



# Electric shock compulsive

Enda Walsh's tale of three sisters is eagerly awaited,

Mark Naglazas writes

## Festival

REAMS have been written about artists whose medical conditions impacted on their work, from the asthma of Marcel Proust and the hallucinations of Vincent van Gogh caused by paint sniffing through to the crippling psoriasis of Singing Detective writer Dennis Potter.

However, it's hard to imagine an odder case than Irish playwright Enda Walsh, whose obsessive-compulsive disorder has manifested itself in a series of plays in which characters are condemned to repeat the same painful scenarios.

In *The Walworth Farce* (2006), for example, a stubborn patriarch keeps his two sons trapped in his decrepit

London flat and forces them to repeat the story of

how and why he left his Irish homeland, even though that tale may be a lie.

And in his latest play, *The New Electric Ballroom*, one of the most highly anticipated offerings in this year's Perth International Arts Festival program, Walsh gives us three middle-aged sisters who replay over and again a notorious moment

in their youth when the sauciest of the trio became involved with local stud named *The Roller Royle*.

Walsh says that he wasn't actually diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. But a decade ago the Dublin-born London resident found himself falling prey to panic attacks which prevented him from carrying out the most run-of-the-mill tasks, from drinking a glass of water to getting on a bus, without following a strict routine.

"It came on the back of a period of hard partying and drug taking," says the 40-year-old Walsh, who, despite his wayward youth, looks so boyish he may have followed his own theatrical formula and sent along an actor half his age to replay his life.

Walsh says that this two-year period of panic attacks profoundly affected everything he wrote during the next eight years, with the theme of entrapment and escape that emerged in his earliest work, such as his breakthrough drama, *Disco Pigs* (1996), achieving full flowering in *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom*, regarded as companion pieces.

However, in the Enda Walsh universe the most lethal means of imprisonment is language and narrative. Taking a cue from fellow Irishman Samuel Beckett, whose poor players also found themselves similarly shackled by spirit-crushing ritual, Walsh's characters are "stamped by story" and "boxed by words". "I am a playwright so I have a deep relationship with words but I've come to realise that words that are completely inadequate. Words are useless in describing anything meaningful."

Ironically, Walsh's cynicism about language has not prevented him from being celebrated as one of the masters of modern English language and included in the big three Irish writers — along with Martin

McDonagh and Conor McPherson — who took the theatre world by storm in the late 1990s.

"The Celtic Tiger and all that shite," laughs Walsh, who has travelled to Perth with the Druid Theatre Company production of *The New Electric Ballroom*, which he also directed.

Walsh says that stylistically there is nothing connecting him to McDonagh (*The Beauty Queen of Lenane*) and McPherson (*The Weir*) but thematically all tend to write about their generation, "people in their thirties who are a bit detached and struggling to find their voice and trying to connect with life".

What does link these three remarkable writers is that all have translated their talent to the cinema.

McDonagh won an Oscar for best short film and his debut feature *In Bruges* was one of the best reviewed films of last year; McPherson wrote the tasty thriller *I Went Down*; while Walsh made arguably the biggest splash of all with his screenplay for *Hunger*, artist Steve McQueen's masterpiece about the shocking death-by-protest of Irish political prisoner Bobby Sands.

"In the theatre you write from the stomach most of the time. When you're writing for the cinema you're writing from your head. You have to learn all this other stuff, then try to write from the stomach," explains Walsh.

"The medium itself is a real difficult one for me. Just how to write a film; it's a bloody difficult thing to do.

"There are so many hands on it, the patience they have to have. So I won't be abandoning theatre any time soon," he laughs.

**The New Electric Ballroom opens tonight and runs until February 25 at the Playhouse Theatre. Walsh gives a free artist talk there at 6.30pm on Thursday.**



**West Australian**  
**17/02/2009**  
**Page: 8**  
**Section: Today**  
**Region: Perth Circulation: 194862**  
**Type: Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 288.00 sq.cms**  
**Frequency: MTWTFS-**

