THE PLAY'S THE THING

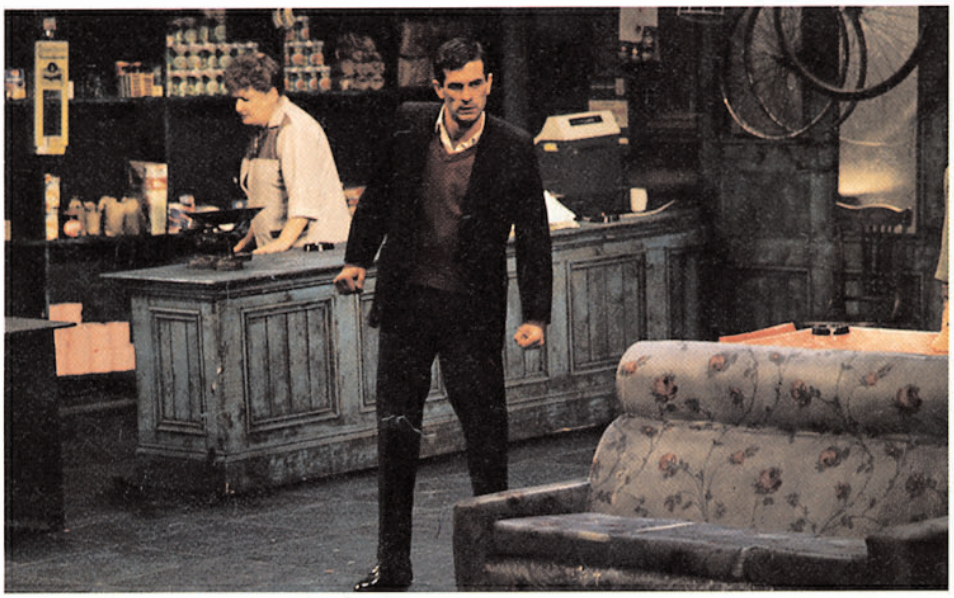
All Dublin is a stage during next month's enticing festival • by Michelle Lodge

There is no better way to discover Dublin's literary heart than through the person who despised it best. Or most famously. Or who wrote about it in the most eloquent and ingenious fashion. That person was, of course, James Joyce, whose prose about his hometown made neighbors and relatives alike squirm and rail.

His work had the opposite effect on me: It made me long to visit Dublin, and to return again and again. My most recent trip was last fall, when I took in the fortnight-long Dublin Theatre Festival (this year's dates are October 7 through 19). The festival has thrived in this literature-loving city for nearly 40 years, even though Dublin has only seven legitimate theaters (compared with 50 on London's West End and 34 on New York's Broadway).

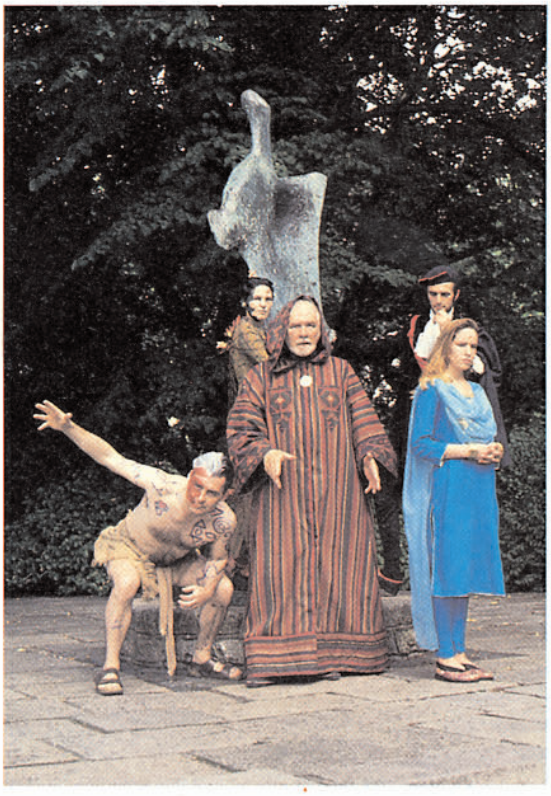
Dublin's festival isn't as well known as those in Edinburgh and Avignon, but they aren't as dedicated to displaying locally grown talent as Dublin is. The city's contribution is unique in that it is one of the few places where theatergoers can see a strong concentration of Irish works. In fact, more than half the 30 productions are Irish; the rest come from the United Kingdom, other parts of Europe, North America, and Japan.

I planned a marathon schedule of 13



BRIAN LYNCH

John B. Keane's play *Big Maggie* is performed at the celebrated Abbey Theatre.



During the festival, performances spill out into the streets of Dublin.

plays morning, noon, night, and late night. My only problem was one of pure luxury, deciding which play to see next.

It turned out to be tough winnowing down my choices: Throughout Dublin, enticing productions were going on not only at established playhouses (such as the famous Abbey Theatre), but also at Trinity College and in pubs, clubs, art galleries, and the Iveagh Gardens. Some were part of the main festival; others made up the Fringe, a separate but contiguous affair that offers an avant-garde mix of some 50 plays and readings.

There were even one-acts at lunchtime at Bewley's of Grafton Street, a popular restaurant. And for the younger set, comedies beckoned at The Ark, a new children's cultural center in the now-stylish Temple Bar neighborhood. Fortunately, most of the stages were on the south side of Dublin (south of the river Liffey) and thus within easy walking distance.

Even with so much brewing in the theaters, no banners heralded the festival. Rather, there was a buzz in the air: Everyone was talking about it. People on buses and in restaurants were exchanging assessments and debating press reviews. An actor I'd just seen onstage at the Andrews Lane Theatre appeared at the pay phone next to mine on O'Connell Street, recounting his take on the show's progress. My tablemates at a pub one night were directors and set designers. It was understood that the festival was the focus of life in Dublin, and everyone was expected to have an opinion.

"I'm an Ulsterman," boasted one effusive septuagenarian as we were en route by shuttle bus to see Fiona Shaw interpret T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The salty gent dispensed a rash of 30-second reviews of the plays he'd seen, and also regaled me with the Gaelic Horatio Alger tale of his life. By the time we pulled up, a mere 15 minutes later, to the site of the one-woman show in Phoenix Park, I knew the "best of the fest" as well as the main whys and wherefores of the man's history. This old trouper, I thought, would certainly have given Ms. Shaw a run for her money on the boards.

"The Irish talk a lot; they are natural extroverts," said Tony Ó Dálaigh, director of the festival, by way of explaining my encounter with the elderly man. But this tendency bodes well for the playgoer, he added, "because there is a kind of outgoing thing that lends itself to theater."

In fact, theater troupes abound throughout this small country of 3.5 million in such plenty "that it's hard to meet anyone in Ireland who hasn't been on the stage," says Ó Dálaigh. What's more, reading is taught from the age of four, and writing competitions for children are commonplace. (A poetry contest for kids 4 to 13, sponsored by the phone company, recently drew an astonishing 35,000 entries.) Some of these children grow up to win Nobel Prizes in literature, as did the playwrights George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett, as well as William Butler Yeats and, just last year, Seamus Heaney.

Part of the reason for this abundance of Irish talent surely has to do with the country's long-standing commitment to the arts. A century ago the poet William Butler Yeats and the essayist Lady Gregory founded Dublin's Abbey Theatre, making it the first government-backed national theater in the English-speaking world.

Since then the Abbey has produced more than 800 new Irish works (probably a record among state theaters), including, in 1907, John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, which raised such strong sentiments about Irish womanhood that audiences took to the streets in protest. There was a similar uproar in 1926, when Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* was produced.

The next highly acclaimed Irish play to cross the Atlantic to New York will likely be Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*.

Today many Irish productions still create a stir, as evidenced by the wildfire successes in London and New York of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Frank McGuinness' *Someone Who'll Watch over Me*. In fact, recent Irish works have been so *(continued on page 127)*

PAT ODEA

Treading the Boards in Dublin

The Dublin Theatre Festival begins booking plays one month prior to its opening. For information on this year's offerings, write to the Box Office Manager; 47 Nassau St.; Dublin 2; Ireland (353-1/671-2860 or fax 353-1/679-7709). Tickets cost $15 to $23 (matinees are cheaper). To find out about the Fringe and its productions, call 353-1/677-5099 or 353-1/456-9569.

I stayed at the Georgian House (353-1/661-8832; doubles from $130), a centrally located hotel on Lower Baggot Street. Aer Lingus offers a package called the Dublin City Spree, which includes airfare, three nights' lodging and breakfast, and the use of a service that will book festival plays for you in advance. The cost is $599 per person, based on double occupancy; call 800/223-6537 or 212/557-1110. For general information on visiting Dublin, contact the Irish Tourist Board at 212/418-0800. —M.L.

(from page 124) much in demand that even English critics have questioned why their own local talent comes up short in comparison. The next highly acclaimed Irish production to cross the Atlantic to New York will likely be Dublin playwright Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*.

Because I wanted to absorb as much of Ireland as possible, I favored Irish plays at the festival. But as an American with an embarrassingly sketchy grasp of Irish history, some of the works left me a bit at sea. Fortunately, with others, I could simply sit back and enjoy the show. *The Lithium Waltz*, by Barry McKinley, about patients in a mental hospital, was hysterically funny, and *No Need to Argue*, written by a team of teenagers about how a family deals with Alzheimer's disease, carried a universal message.

One of the last productions I saw was *Good-Evening, Mr. Collins*, which was performed at the Peacock, the Abbey's smaller, more experimental playhouse. The play is about Michael Collins, a legendary I.R.A. leader who was eventually assassinated by his former allies. A serious subject, no doubt. But in typical Gaelic fashion, the playwright Tom MacIntyre turned this tragedy into a beguiling black comedy of sorts, replete with music and oddball performances.

One afternoon I took a break from my nonstop play viewing and visited the Dublin Writers Museum. This modest museum in two Georgian town houses provides a spellbinding journey across Ireland's literary landscape. Through notes, first editions (Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout*), personal effects (Frank O'Connor's spectacles), and writing tools, it tells of not only Irish struggle and rebellion but Irish excellence and genius.

My favorite exhibits reflected the Irish irreverence for constraints: One was the old typewriter that Brendan Behan supposedly tossed out of McDaid's pub; the second is a published page opened to Patrick Kavanagh's poems, with the censored words reinstated in the poet's own handwriting.

I wound up my week touring Dublin with James Joyce's nephew, Ken Monaghan, now director of the James Joyce Cultural Centre. We strolled around many of the sites Joyce made famous in *Ulysses*, such as Eccles Street and other parts of the still-bleak north inner city. We also saw the ramshackle tenement house where Joyce's family lived, and the school he attended as a child.

But what I remember most about meeting Monaghan was our first exchange. In that peculiarly Irish fashion, he told me more about the Irish love of letters and showmanship than all the theater productions I'd seen that week.

Even though I had popped into the Joyce Centre unannounced, Monaghan dropped everything to discuss his uncle with me. Sensing that I had interrupted his work, I suggested coming back another day.

"Oh, it's really no bother," he replied. "I was just rereading *Finnegans Wake*."

I think he was serious. ■

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