To further develop my contemporary playwrighting skills in Ireland – and to study Irish organizational script development initiatives

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Signed: Mary Anne Butler
Dated: November 2015
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INTRODUCTION

As a regionally based playwright, I've made it my business to travel to Sydney and Melbourne every year since 2008 to see theatre in order to: benchmark my own work, network where possible, keep an ear and eye out for directors, actors, dramaturgs and creative teams whose work has an affinity with my own, see work which is vastly different from my own practice in order to expand my own vision, and see what is rendered both desirable and possible on contemporary Australian stages.

My interest in contemporary Irish theatre was sparked after seeing Dublin-based Mark O'Rowe's Terminus in Sydney in 2011. This moment changed my creative life, because O'Rowe's play showed me a voice of absolute courage and conviction which I had never been privy to before – and I aspired to his levels of both courage and conviction in my own work. Following Terminus I read all of Mark O’Rowe’s plays, which in turn lead me to the work of other contemporary Irish playwrights – to the point where I felt I had to immerse myself fully in the world of Irish Theatre in order to access the rhythms and quirks of this English-Irish vernacular, first-hand.

The opportunity to spend three months immersed in Irish theatre culture and practice and exploring Ireland’s broader literary history has had a profound impact on my writing content and practice, broadening my understanding and appreciation of contemporary Western theatre and empowering me to recommit to my writing craft with renewed energy, focus and purpose. This practice-based research opportunity has also offered me a positive and renewed sense of the possibilities for my work and the work of my NT peers within and beyond the Northern Territory, and wider Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Fellowship was empowering, affirming and inspiring and I would like to thank:

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and all staff, especially Meg Gilmartin and Natalia Wellings. The NT selection panel - particularly NT Director the Honorable Justice Jenny Blokland. The Churchill Fellows’ Association NT. Special thanks to NT Churchill Fellow Angela O'Donnell for sowing the seed for me to apply, and encouraging me throughout the process.

My Winston Churchill Fellowship was extended due to generous funding from an Australia Council Theatre Board Skills development grant, which allowed me extra time in Dublin to delve even deeper into the theatre industry. Many thanks to The Australia Council for the Arts, the Theatre Board Peer Assessment Panel, Lyn Wallis and all Theatre Board staff. Very special thanks to Sophie Travers, whose generous and varied introductions literally opened doors into very helpful companies and individuals. Thanks to my referees Tom Pauling and Sean Pardy.

In Dublin, Cian O'Brien and the Project Arts Centre who supported my application to come here, and Cian in particular who introduced me to a myriad of companies and individuals which extended my knowledge and understanding of Irish Theatre. Beth King, who introduced me to Cian O'Brien. Gavin Kostick and Jim Culleton from Fishamble – Ireland’s New Play Company. Lynne Parker and Maureen White of Rough Magic Theatre Company. Thanks to producer Jen Coppinger. Special thanks to playwright Mark O’Rowe for inspiration, theatre debate and support for my own practice. And Jesse Weaver of The Abbey's Literary Department.

Finally, thanks to the organisations which continue to provide me with ongoing support: Arts NT and the Arts Grants Board, whose funding of my work continues to enable me to write and produce new Australian plays. Browns Mart Theatre who present my plays while supporting me as a producer. Knock-em-Down Theatre’s co-artistic directors Stephen Carleton and Gail Evans. Arthback NT for touring my work, and the NT Writers’ Centre. And my theatre peers NT-wide who I share this journey with: learning from and with them, along the way.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mary Anne Butler, Playwright, PO Box 498, Nightcliff, NT 0814, MOB: +61 409 767 075

To further develop my contemporary playwrighting skills and to study organizational script development initiatives in Ireland

With my combined Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship and Australia Council Skills Development grant, I spent three months in Ireland immersing myself in the contemporary Irish Theatre Canon: attending the Dublin Fringe and Theatre Festivals, and meeting with a wide range of theatre companies and individuals. In summary I attended 25 theatre productions, partook in 19 formal and 12 informal meetings, attended five ‘in conversations’ / interviews / post-show talks, one Masterclass, one radio interview with ABC Radio National and one Language Maintenance Project.

Particularly helpful during my research were: Cian O'Brian from the Project Arts Centre, who supported my stay from the outset, introducing me to anyone I asked to meet. Cain’s knowledge of the history of Irish theatre plus his vast connections made my study of local companies and individuals extremely comprehensive. Playwright Mark O'Rowe who gave me several sessions where we discussed not only theatre but also Ireland’s film and TV industry. His perspectives were helpful on a number of levels, including lessons of resilience and persistence, and staying true to the heart of your own work – all of which I will pass on to my peers on my return. Gavin Kostick and Jim Culleton from Fishamble: Ireland’s New Play Company discussed their New Play Clinic and Show in a Bag initiatives at length, broadening my tools for script development. Plus they gave me a heap of Irish plays to take home and share with my playwriting peers.

Without question the theatre highlight of my trip was DruidShakespeare. Held at Kilkenny Castle. This was a six and a half hour adaptation of five of Shakespeare's History plays, adapted by Mark O'Rowe and produced by Druid Theatre Company. It was a fine lesson in adaptation.

Major lessons and conclusions, and their implementation and dissemination:

While in Ireland, I was informed that I’d been awarded a Regional Arts Development Institutional Fellowship and from March-June 2016 I’ll be based at Browns Mart in Darwin to work intensively NT-wide with playwrights who have plays in development: crafting these works towards production and further local/national development. I’ve also been asked to mentor four young playwrights through the nationally based Australian Theatre for Young People [ATYP] in 2016. Consequently, I spent more Fellowship time than originally proposed studying script development programs and dramaturgy within Irish organisations, with a view to applying the best of these within my NT community when I take up the Institutional Fellowship and mentorship in 2016.

Major lessons and dissemination include:

- Advanced models for running Territory-wide script development and mentoring programs
- A far broader awareness of the International theatre canon which I will take into my own work and my teaching/mentoring practices
- A request from Dublin Fringe Festival to recommend suitable local work for their program, plus a request to recommend an NT artist to participate in an international development initiative in 2016
- Contacts with two other companies, an independent producer and an independent director - all of whom are interested in reading Australian plays for programming consideration
- Lessons in resilience, persistence, self-belief and aiming high which I will take into my work and my teaching/mentoring practice.

While on Fellowship I completed two drafts of a new play, and a first draft novel adaptation of my existing play, Highway of Lost Hearts.
I arrived in Dublin on August 1 and departed on November 1, 2015.

### People and Organisations

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<th>Organisation</th>
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<td>Smock Alley Boys School</td>
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<td>Bewleys @ The Powercourt</td>
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Fellowship and lessons learnt.

Given the extended timeframe of my stay, I decided to keep an ongoing diary documenting each meeting, theatre show and significant event as related to the core purpose of my Fellowship. Each entry contains its own specific learnings as well as production details and review grabs – all of which are summarised at the end of this report alongside proposed application to my NT Theatre community.

.....starting with...

Saturday August 1 2015 - Nearly there!

First sighting of this glorious green coastline. Excited doesn’t begin to describe it.
Monday August 3, 2015

…so day three, and all is well. The place I’m staying in is utterly lovely. A third floor unit with an outdoor area complete with a bench seat and table. This space gets what sun there is, and there are skylights in most of the rooms. It’s light and open and airy with plenty of heaters for when the cold kicks in and I LOVE it!

Day one was sunny, day two was overcast, windy and cold and day three [today] has been a mix of them all. The Irish Summer – as promised – is not unlike a typical Melbourne one.

View from my outdoor balcony, complete with ringing bells from the church.

I’ve just got over the travel fatigue and jetlag, had a few days rest and now I’m getting into a writing routine and exploring this lovely place with cobblestone streets and gorgeous accents.

View up my street
My street, complete with Dublin street art - which is everywhere. The grey stands in front of the wall are from the bike system. You pay 20 Euro a year to get a unique pin code, and can take any bikes to and from any station, any time. It’s very popular as you can see by the number of missing bikes.

Friday August 7, 2015
Rehearsal: Pan Pan Theatre – Rehearsals for NewcastleWest by Dick Walsh
http://panpantheatre.com/

After several months emailing with Maeve Stone - Associate Director at Pan Pan Theatre Company – today I sat in on the penultimate dress rehearsal of Newcastlewest by Dick Walsh. This is Pan Pan Theatre’s Dublin Theatre Festival show, which is rehearsing early due to cast and crew commitments closer to the Festival.

Overview: Run by Co-Directors Gavin Quinn and Aedin Cosgrove, Pan Pan has focused on the “development of new performance ideas” - born from a desire to be individual and provide innovation in the development of theatre art. All their works created are original, either through the writing (original plays) or through the totally unique expression of extant plays. The company is committed to presenting performances nationally and internationally and developing links for co-productions and collaborations and has toured in Ireland, UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and China.

The dress rehearsal was held at the Samuel Beckett Theatre at Trinity College – and it was a great honour just to sit inside this theatre which was named after such a unique and pivotal Irish playwright.

Pan Pan has a very distinctive theatrical voice, and Newcastlewest was both inspiring and innovative. It was a treat to be there, and I’m extremely grateful for the opportunity, thanks to Maeve and Pan Pan.
Trinity College also houses the Book of Kells, which contains the four Gospels in Latin. Written on calf skin around 800AD, it’s incredible to see a text this old.
Monday August 10, 2015  
Meeting: Roisin Coyle - The Abbey Literary Department  
http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/

Overview: “Established in 1904 by W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, The Abbey’s artistic policy of the theatre unchanged and incorporates the following ambitions:

- To invest in and promote new Irish writers and artists
- To produce an annual programme of diverse, engaging, innovative Irish and international theatre
- To attract and engage a broad range of customers and provide compelling experiences that inspire them to return
- To create a dynamic working environment which delivers world best practice across our business

In 1925, the Abbey Theatre became the first ever state-subsidised theatre in the English speaking world and it still receives an annual grant from the Arts Council of Ireland [making it the equivalent to Australia’s State funded theatre companies].
http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/behind_the_scenes/article/history

I met with Roisin to ask about their script development and programming philosophy. The Literary Department reads and responds to around 400 unsolicited scripts annually - also commissioning new works from more established and emerging writers of interest to them. Script assessments are fielded out to a panel of independent readers including established playwrights, directors and producers.

Each play gets at least one reading and a written report which includes a synopsis of the play plus notes on structure, character etc. The readers meet monthly to hand in their reports and discuss the plays they’ve read, and plays are referred to a second reader if the report is positive.
Roisin says that The Abbey are increasingly investing in regional / remote communities by taking around ‘pop-up’ initiatives which might involve readings of local works [submitted via EOI with a sample of writing attached], might also entail a masterclass or workshop, or maybe a Q&A addressing how to get work on. The pop-ups can be tailored to focus on the main problems theatre workers face in that particular community, and aim to strike a balance between the delivery of practical information with the development of creative skills.

This tailoring of content and process to suit individual communities is an excellent model for the Northern Territory, and is a concept I’ll apply to my 2016 Regional Arts Institutional Fellowship at Browns Mart.

Roisin also alerted me to a Masterclass series The Abbey are running during the Dublin Fringe Festival. Called the ‘Playwrights Hub’, attendance is by competitive application where you forward samples of your work. I applied and subsequently got selected to attend a Masterclass with playwright Michael West [see September 10, 2015].

In 1951, the original buildings of the Abbey Theatre were damaged by fire.

_The Abbey Theatre before the 1951 fire._

**Wednesday August 12, 2015**

**Meeting: Cian O’Brien, Artistic Director - Project Arts Centre**

[http://projectartscentre.ie/](http://projectartscentre.ie/)

A fantastic meeting with the man who is responsible in large part for me being here. Cian O’Brien runs the Project Arts Centre, and it was his belief in my work and the willingness of him to introduce me to pivotal Irish theatre folk which cemented my decision to apply for a Churchill Fellowship, with Project Arts Centre as my host organisation.
**Overview:** Project Arts Centre is “Ireland’s leading centre for the presentation and development of contemporary art, dedicated to protecting the independent sector and nurturing the next generation of Irish artists across all forms of the performing and visual arts.

“A multi-disciplinary arts centre programming work across all art forms from visual art, theatre, dance and music to live art events, talks and discussions Project Arts Centre is the busiest arts centre in the country presenting over 620 events and curating and co-ordinating 6 exhibitions each year as well as co-producing 38 productions as part of our Project Artists initiative. They also work with many major festivals including Dublin Fringe Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival and Dublin Dance Festival.

![Project Arts Centre](image)

*My terrific Host Organisation: Project Arts Centre*

“For nearly five decades Project Arts Centre has been at the forefront of contemporary artistic practice in Dublin and counts amongst their successes having helped to launch the careers of Liam Neeson, Gabriel Byrne and U2.” [http://projectartcentre.ie/about-us/](http://projectartcentre.ie/about-us/)

Cian and I had a long meeting, during which he filled me in on the history of Irish theatre since 1906 when The Abbey Theatre formed, and he talked me through its various phases since then – including The Abbey’s relatively recent decision to focus only on Irish playwrights. This, he says is a response to being such a tiny country. Most plays only go on once in any city – and there are not that many professional theatres in Ireland, so unless a playwright gets their work overseas then each play has only one life - at the most two, if there is a revival. This is a fascinating thought, as in Australia plays have more chances at more productions, given the number of big cities we have. Marina Carr’s The Bog of Cats has a revival next week – The Abbey first produced it in 1998, and this is the first Dublin production since then - and she is a MAJOR playwright in this country.

Cian went on to discuss the establishment of The Gate theatre in the 1920s, and then Druid Theatre in the mid 80’s. The Gate tends to do revivals of Beckett, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Miller, Brian Friel etc. – so they don’t tend towards new works by new writers.
Druid focuses on new writing - plays which have never been produced before. They have International Premiere of new works. Having said that, they will also do 'adaptations' of Shakespeare - and they recently revived a few of Irish playwright Tom Murphy's plays.

Cain then talked about how the 2008 arts funding cuts in Ireland and subsequent austerity measures in effect reduced what were 30 funded independent companies down to 11. In the early 1990s, small companies where encouraged to incorporate and consequently funded to operate - so there was a very diverse and healthy scene. But during the cuts some were totally defunded, and others reduced to part funding – and many of them have now folded. I found out on Monday August 10 that I have been awarded a Regional Arts Development Fellowship, which will see me based at Browns Mart Theatre for four months in the first half of 2016 specifically to run a script development program across the NT. This will involve delivering workshops and masterclasses plus engaging in some levels of mentoring and dramaturgy on a number of NT plays. It will also include building some interstate partnerships.

Given this recent Fellowship news, I spoke to Cian with 'two hats', as it were:

- As an individual playwright wanting to connect with potential Irish partners with a view to them being interested in producing or presenting my work, and
- As a facilitator seeking advice to develop an effective script development program which would work across the NT’s vast distances.

Cian outlined what he felt were the most effective script development programs running in Ireland, and he then initiated email introductions for me, to the relevant organisations. He also email-introduced me to two playwrights / theatre makers, and offered to line up meetings with any other playwrights I would like to meet, if it was in his capacity to do so.

Finally, he recommended I book for some specific theatre shows during the Dublin Fringe and Theatre Festivals, as he felt they would be worth while my seeing. All in all, a terrific meeting with a very knowledgeable, well connected and extremely generous man. Cian was described to me by a local practitioner as ‘a National Treasure’ – and I can see why.

Saturday August 15, 2015
Production: DruidShakespeare adapted by Mark O’Rowe for Druid Theatre Company
http://druid.ie/druidshakespeare/about

I caught a bus to Kilkenny to catch the last night of the Kilkenny Festival, having booked months ago to see DruidShakespeare. Founded in 1975 by graduates of the National University of Ireland [Garry Hynes, Mick Lally and Marie Mullen] and based in Galway, Druid Theatre Company productions have won over 50 awards both in Ireland and internationally. The first professional theatre company to be based outside Dublin, the company has had two artistic directors: Garry Hynes (1975–91 and 1995 to date) and Maeliosa Stafford (1991–94).

Overview: Druid brings “…groundbreaking productions of classic and new dramatic works to the world stage and, as such, has drawn extensively from the Irish dramatic repertoire and has worked with celebrated Irish and international playwrights.” A “writers’ theatre” with a track record for premiering “new plays of international stature”, all Druid plays premier in Galway. Druid believes that audiences have a right to see first class professional theatre without having to travel long distances outside their own communities, therefore they tour extensively as an essential part of the company’s mission. Tours include the UK, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Druid accept play submissions in the English language from Irish, UK and other European or Europe-based writers.
This production of *DruidShakespeare* saw Dublin based playwright **Mark O’Rowe** adapting four of Shakespeare’s history plays - *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts I and II*, and *Henry V* into a seven-hour epic.

...people queuing up to see *DruidShakespeare*...
This had to be one of the greatest theatre experiences of my life to date. The show was held outside in the Kilkenny Castle stable yards - with no cover - and while it looked [and felt] like it was about to snow, the rain held off and we settled into a chilly evening of dynamic theatre.

Richard II was played by celebrated Dublin actor Marty Rae, and I have never seen anything like this man’s work. He was utterly riveting. It’s a cliché, but I literally couldn’t take my eyes off him. I’ve since been told he is one of Ireland’s top two male actors, and consistently brilliant - and that certainly was my experience. Henry IV and V were played by women who both held their own as Kings. The four plays were almost seamlessly knitted together, and seeing them in sequence gave me a strong sense of the succession of these Kings: how they fell, what they endured, whether or not they were loved by their subjects, the surreptitious plotting and politicking of that time. Just brilliantly adapted from the original by playwright Mark O’Rowe.

I later got the chance to spend some time with Mark [see August 20], and ask him about the writing process for this epic. He spoke openly about the challenges in terms of trying to get it down to a size that they could afford to cast [13 actors, and a lot of doubling] as well as the challenges of keeping each play coherent yet as brief as possible. This not only entailed Mark’s cutting of the existing text, but in some cases also meant he had to write bridging speeches or exchanges to convey vital information which was lost in the editing process - which he had to write in iambic pentameter.
The Graves of Kings, which increased in number as each was slain. During each of the three intervals we saw more and more grave plots appear.

The stage is set. Few props and sparse sets highlight the language and character interactions.
To see all four plays one after the other like this really balanced the story strengths out against losing some of the text. High energy performances by all meant that I could keep focused and attentive for the seven hours, and seeing the works concurrently gave me a really strong sense of the generational links between each story.

Another highlight was the almost complete absence of props or set. The direction relied on the script and high energy actors to tell us these complex and inter-woven stories. Great costumes helped. The doubling meant that some of the actors literally played three characters in one play – sometimes changing costumes in the wings in full view of the audience within a 60 second turnaround. The standing ovation well after midnight was a terrific end to the season of this extraordinary epic; well worth travelling to Kilkenny for.

I wandered back to my B&B tired, cold, happy and awoke to a Black Pudding breakfast before catching the bus back to Dublin.

Ah; to be sure, to be sure…

**Tuesday August 18, 2015**

**Production: PALs – an ANU production**

http://pals-theirishatgallipoli.com/

**Overview:** Presented by ANU Productions, PALs is an immersive show which re-creates the lives of the 7th Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, at war in Gallipoli in 1951. Ireland’s 7th Battalion were a team of rugby legends built from some of the strongest athletes in Ireland who enlisted together with the understanding that they remain in the same battalion while in service. Most were wiped out - and those who weren’t, returned damaged and broken.
The setting for the play is Collins Barracks, where the audience gathers to see a battalion of soldiers marching across the space. One soldier is disciplined in front of us, and then we’re ordered to go upstairs into a room which is set out like an army barracks – bunk beds and all. From there we’re dropped into army life where we experience scenes of war, loss, mateship, sickness - and descents into madness. The space becomes a battlefield, a hospital, a kitchen ‘back home’. The hour-long show is fast paced and immensely varied.

It was great to be so literally drawn in by a production, with character contact visceral and immediate. At the very start of the play a soldier took a sly swig from a hip flask, then passed it to me with a wink. On his urging, I took a swig – and it was real whisky in there.

A highly successful model, PALs is performed four times a day, six days a week and has had several months of sold-out shows. One scene which I found particularly moving: a soldier read out a letter which his mate – now dead - had written to his mum just before he was killed, while a nurse simultaneously read from a stack of around 100 cardboard cards – each one containing the name of a dead soldier. As she read each name out, she flicked the card onto the floor, slowly spinning as she read the names of the dead - which created a hypnotic, disassociated feel. The sheer number of cards, the names of the fallen as they fell to the ground juxtapose with the letter to a mother was a powerful image which has stayed with me.
PALs has got me thinking about opportunities for a similar model in Darwin, with its own WWII history.

**Wednesday August 19, 2015**

*Production: Marina Carr’s By The Bog of Cats at The Abbey Theatre*

I just got home from The Abbey Theatre after seeing By the Bog of Cats, by Marina Carr. And THIS is why I choose theatre beyond any other medium. It was not without its faults as a production but the script itself is riveting. An epic tale: tragic and funny at the same time – beautifully written. A theatre of several hundred people on their feet in a standing ovation.

It was the opening night of this show, and local producer Jen Coppinger generously invited me as her ‘Plus One’ - also introducing me to some key industry people at the opening such as Willy White who runs the Dublin Festival. Also Olwen Fouere, who is a stunning local actor and director. She was in the cast of Mark O’Rowe’s Terminus which I saw in 2011, which is one of the reasons I am here now in Dublin. It was terrific to get a sense of an opening night at THE Abbey, the oldest and most famous theater in Ireland. I also met Mark O’Rowe, the man who wrote Terminus – the instigating reason I am here in Dublin – and we’re meeting tomorrow so I can ask him questions about his work.

**Thursday August 20th, 2015 – my birthday**

**MEETING MARK O’ROWE!!**

The seed that started my trip to Ireland was sown by my seeing Mark O’Rowe’s play *Terminus* at the Sydney Opera House in 2011. It was the most incredible piece of theatre I had ever witnessed. Mark wrote and directed it, and after seeing it I set about to read all of O’Rowe’s work, which took me to the work of Conor McPherson – another contemporary Irish playwright – and in turn to some other Irish playwrights, which ultimately made me realize I needed to immerse myself in this language and culture and experience a lot of theatre here.

Prior to coming to Dublin, I emailed Mark O’Rowe’s agent to ask if there was any chance of meeting him - and he was up for it. Mark is renowned locally for his generosity and positive role modeling for playwrights. So today I spent almost two hours with Mark O’Rowe: a pivotal influence on my last few years of playwriting, and – along with Australian playwright Andrew Bovell – one of my literary heroes.
It was a terrific session. I asked him a lot of questions about his process and practice, and he talked about commitment and re-writing and routine, and ‘just doing the work’ – reinforcing that writing is a craft which demands hard work and long hours, but is utterly worth it. He also talked about failure and resilience, about his choice to direct his own work, about writing for film and TV, and about their different challenges. Mark’s written five screenplays – four have been made [Broken, Boy A, Intermission and Perrier’s Bounty] and he’s about to direct the fifth himself. He’s written and directed a short film [Debris] already, but this is his first feature film as director.
It was an absolutely amazing day for me – a real shot of inspiration. And those old clichés ‘walking on air,’ and ‘floating like a cloud,’ were totally attributable to me after that session because I walked around Dublin in a bit of a daze, then - full of inspiration – I headed back home for a good write.

This session alone has made the trip worthwhile. It made me realize how much I crave dialogues about the craft and about surviving as a playwright – and I don’t feel I get the chance to do this as much as I’d like to, back home. It’s not about seeing work or networking so much – although these are both necessary to the development of the craft - it’s about reinforcement that the wrestling is normal, and it's okay to feel lost at times. This is part of what Mark gave me – his generosity, openness and honesty were also empowering. It got me thinking that maybe I should try and establish more of a formal ‘let’s just talk about being writers’ dialogue, or group when I get back home.

The very inspiring Mark O’Rowe with one very happy Darwin based playwright

Wednesday 26th August
Meeting: Willie White – Artistic Director, Dublin Theatre Festival

Willie White programs the Dublin Theatre Festival, so I met him to talk about my own work and also the work of other Northern Territory / Australian playwrights and theatre makers. Willie was frank about where the Irish Theatre scene sits from his perspective, and spoke also about his struggle to balance the programming of local work with international work. He told me which type of Australian work he was interested in – and post meeting I sent him some links to Andrew Bovell’s most recent work, The Secret River – because from what Willie was saying I felt that this may be a work he’s interested in for the Dublin Theatre Festival.
Thursday September 3 2015  
Meeting: Gavin Kostick, Literary Manager at Fishamble: Ireland’s New Play Company  
http://fishamble.com

Overview: Fishamble is known in Ireland as “The New Play Company”. Each year, Fishamble supports 60% of the writers of all new plays produced in Ireland, typically about 50 playwrights/plays per year. This happens through courses, workshops, script dramaturgy, awards and commissions. Over the past 25 years Fishamble has produced 131 new plays including 42 full length plays and 89 short plays. During the past year alone, Fishamble has engaged with over 160 playwrights, theatre makers, directors and performers via a range of workshop and mentoring schemes, and they have produced over 230 performances of new plays to audiences in 81 venues, touring work throughout Ireland and internationally to England, Scotland, USA, Canada, Australia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, France, Germany, Iceland, Croatia and the Czech Republic. Some of the now famous Irish playwrights whose first plays were produced by Fishamble include Mark O’Rowe, Marina Carr, Gavin Kostick, Pat Kinevane, Sean McLoughlin, Stella Feehily and Michael West. http://fishamble.com/about-us/about-fishamble/

Fishamble are an independent company, and the amazing thing is that they do all this with the equivalent of three full time staff and some additional part time support. They don’t have a dedicated venue, but they tour a lot and partner with venues to maximize their spread. 6-7 full length plays are fully produced by them every year, and 200-400 more supported annually in some capacity [workshops, dramaturgy, developments]. Gavin describes their development model as “Low Cost / High Impact”, ‘active’, and ‘non-ageist’.

A really exciting thing about Fishamble is their willingness to read plays from anywhere in the world. They only accept hard copy submissions – a philosophy Gavin says ensures the writer is more committed – ie: actually print and post rather than just press ‘send’ on an email. They do readings of plays from other countries as well; their philosophy being that all work should be ‘primarily of interest to the Irish Public’.
They have a Fringe Festival ‘New Writing Award’ which is based on the submitted script, rather than the production of the script – and that comes with 500 Euro worth of free dramaturgical support. Plus they have a venue based mentoring scheme where once a month for four hours directors and writers progress works together – application for writers is via a sample of writing and a CV.

Their ‘Show in a Bag’ collaboration with Dublin Fringe Festival and the Irish Theatre Institute has across the years resulted in the creation of 19 shows, winning multiple awards, and receiving extensive touring across a host of national and international venues. Held annually at the Dublin Fringe Festival, two actors who want to make a play together propose their idea and from these four actor ‘teams’ are selected to work with Fishamble from February to September. Gavin’s job is to support the development of the play towards a Fringe outcome. Shows are kept small scale with a view towards touring.

Gavin used to write the plays for the actors [he is an award winning playwright in his own right], but now some actors choose to create their own scripts, with his support. The work is driven by the actors need for something to say – and 60,000 Euro of in-kind support goes into these four shows across script, directing, production, marketing and publicity elements every year. Then there’s the New Play Clinic, which can range between 1-5 days of script development, with Fishamble providing the fees for writer, director, actors and dramaturg. This initiative is for new plays which are heading into production.

Fishamble also runs two-month playwriting courses where exercises are set each week. Participants write during the week, circulate drafts prior to meetings, everyone reads the drafts prior to coming and then the sessions involve reading sections of their plays aloud and giving feedback. They also all go and see plays as a group, and then discuss them. The aim Gavin says is to: “Make this play be the best play it can possibly be.” That’s a terrific philosophy, and I feel playwrights and their plays are very safe in the hands of this company. Gavin has another metaphor he uses, which is to get the play to such a point that: “You can poke it from any angle and it won’t wobble,” which is a terrific image to come away with, and to pass on to my peers back home.

Fishamble’s ‘Tiny Plays for Ireland’ started with Fishamble commissioning five famous Irish writers to write ‘mini plays’ – no more than three pages – and then printing these in the Irish Times to launch the call for submissions. This generated massive public interest, resulting the writing of over 1,700 plays – submitted from every county in Ireland and many countries beyond. From this selection they created a season of new works – some of which went on to become bigger plays - and led to full length Fishamble commissions for three writers, with other playwrights being commissioned by further theatre companies such as The Abbey. Several new playwrights were discovered and supported via this initiative, and 50 of the plays were published in hard copy. Gavin says these are also terrific teaching tools, as you can use each one for a discrete craft tool. He gave me a copy of this publication as well as Abbie Spallen’s new work, Strandline.

Fishamble’s Artistic Director Jim Culleton took the Tiny Plays model to the 2015 Australian Theatre Forum with five Australian playwrights commissioned to contribute, and have their plays rehearsed and produced at the Forum.
I’ve been thinking for a while now of trying to set up an exchange program between Irish and Northern Territory playwrights. Speaking with Gavin, I felt he was the ideal person to float this idea with. He was in principle interested and suggested that such an exchange occur when the Darwin Festival was on [for the Irish playwright] and vice-versa – for the NT playwright to come during Dublin Theatre Festival time. He mentioned two main Arts Council of Ireland initiatives which may support such travel from an Irish perspective: Culture Connects http://www.artscouncil.ie/initiatives/eu-presidency-culture-programme/About-Culture-Connects/ and the Travel and Training Award http://www.artscouncil.ie/Funds/Travel-and-Training-award/ - As an independent playwright I clearly need to facilitate some partnerships towards this. I have a host organization interested in Darwin, and there is a potential residency space at the Botanical Gardens. Once I’m back I’ll commence dialogues with Arts NT to see what is possible in terms of funding, from the Northern Territory’s perspective.

Gavin spoke about The Pavillion, a theatre and cinema venue which puts one Euro on top of every ticket sold and donates this to a fund supporting local artists. This strikes me as a great idea which we could adopt across Australian venues and companies.

All in all, this was an amazing session and I learned more than I could have hoped for: for myself as a playwright, for my peers, for the broader Script Development Fellowship program I’ll be running across the NT next year, and - hopefully – for an international collaboration in the form of a playwright exchange. Fishamble’s Artistic Director Jim Culleton was in rehearsals for their Theatre Festival show Bailed Out! By Colin Murphy. Jim and I have arranged to meet on October 22, when the show is over and he has more time.

Jim Culleton, Gavin Kostick and Fishamble are doing some incredible things on very little - especially as Gavin’s position is only .5 – but as he said at the start of our meeting, with the budgets cuts here in 2008 and the ensuing austerity measures cutting deeply into the Arts, as a company they shifted their focus to look at “Low Cost / High Impact” driven programs. It’s clearly been a massive success, with Fishamble a pivotal part of the ongoing generation and development of new Irish plays. Many thanks to Gavin for this generous sharing of time, ideas and scripts.
Tuesday September 8 2015  
Meeting: Rough Magic Theatre Company – Maureen White and Lynne Parker  
http://www.roughmagic.ie/Home

Today I met with Maureen White – dramaturg and briefly with Lynne Parker, Artistic Director at Rough Magic Theatre Company. We met at The Lir – Ireland’s National Academy of Dramatic Art - where Rough Magic are rehearsing their Dublin Theatre Festival show, The Train, based on the contraceptive train from Dublin to Belfast in the 1960’s.

Maureen was terrific. She’d read my two plays [Broken and Highway of Lost Hearts] before this meeting and she started the conversation off with lots of lovely comments about my work, enquired about the history and context of these two plays, and then wanted to know about the future, ie: for me as a writer, and for my work. I discussed with her the difficulties of working from a regional base, and trying to get the work into mainstream Australian companies when I’m not ‘on the ground’ to network and connect with people in foyers - where many of these formative relationships and conversations are seeded. She pointed out that the refreshing thing about my work was the inherent remote-ness of it in terms of space and landscape - which is what she was drawn to, and this is also what my regional base gives me.

Artistic Director Lynne Parker joined us briefly but as she’s in the thick of rehearsals for The Train, she needed to go and trouble-shoot some rehearsal business looming that afternoon. Maureen and I chatted some more – mostly her informing me about how Rough Magic works with writers – and then she suggested we meet again with Lynne, once Lynne also had a chance to read my work.

It was a great feeling to go into a meeting with my work having been read and considered beforehand. As a writer with your work on the table, this extra effort makes a massive difference to the relationship and the dialogue - and I was extremely grateful to Maureen for having made that effort.

Wednesday September 9, 2015  
Meeting: Cian O’Brien, Artistic Director - Project Arts Centre

Cian O’Brien and I had another catch-up where we talked about local independent companies and Project Art’s ambitions to become more of a producer body than a presenter hub. I got a strong sense of how much the Project Arts Centre does to support independent artists and smaller groups to retain their individual voices and develop and produce work with the support of Project. There is such respect that genuinely emanates from this man when he talks about artists and their work - I want to clone him so we can all have what he’s giving.

Before I came here I had a dialogue with Michael Cathcart from ABC Radio National’s Books and Arts Daily show – and he asked me to keep my eye out for anything interesting that was happening here in Dublin. After talking to Cian today, I think there is a link between what Project Arts Centre are doing to support independent artists and groups, and what Fishamble is doing to support independent playwrights to write and realize their scripts into production. So I will propose to Michael that he speaks to Cian and Gavin Kostick from Fishamble together, with a focus on how these bigger, funded organisations use their resources to keep the flame of new work going.
Wednesday September 9, 2015
Production: *It Folds* by Brokentalkers and junk ensemble - Peacock Stage, The Abbey

My first Dublin Fringe Festival show: a collaboration between locals Brokentalkers [dance] and physical theatre company junk ensemble. While billed as dance/theatre, it became apparent as I watched that this was a hybrid work – text and movement driven, equally.

I found the work to be challenging at the start, because it was quite esoteric in its storytelling and there seemed to be so many threads - I had trouble hanging on to them all and wondered more than once in the first 15 minutes if they actually would pull together by the end. But they did – and this work used metaphor and movement beautifully to tell the story of a ‘disappeared’ child and his distraught parents.

There were many other threads: a birthday sequence running throughout [it was never mentioned but one assumes it was the boy’s birthday today because at the end he smashed a piñata [which was full of dirt which scattered all over the stage], a clairvoyant character who kept second-guessing where the boy was - thereby reinforcing the parent’s agony [“I see him, he’s deep under the ground. No, he’s under the sea, in the ocean. No, he’s in a basement. There’s a bed. A dirty bed and he’s there, and... no, he’s...” etc]. An Angel of Death who drags the boy’s body through tiny graveyards which have been created in the previous scene for ‘the disappeared’ children. A chorus of ghosts, an alter boy.
Some elements fit seamlessly into the story and some didn’t – but it was the choice of when to reveal information that created the power. The clever jigsaw which made this a thriller in terms of genre, but with a heartfelt story attached. I had to work hard to piece it all together which was part of the reward in what was ultimately a very moving piece. I went straight back home to write - inspired by the rich imagery and metaphors contained within *It Folds*.

Reviews of this play included: "While perturbingly powerful, this beguiling production is stirringly beautiful."

“There are a great many ideas in this production, as the viewer is flooded with visual imagery. The production gives you a variety of ideas, concepts and thoughts delivered through an array of formats, that will last with you long after you’ve left the theatre."

…indeed they did…

**Thursday September 10, 2015**  
**Playwriting Masterclass with Michael West**

Michael is Adjunct Lecturer in Drama at Trinity College, Dublin and teaches playwriting at the Lir Academy – Ireland’s National Academy of Dramatic Art. He’s had work programmed at The Abbey, and he’s won numerous awards. Michael also translates and adapts extant texts including *The Separation of Body and Soul* by Calderón, *The Canterville Ghost* for and *Death and the Ploughman*.  

This had been billed as a Masterclass, but turned out to be a discussion. The first hour was Roisin Coyle and Jesse Weaver From The Abbey’s Literary Department speaking about the realities of Abbey programming. There are currently very few chances to get work produced at this major theatre company, and as most of the writers in the room were emerging Irish playwrights, I think this information was a bit disappointing. Jesse and Roisin did say that everyone in the room had been invited because The Abbey was ‘watching’ their work – and encouraged all to keep sending plays in, and to invite The Abbey staff to their shows.

Michael West then tabled what he called his ‘worries’ as a playwright, then invited others to do the same. So those who had ‘worries’ with their work then tabled them. A great thing emerging for me from this session was that Jesse Weaver asked me to send him one of my plays. I thought The Abbey only took work by Irish writers, but he said he was interested in reading my work - so I sent him *Broken*, and I now look forward to his thoughts on that work.

**Thursday September 10, 2015**  
**Language maintenance project – Gaeilge Tamagotchi**

An instillation at the Project Arts Centre, Gaeilge Tamagotchi is an interactive language maintenance project. You weave your way through a coiled curtain and end up in the centre where Manchán Magan explains to you that he is about to entrust you with an endangered Irish word. If you accept this word, then it becomes your responsibility to keep it in the public realm; thus keeping the language alive.

I accepted the responsibility, and the word Manchán gave me was ‘fuaidrimín’, which means ‘flighty woman’. Perfect. When you come out of the curtained area you’re lead to a craft table and invited to create a piece with your word on it.
The queue going out the door for Gaeilge Tamagotchi

I posted the project as a whole - and my word in particular - onto Facebook amongst my Indigenous and non-Indigenous contacts who work in language maintenance back home. It’s had a heap of responses, including some who are going to create a similar project in their communities, and/or with their students. So this flighty woman is doing her job to keep not only fuaidrimín alive and in the global community, but also spreading the concept as broadly as possible for our own endangered languages.
It was a truly beautiful project. The day I went there was a queue right out the door of the Project Arts Centre, and all sorts of people were waiting to go in. One tiny girl got her word and said she was going to name her fish after it. Me? I reckon I'll just work harder at being a fuaidrimín.

Thursday September 10, 2015
Production: *Grounded* by George Brant at Project Arts Centre.

*Grounded* is about a female fighter pilot who feels pressured to give up her career ‘in the blue’ due to her pregnancy and her choice to keep the baby. What subsequently unfolds is a life of increasing frustration and growing emptiness, as she has to settle for being ‘in the chair’ as a drone pilot – working 12-hour shifts, coming home to be a mother and wife, and yearning all the time to be back ‘in the blue’. Told in monologue and presented by Siren Productions, this production starred Clare Dunne, with Selina Cartmell directing. The script itself has won awards and had many productions world-wide.

This production was fast-paced and frenetic and had mixed reviews during its run in Dublin. For me it was good to see a monologue play with a protagonist who – as a fighter pilot – was not your average female character.
Written and directed by Orla Murphy, this work stars Liz Fitzgibbon as Maeve, Raymond Keane as her father, and Geraldine McAlinden as Doreen. It tells the story of Maeve’s relationship with her father across the years and across continents – as Maeve learns to swim in a pool in Christchurch following the 2011 earthquake. The play explores sorrow and loss, grief and courage and – ultimately – resilience.

The start of this show held extremely high stakes. It opened with footage of the 2011 earthquake, and then followed the central character [Maeve’s] move to New Zealand with her husband to help rebuild the country. Then it backtracked to her as a child, exploring her relationship with her father. As the play progressed we follow the father’s increasing depression as he loses his land and stock – leading him to eventually suicide, and Maeve left with the guilt of not being there for him.

I can feel while watching all this theatre that it really does hone my crafts skills, language and choices - reason enough to be here for this pivotal period of my writing life. Remember to Breathe was a good lesson both in terms of character stakes, and also in structure: lessons which I will now consciously apply to my own work and through dramaturgy, of the work of my peers.
Sunday September 13, 2015
Production: *The Matador* by Shane O’Reilly; Bewleys @ The Powercourt

One of the four ‘Show in a Bag’ offerings at Dublin Fringe Festival in collaboration with Fishamble and the Irish Theatre Institute. ‘Show in a Bag’ is minimal sets and props, a maximum of two actors, under an hour in length and is designed to tour.

Synopsis: Young Liam lives on a farm in rural Ireland with his father and grandmother. Liam’s father cuts a deal to sell his prize bull in order to fund Liam’s dream – which is to study bullfighting in Spain. However, when Liam’s father is killed, Liam has to face the bull in a battle to the death.

*The Matador* is written and performed by Shane O’Reilly and directed by Eoghan Carrick. It’s a one man show with no set and one prop [a bullfighter’s cape]. Ostensibly a play about a young man who wants to study to become a bullfighter, *The Matador* explores poverty and resilience and dreams and determination. It’s also about mistakes and regret - ultimately sending the message to make the most of life while we have it.

Tuesday September 15, 2015
Production: *Big Bobby, Little Bobby* by Camille Lucy Ross and Kelly Shatter - at Smock Alley Theatre

Supported by Rough Magic Theatre Company, written by Camille Lucy Ross and Kelly Shatter, performed by Camille Lucy Ross and directed by Kelly Shatter.

Another one-person show which tells the story of ‘Big Bobby’ who has recently moved out of home – away from her alcoholic mother. However, the isolation wrought by this separation – and by Big Bobby now living alone - has unleashed Bobby’s demonic inner child ‘Little Bobby’ who wreaks havoc on Big Bobby’s world by whispering evil things inside her head, ie: Little Bobby forces Big Bobby to eat more, drink more, wreck the house, poo on the carpet, send inappropriate text messages while drunk. It’s a great way of exploring schizophrenia, dual personalities, dependency, depression, self-hate, fragility, guilt and – ultimately – redemption, as Big Bobby’s mother dies and Big Bobby is forced to assume some responsibility for herself, for the first time in her life.

This play is about overcoming obstacles and achieving personal growth. It’s a very very black comedy, superbly acted, very well written and directed. Great to see another solo show.

Thursday September 17, 2015
Production: *Love+* at Project Arts Centre

*Love+* is devised by Claire O’Reilly, Breffni Holahan, Maeve O’Mahony and Dylan Coburn Gray and directed by Claire O’Reilly - featuring Breffni Holahan as a robot and Maeve O’Mahony as the robot’s owner.

Synopsis: A female robot proves to be perfect in every way except the ways that matter. An automatic lover to meet your every need, she constantly readapts to anticipate and respond to your every whim: giving you the perfect compliment, upgrading your online porn choices without judgement or shaving your legs, her goal is always your happiness. But she cannot reciprocate desire, cannot care, cannot feel aroused and cannot love. And the robot’s owner wants more.
“A clever, funny and thoughtful investment into the nature of being human and of human relationships when woman meets machine and sparks fly.” [from http://www.examiner.com/review/dispatches-from-the-fringe-the-perfectly-imperfect-clash-love]

This was a great show – terrific performances, high production values and a fun script, although I did crave for it to go a bit deeper than it did. The woman’s realisation that this once ‘perfect’ companion could not after all provide her most basic need - reciprocal love – offered an opportunity to deal with far deeper questions about need-want-love-loneliness, and I would have loved to be taken a layer or two deeper than I was. I would love to see this piece re-worked and re-staged, because I believe it deserves a longer season.

Thursday September 17, 2015 @ 9pm
Production: You’re Not Alone at The Abbey – Peacock Stage
Devised/Written/Performed by Kim Noble

This was an extraordinary work. It wowed audiences in the UK before coming here – and it divided audiences as well. Nobel uses multi-media [graphic imagery and footage are projected onto a large screen at the back of the stage and we see Noble in various states of undress], and audience interaction to explore matters of loneliness, relationships, love, sex, death and voyeurism. It’s both ugly and tender - revealing [via film screening] the slow decline of Nobel’s father from Alzheimers, exposing a range of men who have anonymously hooked up to have sex with Noble [believing him to be a woman], and Keith - a cashier checkout attendant - who Noble rewards with a range of false Awards – believing Keith to be un-championed in his job. Some of Noble’s theories about humanity are utterly perverse – but when he tests them out, it seems that some humans are indeed that perverse. So while this show had the audience laughing out loud, Noble provided a perfect balance of humour and pathos – leaving me with a number of powerful images and questions about the nature of human greed, isolation, sexual exploitation and the ugly sides of man’s nature.

The show ended when Kim Noble chose an audience member to leave the theatre with – on the back of a horse – as they go off into the Dublin night in search of a drink together. One review summed the show up thus: “The brave degree of self-exposure will stun, and even make some uncomfortable. But the search for companionship is undoubtedly epic. To stroll out into the night with a willing participant suggests new possibilities. Because to be anything more than strangers can take a miracle.”

After Noble’s departure with his potential new friend, the back screen flashes up with: “We’re born alone, we die alone, and in between we construct a thing called community.”

I loved this show. It’s not a style of theatre I could make myself, but it hit a powerful emotional note in me and I would love to have seen it twice - but it was fully booked out.

Friday September 18, 2015
Production: Sure Thing by Eric O’Brien and Jed Murray at Bewley’s @ The Powercourt

Another of the four ‘Show in a Bag’ offerings at Dublin Fringe Festival in collaboration with Fishamble, Sure Thing is a two-hander about the gambling industry, directed by Tracy Ryan and performed by Eric O’Brien and Jed Murray.

Synopsis: Set across a single day, two mates end up frequenting the betting agency. One of them is father to a young girl whose communion ceremony is today. His mate has never
gambled before, and in the womb of the betting agency, he’s drawn in by the excitement of horse racing. By the end of the day, the non-gambler is hooked and the young father has blown all his daughter’s confirmation money.

This show was fast-paced, bouncing around in time and location. I got a bit lost in both at times, but stayed with the emotional core of the play until the end.

Friday September 18, 2015
Production: Rebel Rebel by Aisling O’ Mara and Robbie O’ Connor at Bewley’s @ The Powercourt [evening]

Another Show in a Bag directed by Louise Lowe and featuring Aisling O’ Mara and Robbie O’ Connor, Rebel Rebel offers a snapshot of the 1916 Easter Rising through the eyes of two of its real-life participants, Sean Connolly and Helena Molony. The latter was an actor who gave up her career in The Abbey to fight with the Irish Citizen Army. Apparently when W.B. Yeats’ seminal play Cathleen Ni Houlihan was being produced at The Abbey, she abandoned the production to march to Dublin Castle. Rebel Rebel contains voice-overs from the actual play, and ends with Helena returning to the theatre at the end of the Rising. In-between, we see them holed up at the Post Office, being shot at and returning fire in the chaos of war and bloodshed.

There was a lot of action and multiple storylines in this one hour show – and it’d be terrific to see it developed into a full length play for the main stage.

Saturday September 19, 2015
Production: Beckett in the City: The Women Speak – by Company SJ
Directed by Sarah Jane Scaife

This is a series of short plays by Beckett, all featuring women as the main protagonist of the piece. Not I shows only a female mouth floating in space, delivering a fast-paced monologue about loneliness. Footfalls has a woman slowly pacing the floor and talking to her mother. Rockaby is an image of a woman looking out a window and slowly rocking while a pre-recorded voice talks of her life. The final play, Come and Go, has three women who repeat the same dialogue in a loop.

This was a site specific work held in the abandoned Coláiste Mhuire building on Parnell square. It’s massive, with wide staircases and high ceilings and wooden floors. The audience is led from spaces to space as each performance takes place in a different room.

This production was a hot one – hard to get a ticket for. And a great one for Beckett fans, as these monologues are not often performed.

Tuesday September 22,2015
Meeting: Jen Coppinger – independent producer

I met local independent producer Jen Coppinger for dinner. Jen is a bit of a human dynamo, with several shows on the go at once. She works with independent artists to get their work up and has toured acts to Australia and the UK. She toured Riverrun in Australia in 2015 [Adelaide and Sydney Festivals] so has quite a connection here.
Jen works as Producer for a number of artists and companies including Paul Curley, The Emergency Room, Hot For Theatre, Kellie Hughes, Shane O’Reilly, Emma Martin Dance, Seán Mac Erlaine, Raymond Scannell and Dylan Tighe. She has toured work extensively in Ireland and internationally working on partnerships, commissions and co-productions with Cusack Projects Limited, Dublin Dance Festival, Galway International Arts Festival, International Literature Festival Dublin, The Irish Traveller Movement and Poetry Ireland. Jen is also Project Manager for the Laureate for Irish Fiction (Anne Enright 2015-2018) for the Arts Council of Ireland and she sits on the boards of RADE (Recovery through Art, Drama and Education) and NAYD (the National Association of Youth Drama). She is the Independent Producer in Residence at Rough Magic and Manager of Rough Magic SEEDS Program.

Jen and I discussed a range of projects and possibilities – and while it’s too early yet to know which ones may come to fruition, I feel she’s a contact for life and that we will work together some day. Jen also connected me with lauded Irish actor Olwyn Fouere who I saw perform in Terminus in Sydney – she’s a formidable actor, and it was a treat to meet her!

I also connected Jen up with Sydney Festival Artistic Director Wesley Enoch.

**Thursday September 24, 2015**  
*Meeting: Jane Daley and Siobhan Bourke from the Irish Theatre Institute*  
[www.irishtheatreinstitute.com](http://www.irishtheatreinstitute.com)

Everyone in Dublin has spoken highly of the Irish Theatre Institute and this was certainly a terrific meeting. Jane and Siobhan are both very passionate, informed and informative women who drive the Theatre Institute and all its programs. ITI is a a resource organisation that supports and acknowledges the achievements and ambition of Irish theatre artists and companies across all aspects of theatre practice. ITI has pioneered networking, information provision and on-line research tools and has become a key resource organisation for the Irish theatre. ITI’s mission is to create opportunities abroad and strengthen resources at home for theatre artists, companies, venues and festivals.  

ITI promotes Irish theatre production companies, festivals, venues and theatre artists in an international and all-island context. Their objective is to create opportunities abroad and to strengthen resources at home and its key strands of activity fall into three areas:

- Information Provision, Support & Mentoring Services,
- Research, Online Projects & Publications
- International Networking, Promotion & Showcasing

The Irish Theatre Institute’s main artist development initiative is called *Six in the Attic* - which provides six theatre artists with space and practical resources to develop their work in a mentored environment. I got to look through the space – which is indeed an attic – and it was a lovely hub of activity. Playwrights get a desk, access to internet, phones, photocopying, scanners, heating[!] and a range of other industry advice and connections. I wanted to move in immediately!

Their networking event for emerging theatre makers presenting work is called Information Toolbox and is an ideal environment and essential networking opportunity for theatre makers to meet venue managers and festival presenters from Ireland and abroad.
Their online information tools include IRISHTHEATRE.ie which has comprehensive details on production companies, venues and arts centres, festivals, Arts officers, youth drama, education and training courses, and PLAYOGRAPHYIreland - a searchable database of all new writing in English and Irish by Irish writers professionally produced since 1901. There are currently over 3366 plays in the Playography and each play entry contains information on the writer, cast and creative crew credits as well as rights and publication details.

ITI organises an international networking event, the International Theatre Exchange (ITE) to coincide with the Dublin Theatre Festival, at which international presenters and producers engage in dialogue and project development with Irish producers. Many productive relationships have emerged from this event and a significant number of Irish companies and theatre artists have toured internationally as a direct result.

Saturday September 26, 2015
Conor McPherson ‘A Critical Interview’ at Project Arts Centre

Conor McPherson is one of Irelands top contemporary playwrights. When I first came across the work of Mark O’Rowe in 2012, I read all his plays – one of which led me to Conor McPherson’s plays, which I then read all of as well. Both playwrights have had a major influence on my developing voice, so it was great to see Conor speak in the flesh, as it were.

Conor spoke to his new play The Night Alive – which he both wrote and directed, and which has already had seasons in America and the UK. It’s about to have its Irish premiere as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. McPherson has a background in Philosophy – having studied this at Trinity College where he also immersed himself in student theatre, starting to write and direct his own plays. He spoke about his “deep search for meaning” during this study, and revealed that The Night Alive was guided by the philosophies of Nietzsche.

In terms of the play’s themes McPherson said: We are animals living under a veneer of reason. We have organized ourselves into societies. Our life is a construct. A dream. An illusion of meaning. But it gives us a sense of purpose, and lifts us from depression. This illusion of meaning is the locus of what we understand to be God. In response to a question about the presence of evil in his plays, McPherson says we don’t have to look very far to see it – also that we all have good and evil in us, and we all have the capacity to ‘hit the wall’ at some point. He believes we are “…all part of something amazing”.

McPherson prefers to write male than female characters he says, because men characters tend to ‘stuff everything up’, while women tend to sort things out. And for a play – for increased dramatic action – ‘stuff-ups’ make for better drama. He cited his play The Veil [five women and two men], saying there was something wrong with this play, of 5 women and 2 men. He believes that men’s needs are very obvious and just ‘there’. Women seem to be able to read situations much better.

On his own process:

- He writes in longhand.
- In his first draft he tells himself it’s not a play – it’s just ideas he’s writing down – he does this to take the pressure off.
- He writes in little chunks and tells himself it doesn’t have to be any good.
- He then comes in as ‘the editor’ and spends days in the office, sorting through the mess, making something of it.
- He’s done whole plays which he’s left behind. The ‘little fire’ is just not in them.
- You have to have a mad belief that there’s something there.
Conor McPherson in interview

He made other observations on craft, and writing in general:

- When you're straining at the end of your limitations, that's your voice.
- If you go beyond them, that's not your voice, and if you do it for other people that's not your voice either.
- Keep it moving, keep it going.
- Sebastian Barry say a play should take two weeks: one week for the first act and one week for the second
- The Night Alive took 8-9 months to write.
- A play should always be a question, not an answer – otherwise it’s just a statement.
- A play is successful if the audience “feels it, and gets it”. They don’t necessarily have to understand it. They should leave the play with the feeling: “Isn’t this what we all want?”
- Also, it should be a lot of fun
- Everything that the characters can’t say to each other – let them dance or sing it, instead
- The play is only half the work. You’re still at the bottom of the mountain when you’ve written the play. The top of the mountain is getting the play on stage.
Saturday September 26, 2015
Production: *The Night Alive* written and directed by Conor McPherson - at The Gaiety

*The Night Alive* was written in 2013 and has already had seasons in London and New York. This was its Irish premiere.

Synopsis: Set in a run-down bedsit in a crumbling Dublin house, middle-aged Tommy downstairs below his widowed uncle Maurice – who bought him up. Tommy has separated from his wife and children, and is a bit of a lost person – hopeless at looking after himself, yet burdened with the job of looking after the even more hopeless Doc; a homeless man with learning disabilities. Into the mix comes Aimee – bruised and bloodied – who Tommy has recently rescued from her violent boyfriend. As Tommy and Aimee navigate the awkward beginnings of some kind of co-dependency, Aimee’s psychotic boyfriend Kenneth appears – bent on harm and some kind of revenge.

The Night Alive deals with isolation and loneliness, homelessness, violence the search for meaning in life and the solace of community. There are acts of violence, acts of kindness and the overwhelming sense that each of us just has to carve our own clumsy way through this world, assisted at times by the community we manufacture.
Sunday September 27, 2015
Production: *At the Ford* by Gavin Kostick – at The New Theatre

Synopsis: Two brothers are locked in a room for three days, to ‘fight out’ the status of their family business. The fight is literal: physical and visceral. Blood and tub-thumping and rhythmic and numbing with its violence. One of the brothers ends up critically injured in hospital, while the other has to face a new battle: negotiating with their sister about rights, roles and responsibilities.

With more than a nod to Greek drama, this doesn’t end at all well – more blood is spilt and the family dynasty shattered.

This is Kostick and Rise Production’s third play in a trilogy, and while you wouldn’t call it a cheery little number, it was certainly complex, powerful and immediate.

Tuesday September 29, 2015
Production: *The Last Hotel* by Enda Walsh at OReilly Theatre

This is an opera featuring twelve musicians from Dublin’s Crash Ensemble.

Synopsis: A man and his wife arrive at an empty and run-down hotel, where they have pre-arranged to meet a woman who is paying them to help her kill herself. Her exact reason for this decision remains vague – and the couple is driven by their need for money, to extend their too-small house. A wandering Concierge [is he a ghost, or is he real in this world?] appears and serves drinks and dinner for this ‘Last Supper’. Then the hotel’s discotheque
fires up – and in-between vodka shots and erratic dancing, moods alter but the central decision doesn't change. The woman will be killed, and blood spilt within these walls.

It was great to see a contemporary opera, written and directed by one of Irelands premiere playwrights – Enda Walsh – and a disjointed, powerful score, brilliantly orchestrated.

**Wednesday September 30, 2015**  
**Meeting: Independent Director Tom Creed at The Fumbally**  

Named as: “one of Ireland’s most exciting new generation of theatre and opera directors”, Tom Creed and I have been ‘missing’ each other for a few weeks – he’s about the busiest man in the country, a freelance director constantly flying overseas [with current projects going in both the USA and Canada], or locked down in production somewhere in Dublin [he’s currently directing a show with students at The Lir].

He was absolutely fantastic to talk to, with a solid and length CV and a clear trajectory of work ahead of him. We debriefed the Fringe and Theatre Festival shows we’d both seen to date, and discussed a few Irish plays and playwrights. He then spoke about the style of work he likes to do, which at the moment is mostly opera.

Tom’s a dynamic and interesting man whose work is well worth following. Plus he’s a truly lovely person to boot!

**Thursday October 1, 2015**  
**Production: The Night Alive by Conor McPherson - at The Gaiety Take #2**

This was so good, I came back to see it again.  
Refer to Saturday September 26 for the plotline.
Friday October 2, 2015
Meeting: Mark O’Rowe - Lunch at the Woolen Mills

Another meeting with the extraordinary Mark O’Rowe talking all things theatre, writing, film and TV. Mark had read my play *Highway of Lost Hearts* and gave me detailed and very positive feedback to it [I hadn’t asked him to do this – it’s just the kind of generous soul he is]. And he had REALLY read it – referring to specific incidents in detail, drawing threads from it and pulling them together, and generally endorsing the play and its themes. It was an extraordinary thing.

He spoke in particular about the necessity to find the right teams – expanding on our previous conversation, and we chatted for two and a half hours about all things writing and craft related. The man is awesome. Plus a brilliant writer to boot.

Saturday October 3, 2015
Production: Chekov’s First Play at the Samuel Beckett Theatre by Dead Centre

Chekhov penned his first play [*Platonov*] when he was 19 years old. It was poorly received by critics and audiences alike, yet the themes of land, power and wealth were as dominant here as in his latter works. In this production, Dead Centre create a remix of Chekov’s First Play and twist it inside-out. The actors have radio microphones and the audience wears headphones. Then at the start of the play, director Bush Moukarzel comes onto the stage to explain that they had a trial run of this play at last year’s Festival and people weren’t really getting it, so they decided to add a director’s audio commentary to give an insight into the production. He speaks of Chekov’s ‘gun on the wall’ theory and brings out a gun. And then the fun begins – with Moukarzel whispering in your ear as he passes hilarious judgment on the script, the actors, the playwright – even his own direction. The headphones serve to isolate each audience member in their own ‘world’, as Chekov’s script gets left behind and the actors take over – each competing to tell the story of their own character.

The play becomes increasingly personal and intimate as the Chekovian disillusionment of the text gives way to the problems the actors face in their own lives. *Chekov’s First Play* highlights the pretence and absurdity attached with the imagined rules people apply to life-from the theatre itself to everything that happens “out there” in the real world.

An inspired production. Irreverent, topical and laugh out loud funny.

Sunday October 4, 2015
Production: Hot for Theatre - Luck Just Kissed You Hello, by Amy Conroy
Directed by Caitriona McLaughlin

Synopsis: A family drama set in a hospital room, three brothers wait while their father dies before their eyes. Except that one of the brothers was once a sister – and has recently chosen to become a man [changing his name from Laura to Mark]. And one of the brothers isn’t a real brother – he was taken in by the dying father when he was small. The third brother is gay; and the homophobic father is deeply despised by his two blood children for his acts of brutality in their upbringing. They wish him dead sooner, rather than later. The non-blood child is the only one who regards him with any sort of love. As the children listen to their father’s last breaths, they fight over who was loved and who was brutalised more, and who less. They piece together his eulogy with bitterness and some small fragments of empathy.
Much of the plotline for *Luck Just Kissed You Hello* is structured in the past – centred around a deeply submerged and painful childhood trauma. And the plotline that deals with the present means that Mark – once Laura – is listed as Ted’s next of kin in his Will; meaning that Mark must sign as Laura to receive any Estate coming to him.

Amy Conroy is something of a feature in Dublin theatre and this was a hotly anticipated production amongst local practitioners.

**Monday October 5, 2015**
**Meeting: Loughlin Deegan, Director at The Lir – the National Academy of Dramatic Art at Trinity College, Dublin**

Loughlin Deegan is the Director at The Lir, which is Ireland’s National Academy of Dramatic Art. While a separate entity in terms of staff status, all students who graduate from The Lir do so with a degree from Trinity College, Dublin and have student status at Trinity Library and access to all Trinity facilities.
The Lir offers Undergraduate courses including both a Diploma and Bachelor in Acting, and a Diploma in Stage Management and Technical Theatre, a range of Short Courses, and Masters in Fine Art specializing in Theatre Directing, Stage Design [including Lighting, Set and Costume Design] and a Master in Playwriting.

The Playwriting Masters [MFA] takes in between four to seven playwrights, with a mixture of Irish and international playwrights. Loughlin said they’re increasingly looking for working playwrights at early stages of a professional career – perhaps with one or two plays under their belt. All places are fee-paying, and they are hoping to work towards fee subsidies for Irish playwrights who can’t afford to study there. The year-long MFA can be taken part-time across two years, and includes modules of:

**Contemporary Theatre Practice** - enabling students to become conversant in the styles, forms, theories and practices that constitute contemporary theatre making in Ireland.

**Dramaturgy** - introducing students to a range of dramatic texts for the theatre or related media with an emphasis on the dramaturgical composition of those texts.

**Writing Workshop** - designed to prepare students for the writing of a play for performance. Students share their creative writing in a workshop format, and receive both group feedback and individual tuition in the development of their craft, and

**Play** - taught through individual supervision of the writing of a student's full-length play, the development of which is aided by professional actors and directors in the redrafting process and culminates in a rehearsed reading to an invited audience of theatre professionals which bridges the gap between training and industry.

...how to spot The Lir from a distance.
MFA students are expected to write a 40-minute play in their first semester, and a full length play by the end of the second semester. - See more at: http://www.thelir.ie/courses/view/master-in-fine-arts-playwriting

Interestingly, the first time the students hear each other’s work is at the end of first semester, when their 40-minute play is showcased. Loughlin says that the Head of Writing – Graham Whybrow – does this deliberately, to eliminate any competitive elements and to ensure that each playwright has had their individual voice nurtured – and has learned to trust it.

That’s a really interesting idea – and one which I might take into the 2016 script development program I’ll be running across the Northern Territory. While I believe that sharing work can be extremely helpful, for some writers that competitive element can intrude on the early stage processes in particular, so holding off on sharing the work is something I will apply at least to the first half of the process.

Tuesday October 6, 2015
Meeting: Kris Nelson, Artistic Director of the Dublin Tiger Fringe Festival

A very inspiring and informative meeting with Kris Nelson, who gave me an overview of the Dublin Fringe Festival, offered some suggestions for the touring of my own work through Ireland, and asked me about work and artists from the Northern Territory who might fit his programming and who he might be interested in bringing over to The Fringe. It was lovely to have such an open-minded and pro-active approach to new work, and a curiosity about the Northern Territory’s art and artists. Kris also told me about the MAKE Program – an initiative shared between Tiger Dublin Fringe, Project Arts Centre, Cork Midsummer Festival and the Irish Theatre Forum – and Kris suggested that I keep an eye out for a Northern Territory – or Australian - artist who might be a good fit with that in the future. We discussed a few potential names and I’ll alert them to the opportunity once it’s formally promoted in early November.

Dublin Fringe Festival: The Fringe showcases 50-60 world premieres annually, mostly driven by Irish creative, but there is also an International program which is curated. The companies are invited by Kris and guaranteed against loss by the Festival.

Kris works a lot on organizational partnerships to get International work to the Festival. He said he’s most interested in works that have a ‘Bite’ – that grab people. He’s also interested in ways of working that are new, or in works that echo Irish practice. He has a specific interest in Circus and Cabaret, and has a Spiegeltent which in 2015 featured Brisbane companies Scotch & Soda, and Company 2. He’s also interested in Aboriginal work from Australia.

In terms of local artists, Kris positions the Fringe as a ‘Development Centre’, which resources local arts and artists by alleviating the risks they have to take to develop work. The Fringe offices have two rehearsal spaces which are available to local artists all year round, for free – so that development towards the Fringe can take place across an extended time frame and not be rushed. The FRINGE LAB and The Cell create a range of ongoing opportunities for local artists to continue their development all year-round: http://www.fringefest.com/fringelab

Festival Overview: The festival is where artists challenge, subvert and invigorate their disciplines and practice. An active curator, Fringe supports artistic vision, ambition and excellence across a range of art forms and offers supports, resources, space, time and professional development to the Irish independent arts sector.
Tiger Dublin Fringe draws more than 33,000 spectators for 14 days each September and transforms Dublin into an exposé of great creative talent from around the globe. The scale and environment of the festival broadens arts participation, introducing artists and audiences and playing a pivotal role in the fabric of Dublin and Irish cultural life.

Tiger Dublin Fringe is a platform for the best new, emerging Irish arts companies and a showcase for the finest international contemporary performing arts. For artists, Fringe facilitates opportunities to innovate, to cross boundaries and strengthen the conditions in which they work. For audiences, Fringe is the place to discover meaningful, exciting and unforgettable cultural experiences.

Artists also access Fringe’s own in-house expertise across a wide range of disciplines, such as producing, marketing and publicity, with an ongoing schedule of workshops, masterclasses with Irish and international experts, networking events, scratch nights and a host of other activities devoted to cultivating connections and expertise.

http://www.fringefest.com/organisation/about

Tuesday October 6, 2015
Production: Rough Magic’s *The Train* by Arthur Riordan [book and lyrics] and Bill Whelan [music] at Project Arts Centre

Context: On a Saturday in May, 1971, a band of women representing the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement — among them Nell McCafferty, June Devine, and Mary Kenny — took off on a train to Belfast to purchase the pill, condoms, and other contraceptives that were then outlawed in the Republic of Ireland.

*The versatile set of The Train*
The women returned to Dublin that evening with their illegal swag in tow, daring the authorities to do something about it. It was a wonderfully subversive political stunt, one which exposed the hypocrisies and oppressive intrusions of a so-called ‘free state’ which operated beneath a cloak of restrictive Catholic mores.

Describing it as “one of the few successful rebellious gestures in Irish history”, playwright Arthur Riordan has turned this event into a satirical musical via a fictionalised re-imagining of the event. The play looks at contradictions and double standards in both Church and State in an Ireland bound firmly to Catholic doctrine, and highlights the fact that the original contraceptive train was an act of great rebellion driven by feminists of the day.

The Train was laugh-out-loud funny, with a well-deserved and raucous standing ovation on this Preview night. I would have booked to go again but it sold out very quickly – even with the extended season it had. Rough Magic do some incredible work, and are well respected across Ireland for their extremely high production standards and innovative theatre practice.

**Wednesday October 7, 2015**

**Meeting: Louise Lowe of ANU Theatre**

[https://anuproductions.wordpress.com/about/](https://anuproductions.wordpress.com/about/)

Louise Lowe is a producer and director with her company ANU. I’ve seen two of her directed shows so far: PALs and Rebel Rebel. She creates a lot of site specific and immersive works, and ANU has won numerous awards for their work.

ANU has become renowned for exploring historical events – reimagining them and bringing them alive in the present. With 14 full scale productions since 2009 and a swag of awards, nominations and commissions, Louise spends a lot of her time overseas creating work – so I was lucky to be able to catch her between trips to the UK and her Dublin Fringe Festival rehearsal schedules.

Louise spoke at length about her way of working and also the stresses of having to produce as well as direct. I totally empathised with this, and we compared the challenges of having to write constant grant applications, live and work within uncertain financial parameters, and preserving the creative energy to infuse into the work – and also to keep staying positive in what are often challenging arts environments.

I really enjoyed this time with Louise. She’s extremely passionate and focused on the work, and very hard working while remaining grounded and pragmatic about the industry. I can see why ANU has come so far, so quickly – with an international reputation for work of excellence. She’s only one of the ANU team, but she’s clearly a fierce driver of work and ongoing energy.

**Thursday October 8, 2015 @ 3pm**

**Panel: Found in Translation, Dublin Theatre Festival @ Project Arts Centre**

Presented in association with the [Stewart Parker Trust](https://stewartparkertrust.org/), this panel discussion brought together translators Joanna Derkaczew and Christine Madden, playwright Eugene O’Brien and Chair Tanya Dean to discuss the process of adapting plays from other languages, and the challenges of keeping meaning, metaphor and humour intact.
I particularly loved hearing Eugene O’Brien speak to this topic from a playwright’s perspective, as he’s travelled internationally to see his plays in German, Swiss and a host of other languages. The most fascinating thing for me was his observation re: humour, and how some countries have a very different perspective on irony, comedy or humour to what the Irish have. Therefore, he’d be sitting in the audience in Germany during a scene of his which – in Dublin – received massive laughs, whereas the audience in Germany is totally straight-faced. Because Eugene doesn’t speak German, he’s then not sure if it’s the translation which has adjusted the humour, or if the subject matter just isn’t funny in this country, or if he’s written something entirely inappropriate to the culture here. The question of what gets lost in translation - and how – was fascinating, and I found Eugene’s experience and anecdotes to be both hilarious and cringe-worthy.

I spoke briefly to both translators - Joanna Derkaczew and Christine Madden – after the session, to ascertain if there were any potential connections between their work and the work of NT / Australian playwrights, but they tend to get approached by agents and companies who outsource work to them – so there probably isn’t an opportunity for playwrights to connect with them directly in terms of them initiating adaptations with international theatre companies.

Thursday October 8, 2015 @ 8pm
Production: Shibboleth by Stacey Gregg at The Abbey Peacock Stage
Directed by Hamish Pirie.

A play dealing with the building of Peace Walls in Belfast, Shibboleth focuses around the interactions of members of a construction crew and their immediate family members, as they build a wall.

Described by one character as “...a big 12-foot-high wall between Themens and Usens, to keep the peace,” the peace lines or peace walls are a series of border barriers in Northern Ireland that separate Irish nationalist [mostly Catholic] and unionist [mostly Protestant] neighbourhoods. Built at urban interface areas in Belfast, Derry and Portadown, the peace lines range from a few hundred metres to over five kilometres long, and can be up to seven metres high. Some have gates in them (sometimes staffed by police) that allow passage during daylight, but are closed at night.

http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/vow-to-remove-peace-walls-by-2023-29254818.html
Stacey Gregg’s play points out that while these walls are built to separate people and reduce conflict, they also keep people in – and as such can have an imprisoning effect as well. *Shibboleth* was commissioned by The Abbey seven years ago and has its premiere this year as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival.

**Friday October 9, 2015 @ 7.30pm**  
**Production: Oedipus by Sophocles at The Abbey Theatre, directed by Wayne Jordan**

This was a spectacular production, set in a contemporary village with a 12-strong chorus [music composed by Tom Lane] who played the village characters, narrating and commenting on the action of the play and reinforcing one of Wayne Jordan’s thematic choices – that it’s not just the Kings [or leaders] who are responsible for societal collapse: we all have a part to play, and a share in the associated repercussions.

Oedipus shuffles onstage limping - flagging the damage to his foot which will ultimately be the final link in his realization that the prophecy delivered by Teiresias has come true.

The city of Thebes has a curse on it, and as Jocasta – Oedipus’ wife – urges him not to look into the past but to the future to lift this curse, Oedipus can’t help delving deeper and deeper into the past, resulting in the horrific discovery that Jocasta is in fact Oedipus’s mother and that Laius [who Oedipus has killed] was his father. Horrified at what has happened, she kills herself. Oedipus gouges out his own eyes, and is exiled from Thebes.

The only props in this play were a series of chairs, which represented the community of villagers and also suggested status changes at certain points.

A stunning and very moving production of this classic work.

**Saturday October 10, 2015 @ 2.30pm**  
**Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel @ The Gaiety**  
**Directed by Annabelle Comyn**
Set in County Donegal in 1936 during the Celtic harvest festival of Lughnasa, *Dancing at Lughnasa* tells the story of the five Mundy sisters and their brother, Father Jack, who has returned home after 25 years away on missionary duties. The story is narrated by the sisters’ nephew Michael, who recalls the summer he spent with his aunts when he was seven,

Seeing this wonderful play this week was particularly poignant due to playwright Brian Friel’s last week, on October 2 this year. He’s been a massive contributor to Ireland’s playwriting canon and is both loved and respected across this country.

**Saturday October 10, 2015 @ 7.30pm**
**Production: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time** at Bord Gais Energy Theatre
Adapted by Simon Stephens, Directed by Marianne Elliott

![The dead dog, which opens the narrative of the play.](image)
Adapted from Mark Haddon’s glorious novel, this National Theatre of Great Britain touring production captures the spirit of Mark Haddon's high-energy novel in a fabulous adaptation combining physical performance, visual graphics to convey the protagonist's mathematical calculations and powerful lighting choices which create the chaos of his uncertainty. The set is pared back to a black box lined in a grid, with things that appear from drawers in the walls in a highly innovative and functional design.

Particularly interesting was the choice of a ‘floating narrative voice’ – three characters spoke for the inner voice of the protagonist Christopher – a boy who struggles to communicate with those around him, although he’s brilliant at Maths. Variously his father, his school counselor and his mother spoke what he thought – it was a brilliant way to deal with the sometimes tricky role of a ‘narrator’, which can get predictable – but was far from it, in this production.

This play version of the award-winning Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time has won numerous awards and held sold-out seasons for many years. Stephens has kept true to the strong emotional core of the story and there are some very funny as well as highly moving scenes. I LOVE this book, and felt the play did it justice.

Monday October 12, 2015 @ 9am  
Interview with Michael Cathcart Books and Arts Daily  
With Gavin Kostick [Fishamble] and Cian O’Brien [Project Arts Centre]

In June this year my play Highway of Lost Hearts was adapted to a four-part radio series for Radio National’s program, RadioTonic. While recording this at ABC in Melbourne I chatted with Michael Cathcart – presenter of Books and Arts Daily - who asked me to let him know of any Irish companies which were doing good things. Both Project Arts Centre and Fishamble have been prominent in the fact that they use their core funding to support independent artists to develop new work.

Left to right: Cian O'Brien [Project Arts Centre], Mary Anne Butler, Gavin Kostick [Fishamble]
Coincidentally, two of my Australian friends who visited me in Dublin are radio producers. Michael Shirreffs and Lyn Gallacher organized a link-up with the national Irish studios at RTE2. Gavin Kostick [Fishamble] and Cian O’Brien [Project Arts Centre] and I went into the RTE2 studios to pre-record a show with Michael Cathcart. It was great to be able to help profile some of the Irish companies doing good things, and the Winston Churchill Fellowship as well as the Australia Council for the Arts got mentioned as supporting my visit to Ireland.


**Wednesday October 21, 2015 @ 10.30**
**Meeting: Jesse Weaver – Literary Manager at The Abbey Theatre**

Following The Abbey’s September 10 Masterclass, Jesse Weaver asked me to send him one of my plays. I sent him *Broken*, and on October 15 he emailed me asking if I could meet him to talk about the play – so today we met to discuss it. Jesse stated from the outset what I already knew; that The Abbey don’t produce work from non-Irish playwrights. But he was nevertheless extremely positive about *Broken*, and gave me his considered thoughts to the work - which were extremely astute.

He said he wanted to do something for the play despite The Abbey’s inability to program it, and asked me if I would let him send it to a US company he’s associated with which does all new work, and which he felt would be a good fit. His advocacy is hugely appreciated – and hopefully will open up an extended conversation with a new company in a new country, which could potentially be another avenue for the international production of new Northern Territory works, down the track.

I’m extremely grateful to Jesse for his generosity, his considered thoughts to the work, and his strategic advocacy for *Broken*. He’s just started as Literary Manager at The Abbey, and I think he’s going to be amazing in this role.

**Friday October 23, 2015 @ 3pm**
**Meeting: Jim Culleton, Artistic Director of Fishamble – the New Play Company**

So today I finally got to meet the amazing Jim Culleton, who as AD of Fishamble is also a massive advocate for new Irish plays and playwrights. Fishamble is mentioned already in this report, in terms of the diverse programs and opportunities they provide for the development of new plays and playwrights. Jim also has a connection with Australia already – having come out for the Australian Theatre Forum in January this year [2015]. He introduced ATF participants to the Tiny Plays for Ireland model – which Jim Lawson of Vessel theatre in South Gippsland has picked up to run his own version called Play for Australia.

Jim spoke at length about the development of Irish theatre, about their growing program and about his interest in Australia. Fishamble are bringing two shows to the Adelaide Fringe in 2016 – *Underneath*, by Pat Kinevane and *Little Thing Big Thing* by Donal Kelly, plus they’re touring *Swing* with Merrigong Theatre. He gave me a heap of plays by Irish playwrights to take home with me, and also connected me to Jim Lawson – Artistic Director of Vessel, above. Fishamble have a huge legacy here.
Monday October 26, 2015 @ 1.30pm  
Meeting: Marty Rae, New Writing Associate at Druid Theatre, Galway

Druid Theatre Company was established in 1975 by three graduates from Galway’s National University of Ireland - Garry Hynes, Mick Lally and Marie Mullen. It’s the first professional theatre company in Ireland to be based outside Dublin. “Touring the length and breadth of Ireland is an essential part of the company’s mission and Druid passionately believes that audiences have a right to see first class professional theatre without having to travel long distances outside their own communities.” [http://druid.ie/]

Druid is a “…writers’ theatre with a track record for premiering new plays of international stature,” committed to producing those plays “…that are vital and challenging for the contemporary theatre.” They accept plays in the English language from Irish, UK and “other European or Europe-based writers.”

Marty Rae is Druid’s “New Writing Associate”. I first saw Marty when he performed as Richard III in the DruidShakespeare at Kilkenny Castle in August. He was remarkable. I have never been so riveted by an actor on stage before. Every choice he made broke with any cliché I may have had re: Kings, Shakespeare, characters who wield power. His reputation as an actor is as one of the best in Ireland – and deservedly so - so when I found out he was also the New Writing Associate at Druid Theatre Company, I was delighted because I would hopefully get to meet him face-to-face in this capacity, and be able to tell him how terrific he was in the DruidShakespeare.

We had a great session today, where I learned a lot about Irish new [and young] writers, and we discussed script development and dramaturgy at some length. What was nice about this session was that Marty quizzed me on what I felt worked with young and emerging writers – so I felt like I was giving something back.

I also learned a lot about how DruidShakespeare was written – the philosophy behind the adaptation of the four History plays - and this was fascinating. Marty contextualized the separation of the Irish State and how Ireland still on some levels seemed to feel beholden to the UK – and that Shakespeare could be viewed by Irish audiences as being part of the British institution [although he pointed out that of course Shakespeare is universal]. Druid’s previous cycle is DruidMurphy – three of Irish playwright Tom Murphy’s plays - so Druid Theatre’s choice to do Shakespeare rather than plays written by Irish playwrights was interesting in itself.

Marty spoke also about Druid Theatre being at a point where they were seeking audience responses to the question: What do you want to see on your stages – and this was raised at the recent Culture Night, with the general response that audiences wanted to be faced with – and challenged by – new and contemporary work. Druid’s website states: “At the heart of everything we do is our audience. Our goal is to create electrifying theatre experiences for every person, in every place and every time we perform.” – and that certainly was my experience, witnessing their work on stage.
Tuesday October 27, 2015 @ 2pm
Meeting: Lynne Parker and Maureen White of Rough Magic Theatre Company

A terrific meeting. Lynne had taken the time to read my plays *Highway of Lost Hearts* and *Broken*, and was overwhelmingly positive about both of them. We all spoke for an hour or so about their work and my work and where and how they might meet, so now we’re hoping to realize that at some point down the track. It was terrific for me to have my work affirmed by a director and a dramaturg of this caliber, and felt both humbling and exciting. I was hoping to introduce them to both Sydney Festival and Perth Festival, but I haven’t had responses back from those quarters – but I will connect them with the Darwin Festival. Their work really is excellent, and I genuinely hope that it will come out to Australia sooner rather than later.

This was my last meeting in Ireland – and a brilliant note to end these three months of Fellowship on.
Conclusions and recommendations:

It’s hard to concretise much of what I gained through these three months of total immersion in Irish theatre, language and culture. When I talk to people about it, the terms I consistently find myself using are words like ‘affirmation’, ‘confidence’, ‘increased courage’ for my own writing journey. These things are hard to measure. I can and will also point to specific craft tools I gained – many of which I can pass on to my NT peers – but the really remarkable shift in me has been an absolute grounded-ness and affirmation of my past playwriting choices and my planned future journey.

An overwhelming positive for me was to see how these Irish companies collaborate so well. There are genuine partnerships which serve to take the work from concept, to page to stage - and for this outsider, there was a strong sense that the play is the thing to be served. So many of the companies talk to each other well, playing different roles; each company doing their bit to complete the jigsaw in the different stages of making a play whole, and alive for an audience.

Playwriting tools which can’t be measured but can be cultivated:

The primary ‘gifts’ I received from this Fellowship were those of greater strength, solidity, resilience, courage and confidence in my own playwriting journey. This came time and again from the overwhelmingly positive responses to my work, and from a vast range of individuals and companies. Sometimes in Australia I feel like an outsider. Working from a regional base, I don’t get to bump into people in foyers to chat about the work - or casually meet for coffee, where a lot of projects are seeded and nurtured. I feel like I have to do a lot of persistent knocking on doors and sometimes that just gets exhausting and too hard. I feel at times like my work doesn’t have a solid place, or isn’t recognized in terms of the national canon. Having said that, I committed to writing professionally late in life [in 2008], and I only have two plays under my belt. However, in Ireland I felt there was a respect for these two plays that absolutely consolidated my path forward and cemented in me a renewed commitment to my craft. A concrete comparison to this experience: I once flew from Darwin to a major interstate city at my own expense, for a meeting with a theatre company in order to discuss a specific play. It became apparent within the first ten minutes that the particular person I had come to meet hadn’t actually taken the time to read my work. While I was shocked by this, it also served to knock my confidence and I took it as a lesson that my work wasn’t worth reading. I just don’t think that a writer or their work would be treated that way in Ireland. It certainly wasn’t the case with me. I was an unknown and an outsider – yet the respect for the work and the playwright was paramount. Perhaps this is a reflection of that country’s history of, and commitment to literature. Whatever it is founded in, the respect afforded my work across the board gave me a massive confidence boost.

My initial instinct to go to Ireland was based on reading the contemporary Irish canon, and I had absolute affirmation that what I’m working with in my own practice holds its own with work being produced over there. And that feels just incredible.

Playwriting tools which can be measured or cultivated:

Seeing 25 shows expanded my playwriting tools and vernacular immensely. On stage I saw amongst other things: an Angel of Death, a woman bringing her dead husband back to life in order to have an argument with him, and a slow-motion sex scene rendered with falling balloons which was so bizarre and hilarious that the show had to stop so that the audience could finish laughing.
While some of these may seem obvious - for my own work and for those I work with in a teaching, mentoring or dramaturgical capacity:

- Resilience, persistence and courage are my base line tools – so work harder to cultivate these
- Assume my audience is smarter than me, so risk under-writing rather than over-writing
- Pare each play, each scene back to its very essence of language, character, plot etc.
- Many issues in plays can be addressed with making alternate structural choices. Structure is key
- Don’t put a play on before it’s fully cooked
- Don’t be bound by reality in my conceit, conception or realization of the worlds of choice available to me
- Anticipate completing between 5 - 15 substantial drafts before the work may find its feet
- Plays can take a decade or more to write. Let the work have the time it needs
- Pick your collaborators carefully
- Find an overriding metaphor to write to, which frames the play

**Application to my teaching and dramaturgical roles:**

Everything I learned while on Fellowship will be applied to my teaching and dramaturgical work back in my Northern Territory community. The above tools will form the bedrock for the extended Script Development program I’ll be running via Browns Mart Theatre, as part of my 2016 Regional Arts Fellowship. I’ve also been asked to mentor four young writers in 2016 - and in particular the resilience, persistence and courage lessons will be an inherent element of each session. Additionally, I’ve been asked to run two fiction writing courses ‘Story in Six Weeks’ [a repeat of a successful model I ran in 2014], and everything I learned through playwriting can and will be translated to fiction writing.

**Work produced while on Fellowship:**

While on Fellowship I completed two drafts of a new play [Things You Can’t Walk Away From], and a draft of a novel [an adaptation of my play Highway of Lost Hearts]. The meetings with companies and the viewing of so much great theatre sent me back to my own work day after day – inspiration which I am still holding inside me, and applying it to my work. In particular, my sessions with Mark O’Rowe were incredibly inspiring, and affirmed that playwriting is principally hard work, so best just knuckle down and do it.

**Extended and ongoing networks:**

Ireland was an opportunity to forge many links; most of which are ongoing. Many of these I have already been able to field out to my networks back home, for example:

- In Dublin I was alerted to MAKE – a week-long residential opportunity driven by the Dublin Fringe Festival. The Fringe Artistic Director said he’d love to see some applications from Australia. I alerted one particular NT performer to this – as he’s perfectly suited for it – and he subsequently applied to the initiative
- I have introduced two Irish companies to the Artistic Director of the Darwin Festival, with a view towards collaborations
- I got an email from someone in Australia who had heard the Radio National interview we recorded re: Irish Theatre. He emailed the Irish company which featured in this interview, in order to get my contact details from them, thence to email me to talk about a potential
collaborative playwriting project between a South Gippsland company [Vessel] and Darwin playwrights

- I linked independent producer Jen Coppinger up with Sydney Festival Director Wesley Enoch to discuss potential projects
- While in Dublin there was a massive protest against the lack of female voices represented in The Abbey’s 2016 season. I posted a link to this this on Facebook, which was picked up by a national Arts writer in Sydney who then used it as a parallel between the Irish debate and the current Australian debate revolving around the same issue

The connections continue to ricochet, and I believe this will continue for the rest of my playwriting life.

Conclusions:

- Resilience, persistence and courage are three of the playwrights’ greatest tools. These can be cultivated and developed like any other craft tool.

- Having seen such a vast and varied selection of plays from Ireland as well as the UK, I got a renewed sense that anything is possible on stage. The ‘Once Upon a Time’ of any story can be told simply and powerfully, providing the story bones themselves are aligned. The lesson for both my own practice and my teaching in regards to this, it is to not limit the imagination with practical considerations. Give the imagination free reign.

- Playwriting is hard work, so best just knuckle down and keep going, keep going: re-write and re-write until the work is the best it can possibly be.

- Script development is a long and varied process, there is no one way to work with playwrights - so flexibility is the key.

- Ireland has what seems to me to be a very generous, focused and collaborative set of processes in hand, which serve the play first and foremost.

- Irish companies are very keen to collaborate with Australian companies and Festivals for the two-way sharing of work. The Dublin Festival and Fringe Festival are also both interested in investing in Australian work.

- The pursuit of excellence is the bottom line in any work. This is what will ultimately get a play from page to stage, and hopefully beyond [to other stages, adaptations etc].

- Picking your working partners and collaborators carefully is paramount to the healthy development of the work, and to the positive growth of a playwright. Some people just don’t mix, so best to work that out thoroughly before embarking on a collaboration. That sounds obvious, but often these partnerships are orchestrated by a theatre company or by reputation alone.

Dissemination in Australia:

As above re: Application to my teaching and dramaturgical roles and Extended and ongoing networks:
I will disseminate the information further via a five-month script development program, running from February to June 2016.

The purpose of this program is to develop eight existing first draft plays to third or fourth draft, with a view towards production either locally or interstate. The program involves fortnightly masterclasses, prescribed readings and one-on-one script dramaturgy. It culminates in the live rehearsed reading of all scripts before a selected audience of potential buyers of these works, including Darwin Festival, Araluen Arts Centre, interstate literary managers and Artistic Directors and local theatre/touring organisations.

Run through Browns Mart Theatre, this program is funded by a Regional Arts Fellowship. All I learned while on Fellowship in Ireland will be applied across these five months in the Northern Territory, and where plays are suitable for consideration by the few Irish companies which accept work from outside Ireland, I will utilize my networks to field these scripts out to those relevant companies.

I posted the project as a whole - and my word in particular - onto Facebook amongst my Indigenous and non-Indigenous contacts who work in language maintenance back home. It's had a heap of responses, including some who are going to create a similar project in their communities, and/or with their students. So this flighty woman is doing her job to keep not only fuaidrimín alive and in the global community, but also spreading the concept as broadly as possible for our own endangered languages.

- **What could you** do to bring about improvements in Australia?

As above. I will use what I have learnt to maximize opportunities for my Northern Territory playwriting peers and writing students across 2016, and beyond.

- **What other improvements** should be made in Australia?

I think the spirit of serving the play first is a principle which wider Australia could adopt to a greater level. This was so strikingly the case in Ireland – that the play comes first – it made me realize that plays in Australia sometimes suffer from being beholden to multiple agendas: political, personal, practical, creative. Talking to Irish companies about their processes of working with playwrights, to playwrights about their experiences working with companies, and seeing work both in rehearsal and in production, there was a sense that for the most part [and there is one major exception to this in that country], agendas were left at the door of the rehearsal room to focus on the story at hand. I think Australian theatre practice could borrow from that, to the benefit of stronger stories, powerfully told.

I also feel sometimes that broader Australian theatre binds itself by narrow geographical boundaries, and – with a small bit of effort - could cultivate a richer theatrical voice more representative of the whole of Australia. A concrete example:

In 2014, a writing Agent – Sophie Hamley – came to Darwin to meet with 15 writers who had sent her 15 pages of their work in advance. This was an initiative driven by the Northern Territory Writers’ Centre. As a consequence of those meetings, Sophie found three writers / works which she chose to nurture and develop towards publication. A year later, Sophie took on a new job as editor at a major publication house – Hatchett Australia. She then proceeded to publish those three works. In addition, she’d been so impressed with the overall standard of manuscripts in 2014 that she offered a new mentoring initiative to Northern territory writers, from
which she selected a further three writers and works to develop with a view to publication. She was also impressed with the diversity of stories coming from the NT. So for a relatively small investment, in the space of two years, she has secured six new writers / works.

In Ireland I got the sense that many of the companies actively seek practitioners from outside their geographical sphere, to broaden their own programming options and networks, and to ensure that work remains fresh and varied, and reflective of the nation as a whole.

My experience has mostly been that there is a considered lack of interest in regional theatre across the board - including Northern Territory theatre. That includes stories from this region. The city-centric nature of Australia’s theatre programming often means that stories of regional and remote experience are out of reach of most urban audiences – and I find this a shame, because these stories form a vital part of our history and culture. I think East Coast theatre practice is the poorer for this, and – as Sophie Hamley proved – it’s not that hard or costly to source strong and different stories to then support and develop for broader Australian audiences. It just entails looking a bit outside your own sphere towards regional Australia and investing a bit towards those unique voices and stories.

Additionally, Ireland has a strong policy of programming work from Irish writers. Many companies will only program Irish work, a few may take in work from the UK or Europe – but principally there is a commitment to growing and supporting the Irish canon.

Over 50% of 2016 theatre programming across Australia’s ten major theatre companies comes from OUTSIDE Australia*. As a country it seems we still look outwards more often than not, towards plays from other countries. I find this a strange choice, particularly in 2016 when we should well and truly have come into our own as a theatre community. I believe we have a myriad of powerful stories and terrific playwrights with the capacity to tell those stories well, and I believe the top ten companies could do more to both celebrate and support local work, because it’s well and truly worthy of it. Purely on an economic basis it makes sense to make choices which enable playwrights to make a living from their craft. Every play produced offers the playwright 10% of Box Office, which can sustain a playwright through their next work. I feel we could learn a lot from Ireland in terms of the representation of Australian voices on stage – particularly in terms of the programming choices which our major theatre companies have the power make.

On a purely practical note: Gavin Kostick spoke about The Pavilion, a theatre and cinema venue which puts one Euro on top of every ticket sold and donates this to a fund supporting local artists. This strikes me as a great idea which we could adopt across Australian venues and companies.

[* Taken from The National Voice – the Australian Writers' Guild Playwrights' Committee scoping paper, 2016].