

Galway Arts Festival: Small but perfectly formed

New plays, old classics, even Blondie: this Irish event has much to recommend it, finds Michael Billington



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- guardian.co.uk
- Wednesday July 30 2008 12:29 BST



Stunning: Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre perform Giselle at the Galway Arts Festival

Festivals come in all shapes and sizes. But with the behemoth of Edinburgh looming over us, I'd like to put in a plea for an event on a more human and manageable scale. I've just spent four days at the Galway Arts Festival, which has many advantages over its Scottish rival. Galway itself, with its network of interlocking alleys down by the quays, has the bustling air of a Mediterranean port. There is none of that insane pressure to cram eight shows into a day. And yet, under Paul Fahy's direction, this year's Galway catered for all tastes with 266 events, including three Enda Walsh premieres, Fabulous Beast in Giselle, Bill Viola's astonishing video projections and, musically, everything from Philip Glass to Blondie.

"Why Galway?" Fintan O'Toole asked recently. How, he wondered, had it become the most successful Irish city in creating a "sustained, vibrant cultural identity"? Part of his answer was the cluster of student talent in the 1970s that stayed on to leave its visible imprint on the city. And the most famous internationally is the group – led by Garry Hynes, Marie Mullen and Mick Lally – that in 1975 created the Druid Theatre Company. Its production of Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* moved from a parish hall to Broadway, where it picked up four Tony awards. Its celebrated 2005 cycle of all Synge's plays proved you can never have too much of a good Synge. And currently Druid is giving similar in-depth treatment to Enda Walsh. Last year's production of *The Walworth Farce* comes to the National in September. And Walsh's *The New Electric Ballroom* premiered at this year's festival alongside two new lunchtime plays.

Garry Hynes, Druid's artistic director, is obviously one of the reasons for the company's enduring success. Hynes is not only a first-rate director. She has that mixture of the visionary and the pragmatic you find in all great theatrical pioneers. Sitting in Druid's unpretentious downtown boardroom, she suggests the whole company was founded on chutzpah. "It was arrogant," she claims, "to say from the start we were going to do plays about Ireland's west rather than follow the dictates of Dublin. And throughout our history we have always believed that our mission was to seduce, shock and surprise. We also have the freedom of not being tied to a specific building. It means we can pursue particular projects without having to fill slots in a programme. The only frustration is that we have the passion and energy to do far more work than the two or three shows a year that our funding of 850,000 euros permits. We want to be bigger and crazier with each project we do but our hands are tied by our ridiculous subsidy."

Hynes's patience has also been tested by the news that Dublin's Abbey Theatre has been guaranteed a three-year grant of 30m euros and by the way the Abbey recently gazumped her pet project of staging a four-play O'Casey cycle. But Hynes, who has something of the missionary fervour of a latterday Joan Littlewood, remains stockily defiant; and, during the Galway Festival, Druid seemed to be firing on all cylinders, with three Walsh premieres and rehearsed readings of three plays by brand new writers.

What is startling about Walsh's work is its mixture of fizzing originality and invocation of past masters; and *The New Electric Ballroom*, directed by Walsh himself and moving shortly from Galway to the Edinburgh Traverse, is a case in point. It deals with a trio of Irish sisters permanently marooned in a small fishing village and reliving their lost romantic opportunities. Any play about three sisters reminds one of Chekhov. There also strong echoes of Beckett in the way the youngest sibling, Ada, ritually recreates old memories with the aid of a tape recorder. And the evocation of Ireland's 1950s ballrooms, with their showbands dedicated to sexual and musical one-night stands, brings to mind a host of writers from Brian Friel to William Trevor.

Yet, for all its obvious sources, Walsh's play triumphantly creates its own world. There is a wild humour about the periodic intrusions of a lonely fishmonger who admits that, if he looks like someone who's been struck in the

face by a wet fish, it's because he often has been. Walsh's play also wrestles with the paradox of language: that, for all the characters' surreal verbal vigour, they remain "branded, marked and scarred by talk". Beautifully played by Rosaleen Linehan, Val Lilley and Catherine Walsh with Mikel Murfi as the eccentric fish-peddler, the characters float on a sea of words yet remain eternally isolated.

Walsh takes us into even darker territory in his lunchtime one-act plays. Gentrification is a genuinely chilling two-hander about a London-based writer, who shares the name and external characteristics of Walsh himself and whose four-year-old daughter is abducted by a vengeful neighbour: the product, it transpires, of a working-class revolution aimed at the intrusive, property owning bourgeoisie. As played by Ronan Leahy and Niall Buggy, the piece plays expertly on parental and class paranoia. It is accompanied by Lynndie's Gotta Gun, which, in evoking American abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison, explicitly echoes Pinter's One For The Road even down to the torturer's need for approval; but, although too palpably Pinteresque, it is vividly directed by Sarah Lynch and packs a polemical punch.

If Druid provided the core of this year's Galway drama, there was a variety of work from elsewhere. Chicago's Northern Light Theatre looked in with a mildly amusing comedy, Better Late by Larry Gelbart and Craig Wright, dealing with the hazards of divorce and chiefly distinguished by John Mahoney, late of Frasier, as a quietly apoplectic husband. But one great advantage of festivals is that they allow critics to venture outside their particular box. I caught up with Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's Giselle, already seen at the Barbican, which brilliantly transports the romantic ballet to a small-town Ireland thrown into erotic turbulence by the arrival of a bisexual, line-dancing Bratislavan. The highest compliment I can pay Michael Keegan-Dolan's stunning fusion of dance and drama is that I was constantly reminded of Pina Bausch.

And only in Galway, I suspect, would I also have caught up with Blondie celebrating the 30th anniversary of Parallel Lines and playing to 3,000 adoring spectators inside the Festival Big Top. My knowledge of pop is minimal but even I couldn't help but succumb to the tornado-like energy and sex appeal of Blondie (is she really 63?) as she roared her way through hits like Heart of Glass, Rapture and Call Me. And, though I'm often sceptical about the new comedy, I also admired the sophisticated stand-up of Ed Byrne. Looking like an attenuated, bespectacled Harry Potter, Byrne has a gift for logically dissecting absurd propositions such as Nietzsche's "whatever doesn't kill me, makes me stronger". As Byrne sagely points out, "I don't think that would work as a defence at an attempted murder trial." But the peculiar joy of Galway is that it covers the artistic waterfront without, like its famous Scottish sister, offering us a deluge. I've rarely encountered a better curated festival or one that more exhilaratingly mixed the local and the international.