poem, memorised by the volunteers line by line, was a little drama in itself. Audience members were also co-opted as part of *'Every Brilliant Thing'*, being asked to perform certain characters or to read numbered items from a list of brilliant things that a boy compiled over the years as a means of coping with his mother's depressive illness [Paines Plough/Pentabus, 2016]. Jonny Donahoe commanded the audience around him in a virtuoso performance combining hilarious comedy with deep compassion. On the night when I was there, even the Festival's Artistic Director played a role in this memorable show. It was one chance for us to give him a well-deserved round of applause.

Epilogue

This has been a personal selection from the hundreds of Dublin Theatre Festival events over the years since 1957. To those whose plays, productions or performances I have not mentioned, I apologise. I recognise that every production relies upon a combination of theatre-making talents that are not mentioned here. I have not touched upon the Family Seasons for younger audiences which have been such a feature of the Festival over the years, I do not claim to have seen all of the shows myself. Members of the Council of Friends have exchanged views about Festival productions over recent years and have recalled highlights from previous decades. Otherwise I have relied upon others whose opinions I respect, as well as the reminiscences in the brochure for the 21st Birthday Festival. I do not know which of the events that I have mentioned would have happened even if there had been no Festival. What I do know is that the concentration of live theatre from here and afar during the two or three weeks of the Festival has been a great joy to this member of the audience over the years. Thank you to all who were the creators of that joy.

Andrew Parkes

