

20 DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL

# Old masters wreak f

Rich new pickings from Friel and Kilroy compete with assured work from young guns, writes **Emer O'Kelly**



**Performances**

The Gate

THE plural in the title of Brian Friel's new play, premiered at the Gate, is very important. Because there are many performances and layers of performance in this 65-minute text interwoven with Janacek's 'Intimate Letters' string quartet.

We meet the composer, looking as he did at about the age of 50. Now long dead, he is performing with the benefit of hindsight, and perhaps with an honesty he never employed while alive. He is performing in his own mind, reviewing, justifying, and even renegeing upon the perspectives he allowed others to use in judging his work.

And another performance is being forced upon him: the perspective of the Ph.D. student Anezka Ungrova who has travelled from Prague to the Janacek Museum in Moravia, to "interview" her hero in her own mind in the setting of his old villa, now a Janacek museum. Her thesis concerns the elderly Janacek's obsession with a married woman nearly 40 years his junior. Ungrova accepts the popular theory that it was this all-consuming love which produced the later works of genius, that the music is as much the soul of Kamila Stasslova as it is a portrait of Janacek's own soul: that she was more than his muse; that the music is the embodiment of their passion. And she wants to probe it.

Janacek wrote 700 letters to Kamila between 1917 and 1928, letters increasingly tumultuous in their tempestuous adoration. But they were never lovers in the physical sense, something he seemed to accept with a despairing equanimity, and, perhaps, scholars like the young Ungrova posit, it was her form as much as her essence he adored: the faithful bourgeois wife and devoted mother, absorbed in her domesticity while going round, down

that vision disturbed by physical possession.

It is something Ungrova, in her adoration of the ghost of Janacek, cannot come to terms with: half in love with easeful death, she cannot conceive of a woman not abandoning herself to such love. Yet she too is performing to an obsession: that love and great art are synonymous, and she projects her own obsession with the music onto the more plebeian soul of Kamila.

But the conjured-up presence of Janacek now performs to a different melody: listen to the music, he tells her. That is where the secret of his life and genius lay.

This is the soul of the play, the defiant and triumphant valediction of a long dead artist come to defend his legacy. The 75-year-old Brian Friel, still writing, and still exploring new forms of drama, posits a defence of art as inalienable, detached, unique, and almost untouched by the experiences of life. There is a fierce magic about the thesis and the way he presents it, but the underbelly is bleak, and confirms a conviction of the artist as totally isolated.

The interweaving into the work of the Second String Quartet, played by the Alba String Quartet, gives the play its definitive truth. The early parts are played off stage; they are muted and the sound drifts through the arguments between the rambunctious Anezka Ungrova and the wryly determined composer. But when, disgusted and unconvinced, she leaves him listening in a kind of doubtful peace to the final movement, pacing around the musicians as they play, we know that there is no objective certainty in explaining a work of genius: we can only recognise it.

Ion Caramitru is breathtaking as Janacek. He takes the centrality of his role and seems to reduce it to a tiny core of perfect sensitivity that,



**CLASS ACT:** Sara Kestelman as Nell and Justine Mitchell as Thomas Kilroy at The Abbey

Lenihan as the passionately angry Ungrova is a glorious foil. Their interaction seems seamless, a not entirely unexpected result from the direction of Patrick Mason, at this stage probably the premier intelligence in staging Friel's work.

Joe Vanek's set is a further extension of the surreal reality: a representation of the Janacek museum as he found it last summer, in the throes of redecoration.

Quite simply, this is an evening of exquisite theatre.

**The Shape of Metal**

The Abbey **EXTRAORDINARILY**, many of the same preoccupations about the justification and wellspring of art play a major role in Thomas Kilroy's new work *The Shape of Metal*, premiered at the Abbey. Both plays are centred on ageing artists; and both are clearly motivated by the writers' reflections on a lifetime spent in making art.

If normal is about "not feeling different" as a character says in *The Shape of Metal*, then the artist is an abnormal



**FIRST NIGHT:** At the Gate on premiere of Brian Friel's 'Perfo and his girlfriend Maeve

generally accepted as "normality". Artists are different, and normality for them is the explosion of behaviour and stances that frequently make the rest of us nervous. And here, Kilroy mischievously explores our nervousness with another concept unpopular in Ireland: the notion of class as a delineator in our supposedly classless society.

Class in the meaning of dignity and good breeding, as

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# erice festival magic



...ce in 'The Shape of Metal' by



...nesday night for the world  
...nances' were Alan Stanford

So the playwright gives us a central character who is in every way a cauldron: Nell Jeffrey is an eminent 82-year-old sculptor, apparently waiting to die. She is already honoured, and is about to have a permanent exhibition of her work mounted at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. That in itself sets her apart in Irish society; but Nell is a being apart in heritage as well. A member of what her own "sort" would call the middle class, and what the socially

envious and insecure call the "upper class", she is now mentally at war with both aspects of her life.

Nell has been an implacably selfish mother, and a ravagingly demanding lover. Her will to make art has driven her to ride roughshod over all. It is this fatal drive which she can't rein in when her emotionally frail daughter begins a liaison with a local garage mechanic. This must be stopped; and the only way Nell knows to stop it is by the forthrightly self-indulgent methods she has used in relation to her own life. The result, not surprisingly is tragic.

The story is told in flashback, the disappeared daughter Grace at the age of 25 coming alive in Nell's reality at the age of 52, and in ghostly memory in her old age. In that old age, Nell tries to come to terms with the realities of her life.

Nothing is resolved in this play; the audience is left to answer for itself the ethical questions that society asks artists and vice versa. It's fascinating, stimulating, and disturbing. And it is, of course, beautifully constructed. It is equally beautifully acted by Sara Kestelman as Nell, Eleanor Methven as Nell's daughter Judith, and Justine Mitchell as Grace.

John Comiskey and Alan Farquharson have designed an extraordinary set and lighting plan that give detailed voice and vision to Lynne Parker's delicate direction.

### The Far Side of the Moon,

O'Reilly Hall, Belvedere College  
THE Canadian writer-director Robert Lepage is preceded wherever he goes by his reputation for innovation and unique imagination, and *The Far Side of the Moon* is no disappointment.

A mirror dominates the stage; as the superbly devised images are superimposed and succeed each other, from giant washing machines to the interiors of space ships, we are transported with their authority to a place which could well be on the far side of the moon, so far is it beyond the mundane world.

A space travel-obsessed man hears a radio request for schemes to attract communication from extra-terrestrial life. He is a hero-worshipper

from childhood of space ambitions, particularly on the part of those disappointed in the race. Pierre, who has lived all his life in the shadow of his "cool" brother (gay cf, mili anda television weatherman), sets himself to make his mark in this contest.

The script, which is of less importance than the visuals, is nonetheless artful and wistful, and the combination of the two makes for a fantasy based on the simplicities of sibling rivalry and the ordinary tragedies of family life.

Pierre and Maurice, their glamorous mother, and various other human entities, are played by Yves Jacques, with the assistance of charming puppets operated by Pierre Bernier.

The project was originated by Peder Bjurman, and is clearly as fresh as the day it began its worldwide tour two years ago.

### The Lieutenant of Inishmore,

The Olympia  
WITH *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Martin McDonagh seems finally to have a topic to write about. If there are elements in Irish life that are genuinely black, and in need of Greek tragedy or wild comedy lest we lose our reason, they are drug-trafficking and paramilitary "patriotism".

And in this, the fifth of his plays, and the second in his 'Aran Trilogy', he has melded both elements in a blood-soaked manic farce of death and destruction. The fact that this Royal Shakespeare Company production at the Olympia is as ridiculously non-Irish as any of the rest of his work, and as impossibly geographic in its supposed setting of Inishmore, matters not at all. The play is a vicious tale of skewed attitudes and volcanic murder, a piece of sentimentally vicious thuggery and religious-inspired brutality.

It could be anywhere racial hatred is left to brew in a sorry stew of nationalism. It is, however, Inishmore, where Pdraic has left the island to fight for freedom in Northern Ireland in the brave ranks of the INLA. And in true Irish tradition, he has split from the organisation to form his own splinter group. Now his former comrades are out to get

him, come what may. What follows is a visual bloodbath of unspeakable proportions. It's not for the faint-hearted in mind or eyesight; but it is horribly, disgustingly funny; largely because it is an only slightly exaggerated picture of paramilitary thinking and practice.

Barry Ward plays the psychotic Pdraic, with Aoife Madden as his equally nutty girl friend, and Matthew Dunphy as her brother. Paul Lloyd is a torture victim. David Ireland, Matt McArdle, and Jason Kavanagh are the death squad, and Ciaran McIntyre is Pdraic's father. Accents are all over the place at times, and McDonagh's dialect is as stage-Irish as ever. But if these technical details are ignored, and you can keep your lunch down, this is a genuinely funny, if horrifying piece.

### Duck

The Peacock  
DUCK is Stella Feehily's first full-length stage play; and it is certainly an assured debut. It premiered at the Edinburgh Festival, transferred to the Royal Court in London, and now this Out of Joint production has come to the Peacock.

It could be just another story of Dublin city's underworld. Indeed, it is; but the story is strong, well told, and well visualised, and the acting has authority.

Cat is in her late teens; leaving home to get away from an overbearing mother, she moves in with the glamorous-seeming Mark, a drug-dealing thug who calls her "Duck" because of her big feet. Her best friend is Sophie, who tries to warn her, despite the problems in her own home life. How the girls get through the maelstrom and onto the other side of adulthood forms the body of the play.

It has moments of tenderness, and some chilling ones; and it is never less than well observed. Ruth Negga is Cat, Elaine Symons is Sophie, and Karl Shiels is Mark. All three are fully convincing, as are Gina Moxley, Tony Rohr, and Aidan O'Hare, who play the supporting roles. Max Stafford-Clark directs his own production with his usual competent flair in Jonathan Fensom's set.