

## Irish Theatre Festivals, Summer 2013

Theatre was hot the summer of 2013 in Ireland! Despite the recession and a historic summer heat wave that turned theatres into saunas and had even stolid Irishmen yearning for air conditioning, theatre was alive and well at arts festivals in Cork and Galway.

The Cork Midsummer Festival, which ran from 21 to 30 June 2013, was billed by festival director Tom Creed as "a celebration of the people of Cork and the creative city in which we live and work." In a city that is known for its food, the festival certainly emphasized "home cooking" by featuring numerous works by Corkonians or artists with some connection to the city.

No production exemplified the festival goals more than *100% Cork*, which served as a capstone for the festival on the last three nights. An intriguing cross between a theatrical production and a sociological study, *100% Cork* featured 100 Cork residents who were recruited based on demographic criteria of age, gender, and other factors to represent the city of almost 120,000 inhabitants.

At the top of the show each individual introduced herself (fifty one females, forty nine males) along with an object he or she brought along as a significant life token. The choice of objects displayed Cork's artistic heritage: several musical instruments, an oil painting, a sketchbook, a pencil case, a camera, and an original novel. There were, of course, several sporting items including a football and a team jersey, plus an odd assortment of other signifiers from a passport and a suitcase to a flag from the Spanish civil war and a black brassiere. And one rosary.

After each person introduced himself, he introduced the next person in line, which created a sense of togetherness amongst the hundred, a feeling of wholeness, a "circle of life." Later the group presented a visual referendum on significant questions of Irish life: Do you support gay marriage? Gay adoption? The right of women to get an abortion? All three, by this calculation, supported by the vast majority of Corkonians. An almost equally large majority did not attend church and believed that Ireland would never be unified.

The various statistical analyses were enhanced by the clever use of a rotating stage at the Cork Opera House and by cameras that provided close ups of individuals within the throng and overhead shots of the movements and configurations of the group. The production was mounted through the cooperative efforts of the German directing collective Rimini Protokoll (Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, Daniel Wetzel) and Irish theatre director Una McKevitt. As the evening drew to a close, the audience, almost all of whom knew someone on the stage, clearly understood from their enthusiastic reception of the piece that they, too, were a part of this exercise in civic pride. The production reminded me of other civic projects, like some city's bicentennial historical pageant, but in this case even an outsider such as myself found much to appreciate in *100% Cork*.

At the beginning of the second act of Carmel Winters's new play *Best Man*, which played at the lovely Victorian Everyman Theatre, Marta ties her lover, Kay, to a bed, pulls Kay's shirt up over her face and drips candle wax on her exposed breasts. Just as their lovemaking is about to become even more intimate, Kay's husband arrives home earlier than expected and Marta ducks into a closet while Kay struggles to unloose the evidence of her infidelity.

That dramatic swing from a scene of blatant sexuality of a type that might derive from *Fifty Shades of Gray* or another of the suddenly popular line of soft porn to a farcical scene of the lover in the closet, which harkens back to Sheridan's screen scene, typifies the swings in subject matter and mood that comprise *Best Man*.



Best Man by Carmel Winters at the Cork Midsummer Festival. Photo: Michael McSweeney

The play opens with two domestic scenes. We meet Kay Keane, whose prodigiously successful real estate business provides for the family, and her husband Alan, who has shelved his dermatology practice to devote himself to writing a novel. Since Alan also assumes the duties of caring for their two children, whom we see almost exclusively in projections between scenes, he hasn't actually written much save an occasional "Best Man" speech for wedding celebrations. So they decide to hire a nanny. Then we jump to two scenes in the house of Dennis, a retired ambassador who hobbles about on a pair of canes. When Marta, his Bolivian daughter from a disastrous marriage, arrives seeking connection with her father, Dennis, in his addled state, thinks she's a nursemaid he's hired to assist him in his failing mental and physical state. Marta has had virtually no contact with her father, in part—we later learn—because her angry mother returned the cards and gifts he always sent for Marta's birthday.

Marta becomes the nanny for Kay and Alan, which leads to the affair, which leads to the dissolution of the marriage as Kay and Marta take their own flat. The vindictive Alan files for divorce and custody and tires to prevent Kay from seeing her children. The end achieves an almost tragic dimension as the action fast forwards six years. The Irish recession has jolted Kay's lucrative career, Marta is leaving her, and her children refuse to see her or speak to her. Alan's life, meanwhile, has not turned out much better. He is consumed by his anger, and the novel he finally completed is never published.

Author Carmel Winters indicated in a conversation following the performance that her goal was to explore the consequences of absent parents. She does that, but she also examines the consequences of antagonistic exes when a marriage falls apart. At one point Marta, reflecting on what has happened to Kay and Alan, says: "Hating the other parent becomes a measure of how much they love their children." In the world we see in this play, it appears family dysfunction begets family dysfunction. Marta late in the play says to Kay that she wanted to create a family, not destroy a family. But because Marta was herself raised in an angry and dysfunctional environment, she seems to have little notion of what family really means. Acting highlights included Peter Gowen as Alan, who performed with a casual humor that turned to a loud, mocking indignation and then to stone cold hatred. Kate Stanley Brennan moved with a lithe athleticism that gave Marta a catlike quality. As Kay, Derbhle Crotty was sometimes hard to hear, and her brusque, businesslike attitude made Kay a rather unappealing character.

Winters's play was given a beautiful production. The set by Liam Doona (who also did the costumes) consisted of a series of panels that moved elegantly across the stage. The predominant icy blue color on the panels underlined the coldness of the relationships. On the panels were projected occasional images of the couple's children as well as blueprints and floor plans that identified locales.

As for the overt sexuality in act two, Winters explained that people were always curious about exactly what lesbians did when they made love, so she decided to show them. She also stated that one of her primary goals was to entertain her audience and keep their attention. *Best Man* was not always clear, but it certainly did keep the attention of the audience.

Two elderly women stand on opposite sides of the stage facing the audience. They fidget. They shuffle. Eventually they launch into the story of their everyday lives as partners and lovers. Alice Kinsalla is the more outspoken and outgoing of the two, the one who left Ireland for the lure of London before returning to her home. Alice Slattery is the quieter and more conventional of the pair, the one who married and who still attends mass regularly. Best friends since girlhood, the two Alices eventually became lovers following the death of Alice Slattery's husband. After they were seen stealing a kiss in an aisle at a Tesco, a theatre director asked permission to tell their story. And here it is on stage with just a table and two chairs and a backdrop of photographs from the two ladies' travels—their "extravagant luxuries."

The entire eighty-minute production of the palindromically titled *I [HEART] Alice [HEART] I* has the feel of documentary theatre, but it is entirely fictional, the lovely invention of fast-rising playwright and actress Amy Conroy, who also played the part of Alice Kinsalla. The play won the Fishamble New Writing Award in 2010 and was a hit at that year's Dublin Fringe Festival, where Clare Barrett, who portrayed Alice Slattery, received the Best Female Performer Award. Conroy's next play, *Eternal Rising of the Sun*, played the Dublin Fringe the following year, and that year Ms. Conroy captured the Best Female Performer laurels. She also received a nomination for the Irish Times Best Actress Award.

It is easy to see why this "Alice" play has gained such positive attention. On one level it's a delightful spoof of documentary theatre as the two women pass photos and home-made cake to the audience while relating the stories of their lives. On another level it's a touching and heartfelt tribute to gay couples who lived quiet, hidden lives prior to the coming out of the most recent generations. It is all the more timely in a country that will almost certainly be facing a referendum on gay marriage within a year. The production was mounted in the Firkin Crane Theatre in the Shandon area of the city. As the play unfolded, the audience of about 100 could hear the bells of nearby St. Anne's, and their tolling provided an ironic backdrop to the gentle story of the two Alices. *I [HEART] Alice [HEART] I* is an offering of HotForTheatre, a group that formed in 2010 and seeks to produce intriguing stories that "provoke, move, and delight." *Alice* and *Eternal Rising* have already toured to New York, Australia, and several other major venues, and if work of this quality continues we will hear more of Ms. Conroy and HotForTheatre.

A Cork-based company, Conflicted Theatre presented an intriguing adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* that gave Nathaniel Hawthorne's gripping tale of lust and sin a distinctly Irish spin. Hester Prynne became Esther Ryan, played with upright dignity by Julie Kelleher. The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale was now Arthur Gray, enacted with stoic reserve by James Browne. The misshapen Roger Chillingworth from the novel was transformed into a virile and active Roger Furey by Mark D'Aughton.

The work was presented in a large gymnasium-sized space at the Cork City Hall. The audience was admitted, as though to a church, and sat on stools in six or seven pods of ten or twelve people each scattered about the room, creating a sizeable arena space. In addition to the three named characters, four other performers completed the cast and enacted everyone else, including Esther's daughter Pearl, who was represented by a three-foot tall puppet with a white, extraterrestrial-like face and skull. Three cast members manipulated the puppet, which was beautifully voiced by Eadaoin O'Donoghue (a Jacques Lecoq graduate).

No attempt was made to establish a particular time period. Costumes were current without being distinctly modern or trendy. Actors wore almost exclusively tan or brown except for Esther, clothed in a black dress with, of course, the ubiquitous red A. Actors moved freely about the space. The only scenic

embellishments being three stepped platforms about the size of a sofa, which could be rolled about the room, and about twenty five skeletal pyramids about the size of various lampshades which were suspended above the acting area. The telling of the story worked quite well. Action moved quickly through the ninety-minute performance, dominated by Ms. Kelleher's intelligent portrayal of Esther's shifting emotions and by Mr. D'Aughton's powerfully voiced doctor. Occasionally red lights flashed on and the pyramids above our heads bounced up and down to announce a dream sequence or the visions of a troubled mind, and those forays into a more expressionistic theatrical mode were less successful than the narrative development of Hawthorne's basic plot.

The transference of the story to an unidentified Irish locale provided an added dimension to Hawthorne's old tale. Arthur Gray's hypocrisy stood out as representative of the problems uncovered in religious institutions in Ireland in recent years. Little Pearl, in her negative attitude toward religious figures, suggested the twenty-first century Irish youth who seem intent on rejecting the authority figures of previous generations. Conflicted Theatre is a three-year-old Cork-based company founded by recent graduates of the University College Cork program in drama and theatre studies, including Kelleher, director Gavin McEntee, and another cast member, Evan Lordan.

Another Cork based company, Corcadorca, established in 1991, has become known as one of Ireland's finest, and a new show by the group is always an anticipated event. At the Cork Festival the company unveiled a new piece in development in a stripped down workshop form at their Triskel Arts Centre home. *The Tallest Man in the World* is a play by writer and composer Ailís Ní Ríain that features three characters: Felim (David Reardon), his daughter Erin (George Hanover), and a boy, Eamonn (Tadhg Hickey). The three actors sat far apart on chairs at the edges of an arena setting with an audience of about 80 patrons. They were illuminated by lights near their feet, which they could control with a foot pedal. They never moved from their respective chairs.

Using mostly monologues constructed from Ríain's poetic language, the performers conveyed a story of a father whose daughter so idealized him that she wanted to displace her mother. The father, astounded by the forward behavior of his daughter and by the departure of his wife with another man, falls into a drunken spiral that leaves him a mere shadow of the virile man he once was.

As counterpoint to this apparently realistic narrative, the story of Eamonn comes across like a fairy tale. After enduring a headache at age twelve, Eamonn grows to prodigious heights like Jack's beanstalk until he is the tallest man in the world. Adding to the mythical motif is the information that he lives on an island no one ever leaves and that his mother is so small she fits in a matchbox. Eamonn's great size is not the only reference to the title of the piece. Young Erin also sees her father as being the tallest man in the world.

The story of the three characters seems to connect when Felim, disgusted by his daughter's attempt to seduce him, abandons her on a beach where Eamonn sees her, falls instantly in love, and tries unsuccessfully to comfort her. What lies behind all of this? Another dysfunctional family, which seems to be *de rigueur* in contemporary Irish drama. But also a complete ruination of three lives: the daughter who can never have the intimate relationship she craves with her father; the father, whose disgust with his daughter's actions drives him into a drunken hole; and Eamonn, an innocent victim condemned to an eternity of unrequited adoration.

The role that expectations play in our reactions to theatrical events is a mysterious phenomenon. In the case of *The Tallest Man*, there was the expectation of something special from Corcadorca. There were also two other expectations that influenced my reaction to the play. One was the author's reputation as a musician, which led me to expect some sound integration. As it turned out, although the language itself was musical, there was no other sound augmentation.

Another expectation was fostered by a program description, which promised that "gradually we realize that we are hearing one voice in different mouths." Try as I might, I could not condense the three characters and their stories into "one voice." As a result, I left feeling I'd missed something terribly important.

Expectations played a part, too, in my reaction to another event at the festival. One evening I dined on crab brûlée, grilled duck breast with figs and beetroot, and a selection of Irish cheeses and fruit at The Weir Bistro in the Lee River Hotel. Wonderfully prepared and elegantly presented, this was without question the finest meal I've ever eaten in a theatrical setting.

In this case the event was called *Eat the Street* and was put together by Toronto-based Mammalian Diving Exercise, who had done a similar project last year in Vancouver, British Columbia. Students ranging in age from eleven to thirteen received culinary training and then dined at eight noted Cork restaurants before offering their opinions on the experience.

I sat amongst the students as they enjoyed (or didn't) dishes that ranged from liver pate and pan friend hake to a trio of chocolate desserts—without question one of their favorites. Yet here, too, I was something of a victim of my own expectation that the aspiring food critics would, in the words of the program, offer "their uncensored opinions on everything from the food, to the service and the décor." I anticipated a verbal response, perhaps something akin to "Kids Say the Darndest Things," but instead the young foodies simply filled out questionnaires. While I loved the food and enjoyed the company of the students with whom I sat, I wished somehow that the response session could have been as fulfilling as the duck breast.

As intended, many of the performances at the Midsummer festival had strong Cork connections. Those included Raymond Scannell's one-man show *Deep*, about Sir Henry's house for Cork ravers; Secret Theatre's unconventional version of street theatre in *Farewell Cork; Witches*, devised by Cork choreographer and performer Ruari Donovan, which took place at four a.m.; *The Tale of the Ancient Lights*, a one-man spectacle inspired by circus skills, martial arts, and Japanese animation; and *Exit Strategy* by Makeshift Ensemble, which used a game show motif to explore situations related to quitting and leave taking.

A stated intention of festival director Tom Creed was to be "equally local and global." With the productions I've cited, Cork Midsummer certainly did a fine job with the "local" part, but when *Eat the Street*, is one of the highlighted international events, the global aspect appeared somewhat wanting.

Two weeks later I ventured northwest to Galway's Festival of the Arts (15-28 July), which followed fast on the heels of the twenty fifth anniversary edition of that city's noted Film Fleadh. The arts festival was well-attended with many performances sold out. Where the focus at Cork was primarily on new work, some of the hits of the Galway festival were revivals.

Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* was first seen in 1999, but it was reimagined as two connected monologues played by one actor in a production directed by O'Rowe. Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, the star of the RTE television series *Love/Hate*, portrayed both Howie Lee and the man he beats up to begin the action of the play, the similarly named but unrelated Rookie Lee. In the course of the two extended monologues we meet a rogues' gallery of personalities with names such as Peaches, Ladyboy, and Avalanche. The 1990s violence recounted in *Howie the Rookie* isn't far removed from the contemporary Dublin violence depicted in *Love/Hate*, but the structure of the play with its intersecting narratives and multiple characters provided new challenges for the versatile Vaughan-Lawlor.

As with the Cork festival, local connections produced receptive audiences. *A Galway Girl*, a short two-character play written by Geraldine Aron and first performed in 1979, proved to be another sold out revival. The hour-long play at the Bank of Ireland Theatre on the National University of Ireland Galway campus featured excellent characterizations by two gifted performers. Galway native Clare Barrett, who in *I [HEART] Alice [HEART] I* played an older woman looking back at her lesbian relationship, in *Galway Girl* played Maisie, an older woman looking back on thirty years of marriage. Joe Hanley, like Vaughan-Lawlor well known as a television actor, having played Hughie Phelan in RTE's soap *Fair City* for twenty years, played Maisie's sometimes brutal, working class husband Dermot. Barrett and Hanley were reprising roles they first performed in a Galway production a year earlier.

There's nothing earth-shattering in Aron's slight piece, but the performances by Barrett and Hanley conveyed the love, intimacy, challenges, and despair that accompany a thirty-year relationship. Maisie and Dermot's life together consists of big events such as the death of one child at birth and small events like a derogatory comment about an in-law. And both the large and the slight leave their mark on the relationship. Almost all the action took place in a space about four meters square. The dominant color was tan—a tan screen in back, a tan carpet, and mostly tan garments. A few costume alterations suggested the changes in the years—removing a tie, donning a sweater, adding a pair of spectacles. Similarly subtle actions such as a sharply voiced comment or a rap on a table defined the nature of the characters. As the title suggests, Maisie begins as a naïve rural lass who leaps at what she perceives as her one chance for marriage. Through the years come children, a move to London, abuse, and disappointment until, after time, a kind of truce sets in, when "there's nothing left to argue about" any more.

Another ticket that was hard to find was for Bruce Graham's new play *Stella and Lou*, which played in the large Town Hall Theatre. The play is set in an old-fashioned Philadelphia bar. Stella, a nurse with two children and a marriage in her rear view mirror, shares talk and beers with Lou, a bartender who almost never leaves the bar and who is still hurting from his wife's passing two years before. Their conversation is interrupted intermittently by Donnie, a young man who can't reconcile his love for his fiancée with her insistence on an extravagant wedding. Stella and Lou both struggle with the loneliness that is one of the givens of aging, and as the scene progresses we see Stella make her play for Lou, inviting him to be her guest at a dinner at an Atlantic City casino.

Francis Guinan originated the part of Lou in the show's premiere performance in Chicago in May, and he reprised the role in the Galway production. In Guinan's portrayal we see a man who at first seems simply dense to Stella's invitation, but eventually reveals his devastation at his wife's death and his paralyzing fear of any change in life. Penny Slusher, in a role that Rhea Perlman played in Chicago, finds both the humor and the hurt in Stella. Ed Flynn, who also played Donnie in Chicago, has the unenviable task of alternating between pout and puppy love as he imagines his life as a married man. Graham's play wears



its emotions on its sleeve, and little is left unsaid. However, it is an effective and affecting piece. Middle aged and older audiences (exactly the demographic that makes up most theatre goers) can easily identify with these characters, and one can imagine the play receiving numerous productions at regional and community theatres. This was the second consecutive year that Chicago's Northlight Theatre brought a production of a Bruce Graham play to the Galway festival. *The Outgoing Tide* was a success at the 2012 festival, and *Stella and Lou* was certainly warmly received in 2013.



*Stella and Lou* by Bruce Graham at Galway's Festival of the Arts. Photo: courtesy of North Light Theatre

Sell-outs were also the rule at the sixty four-seat Blue Teapot Theatre where the Blue Teapot Theatre Company produced *Sanctuary*, a play about and performed by adults with intellectual disability. In Christian O'Reilly's play we meet a group of eight such characters who, along with their supervisor, Tom, regularly attend outings such as going to the movies, which forms the basis of the first scene. Soon, however, the drama focuses on two characters, Larry (Kieran Coppinger) and Sophie (Charlene Kelly) who would like to spend more time together. In a lovely second scene that is both tender and comical, Tom goes beyond his authority and arranges a rendezvous for the two of them in a hotel room. The repercussions from that tryst propel the action of the second act of the two-hour drama.

In one sense *Sanctuary* is about a love affair between Larry and Sophie. In a larger sense, however, it is about privacy, intimacy, and dependency. Individuals with intellectual disability usually reside with parents or in a group home where they are cared for and watched over. *Sanctuary* explores how that care can itself become an oppressive intrusion into individuals' personal lives. As Sophie says at one point, she

can't even take a bath without someone looking in on her. The fact that sexual intercourse outside marriage is actually illegal in Ireland for the intellectually disabled also plays a role in the plot of *Sanctuary*.

Except for Robert Doherty, who plays Tom, all of the other eight cast members are themselves intellectually disabled. Still, over the last seven years Petal Pilley, who runs Blue Teapot Theatre Company and who directed the production, has provided theatrical training and opportunities for people with disabilities. As a result, most of the actors in *Sanctuary* had several acting roles to their credit, including some in movies and with major theatre companies.

Other significant productions at the Galway Arts Festival included *An Tíoránach Drogallach*, a Gaelic translation of Tom Murphy's 2009 drama *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant*; *Riverrun*, a world premiere in which Olwen Fouéré as adapter, director, and performer sought to combine sound and movement in an abstract and theatrical whole; and *Mies Julie*, an adaptation of August Strindberg's drama set in South Africa. Yael Farber wrote the adaptation and directed the production, which had already played in New York, London, and Edinburgh.

Running at the same time as the Arts Festival, the Galway Fringe festival showed a maturity and organization under director Claire Keegan that belied the fact that the Galway Fringe was in only its second year of existence. An excellent and helpful brochure listed thirty five theatre productions that ranged from pieces by the local student troupe from the National University of Ireland Galway to new work by Philip Doherty, a winner of the PJ O'Connor radio play award.

Doherty's hour-long play, *The Great Couch Rebellion*, was a production of Gonzo Theatre Company, which has produced some twenty plays since it was founded by Doherty in 2009 to create imaginative and provocative stories about contemporary life. In the play, unemployed Adam lies about watching television until his Greek girlfriend Eve prods him into a kidnapping of their banker friend Manus. The action, broadcast over social media, is supposed to stir revolution among the masses against the control of banks and multinational corporations, but the outcome is not what Adam and Eve intend.

The play, which came to Galway after a successful run in Dublin, took place in a good-sized room above The Bentley Bar and Club. Scenery consisted of a small box set with a couch, a television, a bookshelf, and a few other props that aided the action. A variety of sound effects and projections of current events were used between the half dozen scenes. Although there was humor in the play, it ultimately dissolved into a political diatribe.

Shaun Leonard's *Ballykilldowna* was also mounted in a small room above a bar. Utilizing nothing more than three stools, a wheelchair, and a few props, the hour-long play explored the relationships among three young friends as they struggle to come to terms with the death of the grandmother of one of the trio and with their own feelings for one another. In its effective dialogue and many insights about relationships, the author shows genuine writing promise. The playwright, a recent graduate of *NUIG*, is about to embark on an MFA program in creative writing at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Most effective of the three fringe shows I was able to see was *This is the Day* by recently formed Play Dough Productions. Sitting in a church on the day of her daughter's first communion, Mary is dissatisfied with her partner, Cooper, and distraught about the disappearance of her friend Peter. As Mary is

comforted by the youthful Father Cooney and talks to her best friend, Hope, we discover that she is still in love with Peter, with whom she shared her first kiss, and is stunted by her inability to come to terms with the disappointments of her life.

Author Cristin Kehoe is a 2009 graduate of Trinity College, and her writing was lovely and lively throughout. The main character's ruminations about being short-changed at a store and in life were especially moving. The production was aided by a fine church interior set at the Cube Theatre on the NUIG campus and by five excellent performances.

Although the primary focus of my journey to Ireland was the festivals in Cork and Galway, I also had the opportunity to attend the June world premiere of a play called *Shush* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. *Shush* was written by Elaine Murphy, whose play *Little Gem* in 2008 established her as a playwright to watch.

At the start of Murphy's new play we meet Breda, a woman contemplating a bottle of alcohol and a vial of pills as she faces a lonely fifty-something birthday. Breda is just about to lose her job of twenty six years, her husband has left her for another woman (who's not even attractive), and her son in America hasn't phoned a birthday greeting. Suddenly four friends arrive on her doorstep laden with gifts, champagne, and birthday cake and intent on an intervention. The quartet includes two of Breda's oldest friends, the bossy Marie and the brightly-colored but dimly-minded Irene, along with Marie's fad-crazed daughter, Clare, and Breda's seemingly perfect next door neighbor, Ursala. Their goal is nothing less than remaking their frumpy friend—or at the very least cheering her up a bit.

Over the next ninety minutes the five women down enough alcohol to supply Edward Albee's quartet from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They outline a job search resume for Breda and plot revenge on her philandering husband. We expect, perhaps, that in the course of the play we will see female friendship triumph. Instead, the resume goes into a drawer and the revenge plot backfires. The birthday gifts miscarry and result in physical damage, and even the birthday cake tastes like "shite."

There is plenty of humor in this play, but, to her credit, Ms. Murphy doesn't take the easy, conventional path. Each character faces her moment of confession or realization—Ursala's perfect life is riven by debt and her husband's infidelity, and best friends Breda and Marie throw verbal darts that put holes in their friendship. At the conclusion, Breda has turned no corners. By the time her friends have departed, the appliances in her run-down kitchen have shorted out or fallen apart, and she is back on the sofa staring at her pill bottle. She does, however, receive one small consolation: her son calls with a brief hello.

The five parts are well-played by seasoned actresses and effectively costumed by Niahm Lunny to create distinctive characterizations. Deirdre Donnelly is affecting as Breda, who dresses only in black and makes even a stylish dress, which her friends insist she put on, look lumpy. Marie's upbeat and forthright style, well captured by Barbara Brennen, comes through in her sparkly garments and jewelry. Dressed in bright florals, Ruth Hegarty plays Irene almost like a ditzy Betty White character, but her earnest and caring soul emerges through the laughter. Niamh Daly's Ursala, in a sleek black dress with an angled hem, is sufficiently hard edged, while Eva Bartley, as Clare, is overshadowed by her dominating mother both in her personality and in her clothing. *Shush* is not the next great Irish play that the Abbey was no doubt hoping for when it commissioned a piece by Murphy three years ago. Reviews were mostly sympathetic, pointing out that at least it served as a vehicle for the employment of five fine actresses. The play feels as

old-fashioned as Breda's house, and Breda's desire simply to be left alone hardly provides for compelling action.

Certainly it must be said the fortunes of Ireland's females are being given a strong voice by writers such as Ms. Murphy, Ms. Winters, and Ms. Conroy.

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