

# The Limerick Theatre Hub 2009

## EVALUATION REPORT



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## INTRODUCTION

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The *Limerick Theatre Hub (LTH)* was a professional theatre initiative that took place in Limerick City in 2009. It came about as a result of a group of practitioners applying through the *Belltable Arts Centre* to the Arts Council's 'Projects: Once Off Awards', which resulted in a funding grant of €86,000 being awarded. With this money, four professional productions were produced and each ran for two weeks in the city.

This evaluation report was commissioned by the *LTH* in order to reflect on the unique way in which it went about making professional theatre. The report will focus explicitly on the model of production; i.e. the 'hub' concept. It will attempt to illuminate, in an open and frank manner, both its strengths and difficulties. It will focus on the experience of key stakeholders and their experiences of working in, through and with the *LTH*. These key stakeholders include all the theatre artists who have worked on *LTH* funded productions, theatre artists who are a part of *LTH* but were not funded by the *LTH* on this occasion, and personnel from the key cultural institutions involved in the *LTH*, namely, the *Belltable Arts Centre* and Limerick City Council.

It is not envisaged that any evaluative comment will be passed with regard to the artistic success or lack thereof of the four productions that formed a part of the inaugural *LTH* Elements season. The evaluation of the efficacy of theatre productions is the privilege of audiences and critics solely. However, aspects of the production that are pertinent to the model of production (e.g. rehearsal processes, budgets, shared expertise, etc.) will form a part of the final evaluative comments.

In summary, this evaluation has a formative intent – it is written not with a view to forensically examine past productions, but with a view to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a 'hub' model of production, and constructing understandings which can be brought into the future. The critical touchstone for the evaluation of the *LTH* project will be extent to which it has managed to fulfil its own expectations, captured in the agreed mission statement and objectives of the *LTH*.

Finally, it should be noted that as with many aspects of the *LTH's* operation, funding was not available to facilitate the commission of an evaluation. In the same spirit as much other work on the *Elements* season, this evaluation is being carried out on a *pro bono* basis. As a result of this, it does not strive for the depth of analysis that might have been possible in other situations. .

My thanks are due to all the stakeholders of the *Limerick Theatre Hub*, who gave so graciously of their time to facilitate me in the completion of this work.

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4<sup>th</sup> May 2010

## ORIGINS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE LIMERICK THEATRE HUB

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The first meeting of the nascent *Limerick Theatre Hub (LTH)* was held at the *Belltable Arts Centre* on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2008. Convened by the Artistic Director of that organisation, Joanne Beirne, the meeting sought to bring together a range of experienced theatre practitioners and administrators based in the city environs. The overt function of the gathering was to explore the future for funded professional theatre in Limerick, particularly given the then ongoing and seemingly terminal decline of the *Island Theatre Company*. *Island* at that time was entering into its twentieth year of existence, and for many of those years was the sole Arts Council funded professional theatre company based in the city. No funding was granted to the company in 2008, an event that forced the theatre artists and administrators within the city to engage in a process of seeking alternative mechanisms to fund locally produced professional theatre.

Limerick city has a population of 52, 539 with another 34, 197 living in the suburbs<sup>1</sup>. It is the third-largest city in the Republic of Ireland and is home to a professional orchestra (*The Irish Chamber Orchestra*) and dance company (*Daghdha Dance Company*), as well as several distinguished visual art organisations (*The Limerick City Gallery of Art, The Hunt Museum & the EV+A Festival*). The city hosts numerous arts festivals and events, amongst them *The Cuisle Poetry Festival, The Kate O'Brien Weekend, UnFringed & Culture Night*. The greater city region houses four third level campuses (*University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology, Mary Immaculate College & Limerick College of Art and Design*) and has an international airport (Shannon) on its doorstep. The city has a number of dedicated performing arts venues including; the *University Concert Hall, the Millennium Theatre* and the *Daghdha space* at St John's Church. New performance facilities are currently being constructed at *Mary Immaculate College* (500-seat auditorium) as well as in the new building for the *Irish World Music Academy* at the *University of Limerick*.

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<sup>1</sup> [Online] <http://www.limerick.ie/Visit/> (Accessed 5 March 2010)

Theatre in Limerick, as with many Irish cities, has a chequered and varied history through the centuries. It is a history that remains largely unwritten and untold. Fletcher (2000) charts a rich tradition of pageantry and civic performance in the city during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, much of it taking the form political commentary. Morash describes Limerick as part of a southern circuit tour undertaken by the Smock Alley and Angier Street companies as early c. 1740 (2002, p. 45). He goes on to note the establishment of a *Theatre Royal* in Lower Mallow St. in 1841, and indeed much of the oral history of performance in the city surrounds places such as the *Theatre Royal/Limerick Athenaeum* on Upper Cecil St. and *The Savoy Theatre* on Henry St., both venues now sadly lost to the city.

The venue most closely aligned with the contemporary theatrical life of Limerick is undoubtedly the *Belltable Arts Centre*. The *Belltable* was established and opened in April 1981 by a group of local artists as the first regional arts centre in the country. Based in an adapted Georgian building at 69 O'Connell Street, it quickly established itself as a touring venue for the leading theatre companies wishing to establish themselves outside their Dublin bases.

The BELLTABLE ARTS CENTRE, which opened in Limerick in April 1981, is the first arts centre in the Mid-West region and has revived in Limerick a tradition of theatre for which the city has long been noted. The Belltable comprises a 314 seat theatre, an exhibition area, a wine-bar and in the basement a small performance area and coffee-bar. Since the new theatre opened all the major Irish companies have played in Limerick, including the Abbey, the Irish Theatre Company, Field-Day, Druid, Focus and the Cork Theatre Company. Productions which have particularly impressed during the first year include the Abbey Theatre's production of Brian Friel's 'Faith Healer', which opened the Belltable; the Irish Theatre Company's production of Thomas Kilroy's version of 'The Seagull' and their lunch-time production of Tom Stoppard's 'Cahoots Macbeth' and the Actors Touring Company from England's production of 'The Winter's Tale'. The administrator of the Belltable is Brid Dukes and her policy of presenting quality theatre embracing both classical and popular forms of drama, with a new production opening each week, has seen the theatre reach a break-

even point financially in its first year, achieving an average seat occupancy of 38%. (O'Donnell, 1982, p. 41)

The Belltable now sees itself as ‘a space for arts development, excellent arts provision and social engagement in Limerick and beyond’<sup>2</sup>, and it remains the only funded centre in the Greater Limerick region, with *Glór* in Ennis, the *Excel* Centre in Tipperary and *Siamsa Tíre* in Tralee its closest neighbours. In recent years, and with the plethora of larger, purpose-built touring venues available to companies, it is clear the *Belltable* has suffered as a receiving house. At the time of writing the performance activities of the centre are located off-site at 36 Cecil Street while the main house is undergoing extensive renovation, which will result in a flexible and modern 220-seat space. This work is due to be finished in Autumn 2010, and it is to be hoped that it will give the *Belltable* a new lease of life.

Closely aligned with the history of the *Belltable* is that of *Island Theatre Co.*, which was established in 1988, and successfully produced work predominantly in the *Belltable* (but also in other venues and for touring), until the organisation lost its funding and folded in 2008. As noted previously, from the outset of the *LTH* project, it was suspected that no theatre company in Limerick was going to be in a position to immediately emulate *Island Theatre Co.* as a funded organisation. Several groups had begun to emerge in the years previous, but none had received Arts Council funding, and only one company with professional aspirations was longer than five years in existence at that point. This clearly left a gap in the provision of professional theatre in the city, and a hole in the annual programming of the *Belltable*.

What proved to be the initial *LTH* meeting was convened by Joanne Beirne to explore the possibility of a collective application for funding for theatre productions under the Arts Council *Projects: Once-Off* scheme<sup>3</sup>. From the interest generated by the initial two general meetings (May 12<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> 2010), matters proceeded rapidly to the point that expressions of interest were sought from practitioners/companies within the informal

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<sup>2</sup> Belltable Arts Centre Mission Statement

<sup>3</sup> This Arts Councils funding scheme has been replaced in 2010 with the nearest equivalent being the Theatre Projects Award. The maximum award possible under *Projects: Once Off* was €100,000



grouping, and by June 5<sup>th</sup>, seven initial proposals had been received with a view to forming the basis of a submission.

Fully developed proposals were received on June 9<sup>th</sup>. A selection panel of three independent<sup>4</sup> members of the group (Joanne Beirne, Monica Spencer, Michael Finneran) met on June 16<sup>th</sup> to examine the submissions with a view to forming a feasible and coherent collective proposal. It had been agreed at an earlier meeting that the selection would be based around an examination of a synopsis of the proposed piece, an initial costing of the work as well as a broader assessment of the proposed critical and audience engagement for the piece. The selection panel used these as the broad parameters for their work.

As a result of this process, four pieces were selected to form a potential season of work. Upon examination of the themes and content of the pieces, the programmatic idea of *Elements* was decided upon; a season of new theatre based around an examination of place and identity, and aligned with the four primeval components of air, water, fire and earth. An application was compiled by Joanne Beirne and submitted to the Arts Council by Daragh Bradshaw in time to meet the deadline of 24<sup>th</sup> July 2008, and with the four chosen plays forming the centrepiece of the document. The proposal was in Daragh Bradshaw's name, as it was made clear that the *Belltable*, as a recipient of an Annual Funding grant, was not in a position to apply for additional funding for the production of work. It was clear however, from the application that the *Belltable* was to be both the host and the facilitator of the production of the work. The total grant amount applied for was €100,000, which was in turn premised upon overall income of €160,460 – made up of box office, a local authority award as well as benefit in kind from the *Belltable* and others.

Confirmation of an award of €86,000 was received on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2009, and a meeting of the *LTH* convened in late February to agree on the logistics and scheduling of the

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<sup>4</sup> These members were independent insofar as none were involved in any of the initial proposals to the LTH. All three members of the selection team also had other roles in the LTH: Joanne Beirne administered and project managed the initiative; Monica Spencer was a member of the cast of *Excess Baggage* and Michael Finneran is author of this evaluation report.



*Elements* season. The *LTH* proposal was one of twenty four funded from a total of one hundred and nine applications. It should be noted at this juncture that open communication with the Arts Council through the offices of David Parnell, Head of Theatre & Circus and Val Ballance, Head of Venues, was maintained throughout the conceptualisation and formulation of the *LTH* proposal. These open lines of communication proved to be useful in a number of ways. For instance, it was understood that a unified artistic theme to the work was essential, as was a critical evaluation of the mode of production. It was also clear that the involvement of the *Belltable* as a partner in the process was, from the Arts Council's point of view, essential to the success of the project. In addition to the practical pointers, strong expressions of support for the possibilities inherent in a theatre hub production model were received.

Subsequent to the confirmation of receipt of funding, some thought was given at general meetings as to what a hub production model should both look like and aspire to. Unsurprisingly, over the initial eight months of the project the focus of the initial meetings were centred around the acquisition of funding, with only passing thought given to the possibilities and indeed difficulties of a hub model. However, it was decided that a broad framework needed to be put in place, particularly in the light of the requirement to later evaluate the efficacy of the project. Participants were invited to compile suggestions for both a mission statement and set of objectives for the project. A broad and comprehensive range of suggestions were received and then examined by Michael Finneran, who had also agreed to evaluate the *LTH*, and a draft was then produced and agreed as the operating principles of the project. These are as reproduced in Appendix One (p. 26)

The relatively late decision as to the philosophical principles of the production model is unsurprising on a pragmatic level, in that the hub process was primarily characterised by the practical business of funding and making theatre. This was certainly the case with the regular *LTH* meetings from March 2010 onwards. These were principally concerned with agreeing schedules, budgets and the logistics of operating an innovative season of new theatre involving a venue, a hub, two funded companies, two funded practitioners and a host of individuals working on the various productions. Difficulties

were addressed on a case-by-case basis, and again the working spirit of the hub was characterised by pragmatism and necessity, as opposed to ideological vision.

One of the first difficulties to be faced came about immediately after the drawing up of initial production budgets, whereupon it became obvious that the €10,000 proposed in the original Arts Council application to employ a Project Manager was needed to make the production budgets viable. This problem was remedied by the willingness of Joanne Beirne to take on this role in addition to her core duties at the *Belltable*, and for no extra remuneration. In hindsight, it is clear that the application was to some degree over-ambitious at preparation stage, and some consideration could perhaps have been given to reducing the proposed output from four to three productions, either at the initial stage or upon receipt of the award for the reduced figure. The financial ramifications of the award size will be explored further in the next chapter.

Some of the broad operational parameters agreed pre-production included:

- The necessity for a memorandum of understanding to be drawn up between participating individuals, companies and the *Belltable Arts Centre*.
- The necessity for a power-of-attorney document to be drawn up between Daragh Bradshaw and the *Belltable* detailing that the *Belltable* would administer the grant awarded by the Arts Council on his behalf and through their accounts.
- That Joanne Beirne and Sheila Deegan (Limerick City Arts Officer) would act as co-signatories for issuing cheques.
- That co-producing contracts would be drawn up for each production that would detail the agreed financial arrangement/budget for that work.
- A schedule of meetings between the *Belltable/LTH* and the individual productions.
- The billing for the season would present each show as a co-production between the *Limerick Theatre Hub* and the *Belltable Arts Centre* [... in association with Amalgamation Theatre Co./Bottom Dog Theatre Co.]
- Production budgets would reflect a 70:30 split with the 30% going to the venue.
- In the interests of sensible financial planning, budgets were to be prepared on the basis of a net (i.e. less the deduction of the split) 20% box office return.

In the main, these suggestions emanated from the *Belltable*, as one might suppose given their experience in managing sizable budgets and their financial stake in the project as a whole. Some discussion did take place as to the possibility or necessity of having a committee structure in place to drive the *LTH*. Few were very much in favour of that being the case, and it was quite obvious that fewer parties had an interest in being part of such a committee. In the end, no such decision was adopted, and a vagueness of structure remained in place. Many other questions were raised at the meetings before production commenced, including:

- What would happen to loss-making productions within the season? Would their losses inhibit other productions' ability to make work because of potential cash-flow difficulties within the hub?
- What about productions that did not uphold the ethos/standards of the hub?
- What would happen in the eventuality of productions making quite a lot of money at box office? What would the upper threshold of the hub's take on these monies be? Would 'excess' money then go back to the separate companies/practitioners who had made the work which made money? Or would it go to the *Belltable*? Or would it remain with the hub to seed-fund a new season of work?

Despite substantial debate, particularly on the last point, no decisions were reached on these matters. What was clear to all was that the *Belltable* was not in a position to take any kind of financial risk in facilitating/co-producing the *Elements* season, and that prudent financial planning was to be the order of the day.

One other point worthy of brief note at this stage is the attendance at the *LTH* meetings. Besides those with a vested interest in the process (i.e. the City Arts Officer and the author), these were now composed entirely of those practitioners who had been chosen to be a part of the *Elements* season and were to be in receipt of funding. The pragmatism that had characterised much of the earlier discussions was now reflected in the make-up of hub. This will be commented upon at a later point.

The *Elements* season took to the *Belltable* stage over Spring and Autumn of 2010 in the following order:

**1) Air: *Excess Baggage* by Mary Coll**

June 15-27, 2010

Directed by Joan Sheehy

Alice – Monica Spencer

Ruth – Gene Rooney

Puppeteers – Daragh Bradshaw & Rosie Healy

Production Manager – Mike Burke

Stage Manager – Amy Burke

Design – Daragh Bradshaw

Lighting Design – Kevin Smith

Costume Design – Ruth Madida

Sound Design – Boris Hunka

Project Manager – Joanne Beirne

**2) Water: *The Fisherman's Son* by Ciarda Tobin (Amalgamation Theatre Co.)**

July 6-18, 2010

Directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh

Peter – John Murphy

John – Denis Foley

Sam – Maurice Cotter

Production Manager – Mike Burke

Stage Manager – Margaret O'Donoghue

Design – Emma Fisher

Lighting Design – Kevin Smith

Project Manager – Joanne Beirne

**3) Fire: *Don Juan in Hell* by George Bernard Shaw**

October 12-24, 2010

Directed by Duncan Molloy

Don Juan – Nathan Gordon

Ana – Eilish O'Donnell

Statue – Daragh Bradshaw

Devil – Martin Maguire

Production Manager – Mike Burke

Stage Manager – Margaret O'Donoghue

Puppetry – Daragh Bradshaw

Design – Emma Fisher

Lighting Design – Katherin Graham

Project Manager – Joanne Beirne

**4) Earth: *The Revenger's Tragedy* written by Mike Finn, based on the play by Thomas Middleton (Bottom Dog Theatre Co.)**

November 9-21, 2010

Directed by Myles Breen

Cat/Junior – Dorothy Cotter

Spaz – Aidan Crowe

Vinny – Liam O'Brien

Duchess/Geraldine – Gene Rooney

Lucky – Pat Ryan

The Duke – Paschal Scott

Damien – Shane Vaughan

Production Manager – Mike Burke

Stage Manager – Amy Burke

Design – Emma Fisher

Lighting Design – Dave O'Brien

Original Score – Steve Ryan

## Project Manager – Joanne Beirne

Each of the shows was a fully staged production presented at the *Belltable's* interim black box space at 36 Cecil Street, which has a capacity of approximately ninety-four seats. As might be expected, the personnel involved changed quite a bit from one show to the next, with the Production Manager and Project Manager (also venue Artistic Director) the only ones to work across all four productions. That said both Stage Managers worked on two shows each, as did one of the Lighting Designers and a Puppeteer. One of the Set Designers worked across three shows, but only one Actor appeared in two productions.

As noted previously, it is not within the remit of this evaluation to comment, beyond in general terms, on the manner in which the work of the *LTH* was received. A range of reviews and press clippings appear in Appendix Three (p.31). Audience figures are reflected in the box office receipts for the separate productions, which appear in Appendix Two (p.28). There was a fixed pricing structure in place (€18/€15 conc.) across all four productions and all ran for the same period of time. All plays, with the exception of the first production, ran 'two for one' offers on the Monday and Tuesday nights of their second week. *The Fisherman's Son* also ran a preview night with a reduced cost ticket. Broadly speaking however, the 'earning' potential of each production was, therefore, very much the same.

It should be noted here, however, that external recognition of the work of the *Limerick Theatre Hub* was forthcoming with the receipt of two *Irish Times Theatre Award* nominations for *LTH* related activities. One was to Emma Fisher for her work on *Don Juan in Hell* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and the second was a nomination for *LTH* as a whole for the Judges' Special Award, in acknowledgement of the Hub's reinvigoration of professional theatre in Limerick. Unfortunately, neither nomination resulted in an award. Mary Coll, writer of *Excess Baggage* was also nominated for a *Stewart Parker Award* which recognises new writing in theatre.

## EVALUATION CONTEXT & METHODOLOGY

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This evaluation report was envisaged at the outset of the *LTH* project. Mindful of the experimental nature of the work being carried out, the necessity of the process being recorded, analysed and the findings dispersed to the broader theatre community was an informal feature of many of the early meetings. Upon receipt of funding, and as mentioned previously, this evaluation took on greater importance.

The function of this report is primarily to advise both the *LTH* and its main funder, the Arts Council, as to the manner in which the Hub was formed and conceptualised, as well as the reality of how the project itself operated. In addition to this relatively factual reporting, the report offers insights from the administrators, practitioners and artists as to the strengths and weaknesses that they feel to be inherent in a hub model of funding and production.

As well as the local situation described earlier, the national context within which the *Hub* was awarded funding and is now being evaluated, is not unimportant. It is fair to assume that the level of tacit support forthcoming for the project from the Arts Council, would not have been the same were the country at the time (Summer/Autumn 2008) not showing signs of an increasing financial crises. Given the then likely cuts to arts budgets which had grown exponentially (in relative terms) over the years of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’, one could argue that it was indeed prudent that the Arts Council began to explore alternative models of funding theatre work, particularly in regional cities. This is even more so the case when the modest range of funding mechanisms on offer for the production of theatre in the Republic of Ireland are examined.

This assumption acquires further credence upon examination of a discussion document brought out by the Arts Council in May 2009, which suggests that ‘(t)he available resources are neither sufficient to meet adequately the requirements of those in receipt of funding nor to provide for potential new artists and practitioners’ (The Arts Council, 2009, p. 3). This document is open about the growing concern of the Arts Council not being able to support ongoing trends in theatre production and cites the exponential



growth of the fourteen year period 1995-2009, which saw an increase of production companies from 20 to 34, total budgetary allocation from €3.9m to €15.9m, and average allocation from €195,000 to €467,647. This growth clearly reflected the increasing prosperity of the country over the years in question, but is in spite of the fact that it was recognised by the profession itself in a previous background paper (The Arts Council, 2005) that such a level of growth in the number of production companies was unsustainable. It is worth further noting here the full extent of currently reduced Arts Council funding, which shows an average cut of 18.29% in 2010 (Theatre Forum Ireland, 2010) across all theatre allocations (both venues & companies). That figure is not inclusive of companies who were funded previously but lost funding this year.

The 2005 document called for the examination of new ways of making work, and particularly suggested the provision of incentives for companies who pool resources. More explicit support for the concept of hubs is then made in a recent Arts Council policy document. This sees hubs primarily as administrative loci, which ‘can play a valid role as part of a balanced theatre ecology by virtue of the fact that it is more cost effective to provide funding for administrative resources that are shared, thereby supporting the work of more than one artist (or producing entity) at a time’. (The Arts Council, 2010, pp. 5-6). Clearly, hubs are a phenomenon in whose success the Arts Council has a vested interest.

Production models broadly similar to that of *LTH* have some international precedent, with limited analysis available. The modest scale of this research prohibits any kind of substantive evaluation of extant models, but a brief scan of the literature points the way to some interesting trends from abroad. Generally speaking the idea of production hubs tends to be a resource/management/funding oriented model, as opposed to an artistic one<sup>5</sup>. Artists who choose to collaborate typically do so through pragmatic coalitions such as cooperatives (perhaps to share resources and spaces), or shared philosophical and ideological groupings such as collectives. Many of these arrangements are relatively short-lived or eventually evolve into a more traditional company model. What is quite

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<sup>5</sup> For two prominent examples of online resource driven ‘hubs’, see:

**the:hub** (UK) <http://www.thehubuk.com/> (Accessed 1 May 2010)

**artsHub: arts at heart** (Australia) <http://www.artshub.com.au/au/> (Accessed 1 May 2010)

clear is that the attraction in these models is predominantly for early-stage artists who have perhaps not received professional funding or commissions, or indeed for those who wish to produce what they might regard as revolutionary or subversive work. Interestingly, examples of hub-type initiatives seem to be most prevalent in countries at opposite ends of the state funding spectrum: those with little by way of supported theatre, but also in countries with extremely well established and highly subsidised mechanisms for funding theatre.

A brief note before proceeding to the analysis of themes and data on the practicalities of the evaluation process. This evaluation principally takes the form of a case study, a type of research which stands in its own right – i.e. it does not have an overt comparative element. Case study is a qualitative form of research – it seeks to construct an understanding of a situation as opposed to presenting irrefutable facts. For that reason, the primary means of capturing data for analysis was through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews took place with twenty individuals a number of months subsequent to the final production periods. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes, consisted of roughly the same questions and format, and was recorded. Interviewees were requested to sign a release allowing the data to be used confidentially for research purposes. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of belonging to one of five different categories of stakeholders, and were broken-down as follows: (i) **Administrative/Institutional Stakeholders** – 4 Interviewees; (ii) **Funded LTH Hub participants** – 4 Interviewees; (iii) **Performers** – 5 Interviewees; (iv) **Non-funded LTH participants** – 2 Interviewees; (v) **Production teams** – 5 Interviewees.

## KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND ARTIST FEEDBACK: EMERGENT ISSUES

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A range of issues concerning the philosophy, structure and rationale of the *Limerick Theatre Hub* emerged as the interviews and the subsequent analysis proceeded. Some were relatively obvious from attendance at meetings and productions, others were individual to each of the four productions, and yet others slowly became apparent as the process of analysing the data continued.

This section of the report will briefly chart and analyse those emergent issues. Recommendations for future expressions of a theatre hub model will be extrapolated from this section and developed upon in the next.

### **The Nature of the Limerick Theatre Hub:**

Virtually each interviewee had quite strong and often differing views with regard to what the Theatre Hub was, and indeed should be. Some expressed the opinion that it should be viewed solely as a funding mechanism which was a useful way of accessing Arts Council funds in the absence of either a funded theatre company in the city, or until such time as they themselves had built up a body of work/expertise that might enable them to apply for their own funding. Typically this was a view expressed by well-established individuals and the companies involved in the *LTH*. Neither company involved in the hub felt (beyond the immediate funding, exposure, etc.) that involvement greatly enhanced either the image or structures of their group. The view was expressed by one individual that they felt their production could have done better if the money received through the *LTH* had been given directly to them by the Arts Council. One of the substantial bones of contention that arose was the manner in which shows were credited. A perception of one company was that it was particularly unsatisfactory to be listed as being 'in association with' the two main producers (i.e. the *LTH* and the *Belltable*), when it was the company themselves who were actually making the work. It was generally felt that the hub was a 'kinder' vehicle for individual practitioners seeking to make work, as it provided a structure within which they could operate, but also meet new collaborators, as was the case in a number of instances on

this project. Some participants felt that the hub should have aspired more to being a theatrical collaborative, and that the communal and mentoring aspirations described in the objectives were not entirely fulfilled. It was suggested by some that quite differing approaches to participation in the hub from different participants (i.e. the lack of an agreed and shared understanding of what the hub was) had the net result of reducing the overall possibilities for collaboration and collegiality. However, all interviewees were clear that they felt that the *Limerick Theatre Hub* had ultimately been a worthwhile and successful initiative on some level. The majority were extremely grateful that they had received an opportunity to produce work through the auspices of the *LTH*, and were fulsome in praise of the concept, regardless of its deficiencies, because it brought funding for theatre to Limerick professionals.

#### **Future for a hub production models in Limerick & elsewhere:**

Some interviewees – again, particularly those involved in companies, were quite pessimistic about the possible proliferation of production hubs in Ireland. There was an openly expressed fear amongst many that hubs could acquire the same status, and indeed possibly supplant production companies as the primary means of funding Irish theatre. It was widely felt that this would be a retrograde step, and that the place for a production hub is as another means of funding theatre (especially for new practitioners), but alongside companies and producing venues. The vast majority of interviewees were positively orientated to the continued existence of hubs, but largely felt that the model needed to be properly resourced (unlike the current iteration of the *LTH* some felt), and have a clear structure. All those spoken to felt that the continued existence of the *LTH* would be beneficial to theatre in Limerick.

#### **The structure of the Limerick Theatre Hub:**

A perceived lack of clarity was noted by respondents around the manner in which decisions were made, budgets were decided, etc. when questioned about the structure of the *LTH*. However, in the main this was not felt to be a substantial issue as participants were generally more interested in getting the work done, and were happy enough to work within the structures put in place for them. It was typically felt that the decision to avoid forming a committee was a wise one, but that some structures would

need to be developed in order to avoid the situation encountered on this occasion whereby the overwhelming majority of work fell to the Artistic Director of the *Belltable*. That said, all those interviewed expressed appreciation and admiration to her for the work done, and readily conceded that the hub could not have operated without her. It should be noted though, that the majority of practitioners expressed no interest or desire to be part of such structures. The view was also posited that the lack of concrete structure enabled the *LTH* to be a ‘working’ organisation, and the resultant informality and flexibility allowed it to be responsive to needs as they arose. It was suggested that the speed with which the hub came about dictated many of the decisions made and much of the structure of the *LTH*.

Other aspects of structure that were commented upon were the perceived lack of administrative, logistical/technical and marketing support felt by some. This was balanced by those who suggested that all they asked for was made available to them. Still others were of the opinion that the potential human resources that they had at their disposal and could have been utilised in other *LTH* productions, were not fully exploited because of the lack of structures in the hub.

A further structure-related issue that was noted was the mechanism whereby the four pieces for the *Elements* season were chosen. The point was made that there should be more openness regarding the criteria employed, and that if possible the core theme/unifying idea for a season of work should be chosen in advance of the selection process. That said, all parties were unanimous in saying they felt that the process employed was fair. The timing of the initiative and of the funding decision was also problematic from the point of view of the *Belltable*, as it occurred very late in terms of their annual programming.

### **Membership of the Limerick Theatre Hub:**

The majority of parties spoken to were unclear and of differing opinions as to who the members of the *LTH* were, or should be. Some participants felt that the membership should be open-ended in general, but that the reality was that once productions had been selected to be part of a funding bid, the people involved in those shows became the *de facto* membership. This issue is tied up with that of structures, and again the

perceived need for some sort of management/committee/leadership was expressed by some. One interviewee felt very strongly that initiatives such as the hub were solely for funding the work of professional artists, and that by allowing those coming from an amateur background to compete for funding, was to potentially deprive a professional artist of the means whereby s/he could make a living. In doing so, it was felt that the profession was in danger of being diminished. This stance begs some questions around the criteria for entry into the professional theatre ranks, not to mention who adjudicates this, but is a provocative area of discussion nonetheless. Interestingly, some of the stakeholders whose work was not funded approached this debate from a different direction by identifying their perception that some work was not chosen for inclusion in the season because of the fact the proposers had never been professionally funded in the past. A clear facet of the *Elements* season was the number of early-career artists involved and indeed leading work. All of this suggests that the amateur/professional nexus is undoubtedly an area in need of some clarity in hub models, particularly where they take place in relatively small communities.

### **Relationship of the *LTH* to the Belltable Arts Centre:**

A specific question was asked of all interviewees as to whether the *LTH*, if it was to run again, should be as closely aligned and integrated with the *Belltable*, or should seek to forge an entirely independent identity. Some found this idea attractive, and pointed out the potential for having *LTH* work performed in a variety of places/venues. A majority felt that being pragmatic, a hub would have to have a close relationship with a venue such as the *Belltable*, particularly in order to avail of specialist expertise in areas such as finance and marketing. This was especially the case if the funding provided was as meagre as was the case in this iteration of the *LTH*. All were agreed, however, that the Artistic Director of a venue, should ideally not have to double as Project Manager for a hub initiative. Issues of workload were cited for this, as well as the desire to have somewhat of a distance between the structures of the *Belltable* and those of the *LTH*. A particular issue worth noting that arose for the *Belltable* was the legal standing of the *LTH*, and the legal relationship between the two entities, specifically around the question of who was the employer of the artists involved in hub productions.

### **Levels of Pay/Finance:**

In general terms, interviewees felt that the *LTH* productions were insufficiently funded. That said, a representative of one production was clear that their work had all the financial resources necessary to realise it. The initial assertion above is borne out by the financial data provided in Appendix two, particularly when the suggested real costs in the right-hand column of the data provided, are examined. Some felt that it was regrettable that this was the case, and the suggestion was repeatedly made by some that this was the thin edge of the wedge, with the Arts Council trying to make a lot more theatre for a lot less money. In the interest of fairness, it should be pointed out that the *LTH* funding proposal suggested that four productions could be staged for the €100,000 sought, and it could be argued that it was at the prerogative of the *LTH* to down-size the scale of the endeavour when the full grant amount applied for was not forthcoming. No-one interviewed felt that the integrity of their work was compromised by a lack of finance, but the production teams particularly noted the extent to which they had to work with very few financial resources in getting sets and costumes together. This extended to staff having to use their own cash to supply props, buy refreshments for rehearsals or have costumes laundered. All productions suggested that a lot of unpaid work and hours were put in on each production. The lack of finance to pay for technical staff to help in the fitting-up and crewing the shows was an issue that arose repeatedly throughout interviews.

In terms of personal remuneration, a number of fleeting comments: The actors and directors spoken to were extremely grateful for the work and the opportunity to perform/make theatre – many of them in their home town. Typically, they felt they had been fairly paid. Of the four productions, one had a somewhat larger cast than the other three, and it was felt that greater allowance should have been made for this in the allocation/negotiation of budgets. A disagreement arose between a writer and the *LTH* over the course of the season with regard to the payment of royalties as well as a writer's fee. Furthermore, it was remarked upon by several interviewees that their perception was that the Production Manager was underpaid for the scale of the task and the amount of work he had to put into each show.



Overall in terms of finance, the *LTH* finished the *Elements* season with a surplus of just over €1,000. Considering the range of work produced and the number of artists involved in the initiative, this has to be regarded as being a substantial success for the hub as a whole.

### **The artistic success of the Limerick Theatre Hub:**

The question was posed of each interviewee as to whether the hub could have been regarded as an artistic success. Those directly involved in the productions gave this question an unequivocal and unanimous yes, and spoke highly not only of their satisfaction with their own work, but the achievements of others in the hub. Those at a remove spoke somewhat more critically as to perceived strengths and weaknesses. Amongst the strengths identified were the foregrounding of new writing with relevant local themes throughout all the season productions, and the extent to which Limerick actors and production teams were employed on the projects. Amongst the weaknesses suggested were uneven performances within casts and underworked productions. This latter point can be linked with the comment by three directors and writers that a three weeks rehearsal period for a piece of new writing was simply insufficient.

Allied to artistic success for some practitioners, were the artistic alliances that were formed whilst working on *LTH* productions. One immediate and concrete result of this was an independent production that came to the stage in December 2010. This said, interviewees were predominantly of the opinion that that the hub failed in its aim to mentor members of the theatre community, and the extent to which this happened was minimal. There were some notable exceptions to this: one neophyte writer spoke at length of the rich learning that came about from working with a very experienced director; a teenager was involved in puppetry in *Don Juan in Hell*; and two very young actors were cast in *The Fisherman's Son* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

Questions allied to artistic success include those of the establishment of an *LTH* brand, and the development/reinvigoration of a theatre-going audience. Participants had mixed views on both of these questions, suggesting that a strong image of the *Limerick Theatre Hub* was achieved for the first two productions in the Spring/early Summer, but much less so for the Autumn shows. This was despite an integrated marketing plan and

season identity having been designed (see the front cover) for the *Elements* season as a whole, which was then implemented evenly across all the productions. Interestingly, the early productions were also suggested by some as having the most distinct sense of a fresh or new audience. It is difficult to extrapolate to any great degree from this as it may well be mere coincidence. However, it is clear from those involved in marketing and administration, that a long summer break didn't help the case for presenting an integrated and cohesive season of theatre.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Local

It is clear that the inaugural *Elements* season of the *Limerick Theatre Hub* was a success on a number of levels. The following recommendations are made for the future:

- That the *LTH* continues to seek grants to fund professional theatre in Limerick.
- That a management structure be put in place to manage/facilitate the *LTH* with all categories of stakeholders represented within that structure.
- That the *LTH* in future identify a season theme/idea before calling for submissions from participants.
- That greater emphasis be placed in the future on the possibilities for both mentorship and the communal sharing of resources and people.
- That the continued mutually beneficial relationship between the *LTH* and the *Belltable Arts Centre* be continued, but that the *LTH* should strive to establish an independent identity.

### National

Theatre hubs have an emergent role to play in the life of Irish theatre. In moving the concept of theatre hubs forward, cognisance should be taken of the following recommendations:

- That the Arts Council introduces a new category of funding for theatre hub initiatives. This should not supplant or reduce the monies available for either production companies or venues.
- That both the Arts Council and theatre hubs take responsibility to ensure that that productions are sufficiently funded and that normal and equitable rates of pay for all participants are observed.
- That existing theatre companies who participate in hubs should be recognised as entities in their own right, but must also be a part of the hubs and share in the common objectives and decision-making processes of the hub for the duration of the funding.
- That the membership of, and participation in, a theatre hub should by necessity remain open to all theatre artists working in the general geographical region of the hub.

- That all theatre hubs should apply for and then ring-fence sufficient funds to employ a Project Manager and Production Manager to work across all the hub productions.
- That the status of applicants, or previous funding track records not be an adjudicating factor in the selection of productions for inclusion in a hub proposal. All applicants (and artists who work on their production), must however be in a position to work fulltime on their productions.
- That the Arts Council investigate the legal standing of hub projects, and provide organisational guidance and support to future initiatives.

## APPENDIX ONE: *LTH* MISSION STATEMENT & OBJECTIVES

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### Mission Statement

The ***Limerick Theatre Hub*** (*LTH*) is a professional theatre initiative based in Limerick City. It aims to provide a creative, financial and logistical locus for the development of new performance work, involving individual practitioners, theatre companies and the Belltable on a project by project basis. It aspires to being a model for the facilitation of productions, collaboration of artists, and training of new practitioners. It will provide a platform for the showcasing of high-quality regional theatre, and seek to engage and entertain audiences in Limerick.

### Specific Objectives

- To provide an umbrella-body that will afford artists the necessary resources, supports and facilities to enable them to produce quality theatre, whilst allowing them to retain creative freedom and organisational autonomy.
- To challenge members of the LTH to ensure the continued presence of professional theatre work in Limerick, made by Limerick-based artists, which will become part of the Belltable artistic programme.
- To provide appropriate remuneration for the artists involved.
- To foster a vibrant community of theatre practitioners, improve communication between them, and stimulate critical dialogue and engagement amongst them.
- To mentor members of the theatre community through processes of shared work and voluntary participation.
- To explore the strengths and difficulties, benefits and challenges of a theatre hub as a model for the production of new work, to critically reflect on the model and share those findings within the theatre community.
- To enable, on a very practical level, the sharing of resources, ideas, people and places.

- To allow the continued growth and strengthening of individual company and practitioner identities, whilst harnessing the collective abilities and strengths through the structure of the LTH.
- To facilitate the development of new theatrical collaborations and initiatives, and to provide a space for their incubation and development.
- To develop the LTH into a known brand that will attract a regular and loyal audience.
- To challenge local audiences with strong, varied and interesting work, and to expand the repertoire of professional work available in the Mid-West region.

## APPENDIX TWO – LTH FINANCIAL STATEMENT

\* This data was prepared by the Belltable Arts Centre, who financially administered the *Limerick Theatre Hub* Project. The ‘suggested normal fees’ and ‘benefit in kind’ columns aligned with expenditure and income respectively have been presented to illuminate the degree to which the practical functioning of the LTH was dependent upon generally lower rates of pay and expenditure, as well as substantial support from both the host venue and the local authority. All figures below are in Euro (€)

Expenditure Item	Actual Fees/Expenditure Paid by LTH	Suggested Normal Fees
Performers’ Fees	<b>42,425</b> Rates ranged from 500 to 600 gross per week	<b>58,808</b> (rate of 600 per week including holiday pay plus employers’ PRSI)
Directors’ Fees	<b>12,000</b> (3,000 per show)	<b>16,000</b> (4,000 per show)
Production Manager Fee	<b>7,500</b>	<b>13,500</b> (approx 850 Euros per week for 4 weeks on each production)
Stage Managers’ Fees	<b>11,000</b>	<b>14,353</b> (rate of 600 per week including holiday pay plus employers’ PRSI)
Lighting Designers’ Fees	<b>5,500</b>	<b>8,000</b> (rate of 2,000 per show)
Set & Costume Designers’ Fees	<b>4,100</b>	<b>11,000</b> (average of 2,750 per show)
Writers’ Fees	<b>10,113</b>	<b>13,113</b>
Sound Design Fees & recording costs	<b>1,750</b>	<b>7,500</b> (1,500 fee per production plus 1,500 for recording costs)
Crew Fees	<b>1,200</b>	<b>6,500</b> (1,000 for Excess Baggage 1,500 for Fishermans Son 1,500 for Don Juan in Hell 2,500 for The Revenger’s



		Tragedy)
Costume Costs	<b>2,000</b>	<b>8,000</b> (an allocation of 1,250 for the first two shows, 1,500 for thirds show & 2,000 for the last show. An allocation of 500 per show for laundry costs)
Lighting Costs & Hire	<b>1,200</b> plus BIK lending of equipment	<b>4,000</b> (an allocation of 1,000 per show)
Set Costs & Transport	<b>7,000</b>	<b>16,000</b> (an allocation of 4,000 per production)
Puppet Design, Construction & Materials	<b>1,750</b>	<b>7,000</b>
Accommodation	<b>1,250</b>	<b>4,000</b> (an allocation of 1,000 per show)
Travel	<b>200</b>	<b>2,000</b> (an allocation of 500 per production)
Miscellaneous Costs	<b>1,000</b>	<b>10,000</b> (5% of overall expenditure based on figures above approx)
<b><u>Total Expenditure</u></b>	<b><u>109,988</u></b>	<b><u>199,744</u></b>

<b>Income Item</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Additional Benefit in Kind received</b>
Arts Council Projects Once off Grant	<b>86,000</b>	
Limerick City Council	<b>3,000</b>	<b>1,000</b> – Postage
RTÉ Lyric FM Sponsorship	<b>2,000</b> (1,000 to production costs, 1,000 to Belltable for marketing of the initiative)	<b>1,500</b> – Approx value of contra advertising of the first two shows

Belltable Arts Centre Contribution		<b>16,000</b> – Project Management <b>10,000</b> – Marketing/PR/Advertising/Print/Design <b>3,000</b> – Admin Support <b>5,000</b> – Technical Support & Lighting operator <b>9,000</b> – Rehearsal Space <b>19,200</b> – Theatre Rental @ 400 per performance <b>2,500</b> – Insurance  <b>64,700</b> – Total
Gross Box Office Returns	<b>12,697.91</b> – Excess Baggage <b>6,116.45</b> – Fisherman’s Son <b>3,315.00</b> – Don Juan in Hell <b>7,939.00</b> – Revenger’s Tragedy <b>(30,068.36</b> – Gross Box Office) less 30% split to Belltable = <b>21,047.84</b> – Net Box Office	
<b><u>Total Income</u></b>	<b><u>111,047</u></b>	<b><u>67,200</u></b>

## APPENDIX THREE – LTH PRESS CUTTINGS/REVIEWS

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The following press clippings are included (*The Irish Times* was the only organisation to review all four productions, and in the interest of balance, these are the only ones included here. Other reviews are available on request):

1. 'Getting to the hub of the issue' – *The Irish Times* (4/6/09)
2. 'At the hub of Limerick's theatre life' – *Irish Theatre Magazine* (8/12/09)
3. 'Connecting to the theatre' – *The Irish Examiner* (5/09)
4. Review of 'Excess Baggage' – Sara Keating in *The Irish Times* (23/6/09)
5. Review of 'The Fisherman's Son' – Sara Keating in *The Irish Times* (10/7/09)
6. Review of 'Don Juan in Hell' – Sara Keating in *The Irish Times* (19/10/09)
7. Review of 'The Revenger's Tragedy' – Sara Keating in *The Irish Times* (17/11/09)

Press coverage was also received in the following outlets:

### Radio:

- RTE RADIO 1: Arena with Sean Rocks.
- RTE Lyric FM: The Arts Show.
- Limerick Live 95fm: Limerick Today Show
- Spin South West: Spin Talk.
- West Limerick fm: Arts Show

### Broadsheets:

- The Irish Times
- The Irish Independent
- The Irish Examiner

### Regional:

- The Limerick Leader
- The Limerick Chronicle
- The Limerick Independent
- The Limerick Post

### Magazines:

- The Irish Theatre Magazine
- The Limerick Events Guide

# Getting to the hub of the issue

Thu, Jun 04, 2009

Theatre companies sharing resources to put shows together in a 'hub' set-up could be a revolutionary concept, or a vicious circle. Limerick is leading the way to see how it might work, writes **PETER CRAWLEY**

AS A MECHANISM, the hub is beautifully simple and endlessly complex. There it is, at the calm centre of a wheel's vigorous activity, with radiating spokes distributing tension so evenly that it's hard to determine where any burden lies. For a radical new model of making theatre, there are, technically speaking, better terms to capture the dynamic. But "production gyroscope" doesn't have quite the same ring.

It hasn't always been easy to determine what, or who, is at the centre of the whirling activity and discussions that surround production hubs in Irish theatre. But whether it was at a recent, hurried Theatre Forum meeting (topic: new models of production) or in the Belltable in Limerick, where a production hub pilot project is preparing to show the first fruits of its labour, the effect of the hub is everywhere. In recent months, "the production hub" has become the main topic of conversation among Irish theatre-makers. Broadly speaking, they view it as either an inspiring new method of generating a lot of work from concentrated resources, or a threat to the existence of the prevailing company structure which may result in an unstable loop of artistically incoherent events. In short, the hub could create a revolutionary concept or a vicious circle.

Hubs, however, aren't particularly new. The Project Arts Centre in Dublin, for example, has long functioned as a *de facto* hub by extending its administrative and technical resources to a number of associated artists who are then freed up to make work without the daily concerns and running costs of maintaining a company.

But, in the current economic climate, the notion of hubs has acquired a fresh urgency, and its implementation could have enormous consequences for how theatre is made, sustained and viewed. It stems from the Arts Council, from where the head of theatre, David Parnell, has been leading the conversation. With the State funding agency now contending with severe Government cutbacks, many suspect that hubs are being vigorously encouraged while production companies – along the recognisable model of Druid, Rough Magic, Fishamble, Corn Exchange et al – are no longer being prioritised. This is hardly a stated policy, but while the Arts Council has ceased to extend Once-Off Project awards to theatre production companies, it is supporting a prototype hub in Limerick under that funding scheme as a pilot project and is currently developing a comprehensive new arts strategy, due for publication in 2010.

"I believe the level of funding for the arts should be at least maintained," Parnell told me in January, "but we have to be realistic about the possibility it's not going to happen. This is a good opportunity to at least re-imagine the model by which we make theatre."

When, in April, the Arts Council's budget for 2009 was reduced as part of the Government's ironically named "Supplementary Budget", chairwoman Pat Moylan announced: "Despite the challenge of reducing financial resources, the Arts Council will strive to maintain, as far as possible, a viable arts sector." It is hard to imagine how that would be possible, unless there is a production model that allows you to do more with less.

**ON A BEAUTIFULLY** bright day in Limerick last month Joanne Beirne, the artistic director of the Belltable, may not have been the only theatre professional worried about money, but she was almost certainly the only one to ask: "If there's a surplus, where does that money go?"

In the current economic climate, this seemed an unlikely concern. Besides, having applied for a relatively modest €100,000 from the Arts Council (through the Once-Off scheme) to initiate a production hub, and then receiving just €86,000, you could be forgiven for thinking that Beirne was already neck-deep in the current economic climate.

A refreshingly frank operator, but sensitive to the concerns and politics of everyone involved, Beirne was simply outlining the complexity of the hub system. When funding fell short of the Belltable's application, Beirne absorbed the role of production manager for each of the four productions selected from application to participate within the hub. Two of these productions are presented in association with individual companies: Mike Finn's *Bottom Dog* is staging his adaptation of Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, while Amalgamation is working with Ciarda Tobin under Bairbre Ni Chaoimh's direction to create *The Fisherman's Son*. The other shows are staged by unaffiliated artists, with a contemporary Chaucer adaptation by Mary Coll being directed by Joan Sheehy, and director Duncan Molloy collaborating with Daragh Bradshaw on a George Bernard Shaw adaptation, *Don Juan in Hell*. Staged in a programme guided by the elements, earth, air, fire and water, each show has a different scale, budget and other requirements – so should the overall project turn a profit, who deserves the spoils?

Once we had visited the Belltable's small, unfussy off-site venue on Cecil Street (the main theatre is currently being refurbished), Beirne laid out the process.

"It is an initiative that responds to the requirements of those involved," she said. "It is a Once-Off award, it is a pilot project and it is an exploration. It's very exciting, but it's also quite daunting. It could fall flat on its face and it could fail gloriously."

In large part, the hub model suits the Belltable's immediate and pressing need. Since Island, the long-standing Limerick theatre company, fell apart following the withdrawal of Arts Council funding at the beginning of 2008, professional theatre in the city and region has been in short supply. Touring theatre has all but diminished into a trickle of one-person shows or international franchises about motherhood and menopause. Something must fill the gap.

"There wasn't a specific individual," Beirne said, when asked who had driven the hub agenda, "more a collective aspiration." But David Parnell had floated the idea at the arts centre's *Unfringed* festival early in 2008, Beirne recalled. "The idea of the model was first articulated by David in the context of developing professional theatre."

As a pilot project, however, the Limerick Theatre Hub will receive great scrutiny from the Arts Council and from the theatre sector at large. Michael Finneran, of Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, is evaluating and critically assessing the project.

"The margin of error is very small," Beirne said. "The initiative will be subsidised by work. People will receive a fee. But I envisage – and they anticipate as well – that people will be putting in hours well beyond what they're paid for. I have asked that everyone writes down what their time has been on an individual production, so that in the end, when the evaluation process comes together, we can identify what the real cost of it would be."

**THE IDEA THAT** a project might "fail gloriously" is not uncommon in the arts, where ambition and innovation have no guarantee of monetary reward. But when a certain antipathy has encrusted around the hubs agenda ("There's only one idea on the table," said a Theatre Forum speaker, "and it's the Arts Council's"), there is also a chance that the Limerick Theatre Hub could succeed miserably. At the Theatre Forum meeting a consensus quickly formed that while hubs might complement existing theatre companies nicely, they should not replace or curb them.

These days, however, theatre companies are folding, not incorporating. Island, Storytellers, Galloglass and Calypso have all disappeared since 2008. No new company has received revenue funding from the Arts Council since Performance Corporation was brought on to the funding

ladder in 2006 – the council’s only new theatre company client *this decade*. It seems unlikely that the council should seek complementary programmes in straitened times. If the Belltable demonstrates that more productions can be generated with a comparatively lower level of investment into a central hub, the company model that has characterised Irish theatre for a generation may appear redundant. Things fall apart because the centre can hold.

“With the hub I have eight weeks of local work which will engage with local audiences, I hope,” says Joanne Beirne, referring to the dearth of touring productions. “What I’d pay in guarantees or splits would be a lot greater than the investment that’s being made on the Belltable’s behalf. I don’t think the company structure is necessarily a bad thing. It is maybe more suitable to established individuals, or emerging artists, where it’s more important to get the work made rather than to establish a continuity of vision. You don’t necessarily need a company structure to support that. But I don’t think it has to eliminate the company model. I can’t see the end of the company model. For us, in a situation where Island has gone, there has to be an alternative model.”

Currently, most theatres and companies are considering their alternatives. Beyond the hub, there are residencies, whereby a company receives a base, administrative support and funding from a venue for which they make work. Tall Tales, for example, is now the resident theatre company of Solstice Arts Centre in Co Meath, an arrangement that saw the company move location and even alter its artistic policy to suit its host.

“It’s a question of taking our artistic policy and making it work in the context of being resident in an arts centre,” artistic director Deirdre Kinahan told me. “There’s no point in performing in the dark.”

Tall Tales, once committed exclusively to new women’s writing, recently toured an Alan Bennett play to nursing homes and other venues. Other companies have started huddling together for shelter with kindred spirits. Corn Exchange has brought Randolph SD and thisispopbaby into its offices, while Rough Magic has opened its doors to B\*Spoke and Making Strange.

Surveying the small, ad-hoc theatre space that would soon accommodate an ambitious programme, Joanne Beirne sounded upbeat. “Something had to be done,” she said, “and this was worth trying.” Indeed, the season holds much more promise than simply illustrating what a hub can enable.

But Beirne reminded me that Island theatre company itself had been born from a hub-like arrangement with the Belltable, “its spiritual home”, and hoped that this hub’s participants might now be on a firmer footing to approach the Arts Council for funding in the future. “So in a bizarre way,” she said, “this sort of development is coming back home.”

It’s an elegant logic, which reconciles a new model of making theatre with an old one, where hubs do not eclipse theatre companies but enable them. Time will tell, but the hub conversation appears to have come full circle.

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*Excess Baggage*, by Mary Coll, opens the Limerick Theatre Hub on June 17, running until June 27 at the Belltable Arts Centre’s off-site venue on 36 Cecil Street. *The Fisherman’s Son* runs from July 8 to 18; *Don Juan in Hell* runs from Oct 14 to 24; *The Revenger’s Tragedy* runs from Nov 11 to 21

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Above: Denis Foley, John Murphy and Maurice Cotter

*The Fisherman's Son*

Photo: Press 22

Below: Gene Rooney and Monica Spencer

*Excess Baggage*

Photo: Press 22

## At the hub of Limerick's theatre life

The production hub set up as a pilot project in Limerick to produce four shows over five months was an 'impressive creative enterprise' that proves that the hub model is capable of producing excellent work, writes Sara Keating.

by **Sara Keating** 08 December

With the shrinking of Arts Council funding this year and the threat of further cuts to come, production hubs have been the buzzwords for theatre in 2009. Theatre practitioners have had to question whether the economic climate can accommodate the current infrastructure of individual production companies. The direction was signalled, to an extent, by David Parnell, who was appointed Head of Theatre at the Arts Council in late 2007. Speaking to the *Irish Times* in January this year, he commented that the reduced Arts Council budget was “a good opportunity to at least re-imagine the model by which we make theatre”. Meanwhile, one of the most significant funding awards made in the early months of this year was for a pilot hub project in Limerick, which was to be managed by the Belltable Arts Centre.

Having lost its main professional theatre company (Island Theatre Company) through funding cuts in the last three years, Limerick seemed a perfect site for such a pilot project to take place. It was a chance for the professional theatre scene to be reinvigorated and for artists working on the periphery of professional theatre to gain a profile and professional experience.

Joanne Beirne is the artistic director of the Belltable Arts Centre and absorbed the role of production manager of the Hub into her full-time duties after the project failed to secure full funding. “It was a way for us to acknowledge artists who were aspiring to work at a professional level but were not getting the opportunity to make work,” she says. “We felt it was important to keep an eye on the future; that the Hub should be a professional programme of work for an audience, yes, but also that it would facilitate artists getting to the level of producing work of a professional quality themselves in the future.”

After inviting applications from local theatre artists and theatre companies, the Limerick Theatre Hub decided to stage four separate productions, two with affiliated theatre companies, two with individual artists, each of which would be produced by the same production team, and share administrative and technical resources. In order of staging, the four productions were: *Excess Baggage*, a contemporary telling of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, written by Mary Coll and directed by Joan Sheehy; *The Fisherman's Son*, a new play by Ciarda Tobin, directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, in collaboration with Amalgamation; a George Bernard Shaw adaptation, *Don Juan in Hell*, directed by Duncan Molloy; and a new version of Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Mike Finn, with Bottom Dog Theatre. (See our review.)

Although the marketing campaign linked all four of the productions together through an evocation of the elements of earth, rain, wind and fire, there was actually little sense of a thematic through-line to the productions. Furthermore, that three of the pieces were modern versions of obscure plays or texts, suggested a hard sell for a contemporary audience, although Beirne is quick to point out that “audiences don't always know what they are going to like.”

However, rather than commissioning a curated season, as Beirne explains, the Hub was actually responding to ideas that were submitted. Anyway, she says, the Hub's job was “not to make a safe programme, or something artistically conservative, but to ensure that the risks that we took were calculated risks. So that if we had two pieces of new writing, which we did, they should be off-set by something more recognisable. And our projected budgets took that into account.”

Because the project only secured €86,000 of the €100,000 requested from the Arts Council, Beirne goes on, there was “no room for loss, because we did not have an administration to soak that up. And we knew that at the start, so all of our [financial] projections were deeply conservative, in order to limit the risk. But because of the funding shortfall it is actually difficult to financially evaluate what the real cost of administering the project was, as there were a variety of hidden costs and benefits-in-kind that we received, which we couldn't have afforded to pay for.” Overall, audience figures between the four shows averaged out at between forty and fifty per cent, so box-office, as projected, was not to be a source of income.

Audience attendance rates do not do justice, however, to the impressive creative enterprise showcased over the five-month production period and there was a recognisable consistency to the production values of the four plays. Much of this had to do with the fact that, for the most part, the four shows shared design teams and technicians, whose versatility in the difficult Cecil Street venue where the Belltable is in temporary residence was particularly commendable.





While Darragh Bradshaw's perfectly atmosphere-less airport design for *Excess Baggage* incorporated two life-sized puppets, his skill as a puppeteer was to be further showcased to greater thematic effect in *Don Juan in Hell*, where he constructed and manipulated one of the protagonists. Meanwhile, Emma Fisher's transformative designs for *The Fisherman's Son*, *Don Juan in Hell* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* used every inch of the limited theatre space, drawing the eye up to its farthest corners, and inviting the imagination to roam down through the concrete floor or suggestively up through the ceiling.

Although cast sizes ranged from two (*Excess Baggage*) to seven (*The Revenger's Tragedy*), there was little double-casting; the excellent comic actress Gene Rooney providing the only link between the plays. While this gave rise to a showcase of a wide range of actors, it would have been interesting to see how some of the most interesting performers – Dorothy Cotter, Aidan Crowe, Patrick Ryan and Monica Spencer in particular – would have fared in other roles. Several of the productions also featured excellent sound design (with particular credit due to Steve Ryan for his original score for *The Revenger's Tragedy*). Meanwhile, what Beirne herself highlights as one of the most important artistic successes of the season is the creative relationships that have been spawned by collaborations between younger artists and more experienced professionals.

The Limerick Theatre Hub received an overwhelming amount of local media coverage (interviews and preview pieces as well as advertisements and reviews), cuttings from which papered the walls at 36 Cecil Street, providing both diversion and context for audiences before the show. There was also plenty of national attention, especially because of the topicality of the venture. If audiences for the four productions remained inconsistent, then, it was perhaps to do with the material itself, which, while excellently produced, just was not compelling enough to draw large audiences.

*Excess Baggage* was a pleasant, gently comic meditation on airports and women's woes; *The Fisherman's Son* proved to be a nice, nostalgic tribute to generational misunderstanding; *Don Juan in Hell* staged a didactic philosophical debate about love and justice, while *The Revenger's Tragedy* made the Jacobean morality tale resonate with contemporary crime. Ultimately, with the exception of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, there was nothing to excite the contemporary imagination, nothing that resonated vitally with the present day.

Limerick Theatre Hub has successfully demonstrated that there is huge talent among the theatre community in the region, and it has also proved that the hub model is capable of producing consistent and excellent work. As Beirne explains: "At this point it is anticipated that a further application will be submitted [to the Arts Council] in the new year in the Projects strand of funding, which would be supported by the Belltable. However, with the uncertainty surrounding all potential funding, there is no guarantee that the Projects strand will be available, but we would certainly hope it will."

What they need to do next is prove that there is an audience for excellent work in Limerick, but to do that they will need to convince Limerick that they also have something worth saying.

*Sara Keating writes about theatre for the Irish Times and Sunday Business Post.*

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# Connecting to the theatre

**T**HE newly-formed Limerick Theatre Hub's first season, Elements, was launched last week by Pat Moylan, chairperson of the Arts Council. The Limerick Theatre Hub (LTH), supported by the Arts Council, is a professional theatre initiative based at the Bellable Arts Centre. It aims to provide a creative, financial and logistical focus for the development of new theatre work, involving individual practitioners, theatre companies and the Bellable on a project by project basis.

The LTH is made up of established and emerging performers, directors, writers and designers in the mid-west region. It was set up as a response to Limerick-based Island Theatre Company's funding being cut last year after nearly 20 years in existence.

Joanne Beirne, artistic director of the Bellable and producer of LTH's forthcoming four plays, says it was "a very dark day when the decision to cut Island Theatre Company was made. The company played a big part in the fabric of Limerick's cultural life. It was the only Arts Council-funded regional theatre company in the region. But fair dues to the response of theatre practitioners in Limerick. They have been very pro-active and pragmatic."

Soon after Island Theatre Company's funding was cut, David Parnell, the then newly-appointed head of theatre at the Arts Council, attended Unfringed 2008 in Limerick and met with theatre practitioners to discuss the impact of the cut.

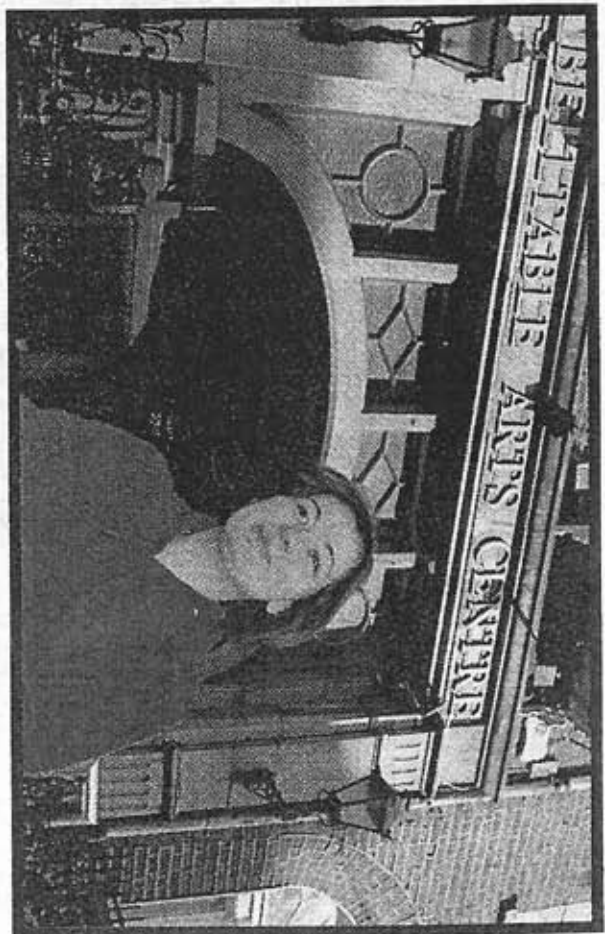
**The Limerick Theatre Hub is set to take the city by storm with**

**Elements, says Colette Sheridan**

"They were looking at ways to develop professional theatre in Limerick and one of the suggestions was a production hub model that would operate from the Arts Council-funded Bellable Arts Centre," says Beirne.

"The centre has the resources to support the administration and production side of the hub. The hub seeks to engage established and emerging artists who might not want to set up a new company to produce work."

Beirne says that the regions get a raw deal when it comes to theatre. "There's a huge focus on work that is produced in Dublin. While



there is a strong infrastructure of venues in the regions, there is a real dearth of good quality touring theatre at the moment. Companies are not being given adequate resources to tour."

The Bellable, which is being renovated, is currently located at 36, Cecil Street, and can only accommodate an audience of 100 people. But in the hope of reaching as broad an audience as possible, Beirne is in discussions with a number of other venues, looking at the possibility of touring.

The LTH has been given Arts Council funding of €86,000 through the Projects: Once Off Award scheme. It is also supported

Joanne Beirne says that the regions get a raw deal when it comes to theatre. "There's a huge focus on work that is produced in Dublin. While there is a strong infrastructure of venues in the regions, there is a real dearth of good quality touring theatre at the moment."

by Limerick City Council and RTE's Lyric FM, which is based in Limerick. Dr Michael Fineran, senior lecturer in drama and head of the department of arts and physical education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, will be critically assessing the initiative. "It could be a situation where we will fall gloriously or it could work very well. It's a new way of working for a lot of people."

Four full-scale productions make up the Elements season. It kicks off with Excess Baggage, opening on June 17. Directed by Joan Sheehy, this is a contemporary adaptation of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* written by Mary Coll.

The Fisherman's Son, directed by Barbra Ní Chaoimh, in association with Amalgamotion, opens on July 8.

This is a new work by Limerick writer and director, Ciarda Tobin, inspired by Limerick's Strand Salmon Fishermen. Don Juan in Hell by George Bernard Shaw, directed by Duncann Molloy, opens next October.

The final production of the season is *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Directed by Myles Breen, this play is produced in association with Bottom Dog Theatre Company and will transpose Thomas Middleton's Jacobean classic to contemporary Limerick.

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before cranking it back to life and reprising the chorus one more time.

Young encored with John Lennon's *A Day in the Life*, a curious choice given the richness and depth of his own back catalogue. But, typically, Young has brought a new ragged glory to a great old song.

When he left the stage after two hours on Father's Day, the dad rockers and their offspring were on their feet dreaming - like this reviewer - that Young might some day play the O2 with his old companions Crosby, Stills and Nash. (CSN play Cork's Marquee next Monday).

But this was more than enough to be getting on with. This gig was a potent reminder of the power and majesty of a defining figure in rock music. Long may he run. Now, where did I put the €150-plus for the *Neil Young Archives Volume One*.

**Excess Baggage**  
34 Cecil Street,  
Limerick

**SARA KEATING**

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* ends up in Stansted Airport in Mary Coll's reworking of the most famous of *The Canterbury Tales*. Situating Chaucer's Alys in a contemporary context, Coll finds room to re-invigorate age-old questions of female identity: the compromises of self-hood necessitated by marriage and child-rearing. The airport setting allows Coll to play with structure and contemporary content, as well as sceneography. Darragh Bradshaw's design is yellow-and-blue functional, creating a visual cue for the unnamed airline-bashing that the characters partake in without libelling anyone. Kevin Smith's lighting design has that same tired yellow glow.

Meanwhile, the side-stage presence of two life-sized puppets, dolled-up like shop mannequins, provides a visual distraction too.

though as a rule air-stewards tend to be invisible - at least they are certainly never around when you need them to be.

In Coll's reworking, Alice - as the *Wife of Bath* becomes - is a thoroughly modern heroine, frankly divulging her history to a stranger in the airport departure lounge. Pouring over celebrity weddings in *OK!* magazine, she somehow manages to thaw the icy reception of business woman Ruth (Gene Rooney), whose frosty front is a facade to protect herself from the judgment of her imposing neighbour. Monica Spencer makes for a charming, guileless, and incongruously glamorous Alice.

However, despite the counsel she dispenses with sandwiches and eclairs, it is she who really has the excess baggage. She may know a lot about diamonds, and a hell of a lot about marriage, but as this is her confessional, her tale, so it is also her quiet tragedy. Director Joan Sheehy allows this more serious study of a woman's floundering sense of self-worth to underscore all the ribald humour of the play, and the chilling final lines resonate, as Alice is left on stage, struggling with her shopping, alone.

Ultimately, the Chaucerian origins of Coll's slight, amusing play are take-it-or-leave-it, but there is much to enjoy on a more literal level: a good old whinge about the state of airports these days, and a few laughs about a woman's lot in this world. Runs until Sat.

**Tetyana Vlasjuk**  
(piano)  
NCH John Field  
Room, Dublin

**ANDREW JOHNSTONE**

Rameau - Les Tourbillons. Les Cyclopes. La Poule. Schubert - Sonata in A minor D784. Bartók - Suite Op 14. Liszt - Ballade No 2.

Dublin Master Classes presented this lunchtime piano recital by

# The Theatre Hub

The Irish Times Fri 10<sup>th</sup> July 09'

PUBLICATION: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**The Fisherman's Son**  
36 Cecil Street,  
Limerick

**SARA KEATING**

CIARDA TOBIN'S play *The Fisherman's Son* is a sophisticated exercise in old-fashioned storytelling, bringing together three generations of a Limerick family whose fate mirrors the changing face of Ireland.

Peter, in an affecting performance by John Murphy, is a carpenter, boatbuilder and salmon fisher, whose way of life is slipping through the nets with the challenges of modern life. Having lost his wife, Annie, he is ready to build his own coffin, but his passing from this world will be slow and humiliating.

His son John, played at various ages by the able Denis Foley, is less certain of his values or place in the world. Divorced, a modern émigré in Belgium, he is racing towards a future that has no time for the intricacies of traditional crafts or modes of living such as fishing.

They are brought together by John's son Sam (Maurice Foley), whose oral histories seek to preserve both the old way of life that his grandfather represents and the family relationships.

Told through a combination of real-time action, narration and flashback, Tobin keeps a firm eye on character, even if the generational divide and its parallels with the passage of 20th-century Ireland seem laboured, especially in the final scene.

However, there is real verve in the writing and an ear for idiom. Director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh's sensitive hand eschews sentimentality where it can.

Emma Fisher's raw deal set is strung with nets and ropes, making the theatre space itself the boat's workshop. Kevin Smith's lighting facilitates the timeframe changes, but does little in the way of creating atmosphere.

As a lament for lost times and the ever-evolving family unit, *The Fisherman's Son* is a touching, if somewhat clichéd, tribute. But there is a quiet tragedy building as Peter's boat floats towards its final destination, the river Lethe, where the "man with the black hands", and his wife, are waiting.

Runs until July 18th



version of the music that receives the majority of airplay, in their respective continents.

"We're not affixed to a scene or a culture of making money, which is hard in Ireland anyway," says Ophelia. "The commercial world creates a very bastardised form of something that began from pure expressional roots. Anything doctored and manufactured for commercial gain loses the message."

Many participants will speak of hip hop offering a chance to kick-start a renewed

picture, background, from left) Ophelia McCabe from Dublin's East Wall, Vaimoana Niumeitolu from New York, Emile YX? of Cape Town's Black Noise, with (in foreground) bandmates Daniel Van Wyk and DJ Thee Angelo. Photographer: Dara Mac Donnail

When humans started to record, or write down any feeling, you'd have found an incredible, fast lyricism and delivery. The gift of the gab. We've always been highly expressive verbally." The oral tradition continues, whether in Irish, English or Afrikaans, matched with bodhráns, B-boys or breakbeats.

Hip-NGs is at Vicar Street tomorrow at 8pm. axis-ballymun.ie

# hibition

appear in photographs, landscapes in the aftermath of a battle. Apart altogether from their historical nature, they are extraordinary, visually striking environments. They also accord with some of Burch's previous work, which displays an interest in the way modernity shapes landscapes, rural and urban, general and local.

Another pattern that emerges in his past work recurs in this project: a consideration of the space alternates with a consideration of those who occupy it. As he says: "I'm not a great one for having a rigid theme and sticking religiously to it."

*Under a Grey Sky* could have been purely a landscape project but, as it progressed, I thought that would be disingenuous, because all the time I was aware that there are people there, working on the peatlands and living adjacent to them. And the industry and landscape are central to their lives. So there are two sides to the story - people and landscapes."

Some of the people who live close to and work within this hard, challenging environment feature in portrait photographs. As with his approach to landscape, Burch is not formulaic in his portraiture. The pictures are intricately and precisely detailed, the settings are workaday, often spare and functional, the individuals have a solidity and a reserve about them.

Through various emblems of work, utility and entertainment, we gradually get a sense of the range of human aspirations, framed on one side by rigorous actuality and on the other by optimistic possibility.

*Under a Grey Sky* is at the Gallery of Photography, Meeting House Square, Dublin until November 15



**'It's not that unlike being beside the sea, it has that elemental quality'**

Photographs: Simon Burch, from *Under a Grey Sky*

# REVIEW

## Don Juan in Hell 36 Cecil Street, Limerick

SARA KEATING

*Don Juan in Hell* is the title of the third act of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, a dense meditation on philosophy, politics, religion and love. As with all things Shawian, it is a debate about morality, free will and the nature of consciousness, staged as a dialogue between several characters that is dense with brilliant, pithy, quotable lines.

Where the long third act of the play is often cut from productions of what has become a Shaw classic, Duncan Molloy cuts the rest of the play, and instead gives us the third act alone in a 75-minute stylish cinematic production. (However, this is not an entirely original concept: a notorious concert version was similarly staged in the 1950s.) The third act is structured as a debate between Latinate Lothario-turned-philosopher Don Juan (Nathan Gordon), his former lover Ana (Eilish O'Donnell), Ana's statuesque guardian, (Darragh Bradshaw) and a demagogue and dandy of a Devil, played by Martin Maguire. Each of the four characters embodies a particular attitude to the philosophical questions that Shaw is interested in unravelling.

Emma Fisher's cobwebbed set is a refreshingly original version of hell, the half-sunken statues and allusively ascending staircase taking an abstract rather than a literal approach to preconceptions, and her transformative costumes are similarly inventive. Meanwhile, Darragh Bradshaw's puppetry-skills are perfectly realised in bringing the character of the Statue to life.

Molloy's use of music throughout helps to bring a comic and ironic edge to Shaw's voice. However, the performances in this Limerick Hub Production lack clarity. There are terrible problems with diction, but more crucially, the cast fails to bring Shaw's arguments into digestible focus. What results is thus a triumph of style over substance. The production is aesthetically adventurous, but makes no real case for why its' ideas should be relevant to a contemporary generation.

- Runs until October 24

# The Revenger's Tragedy

SARA KEATING

Tue, Nov 17, 2009

36 Cecil Street, Limerick

*The Revenger's Tragedy*

Laden with contemporary cultural references and self-conscious quotations from some of Middleton's ancestors (Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* is an obvious visual reference, while *The Sopranos* and Quentin Tarantino get a nod in the text), Finn doesn't just make the classic play "relevant", he transforms its idiom entirely, engaging with both the gang culture that Limerick audiences will be no strangers to, and the defining genres of 21-century film and TV. If the juxtaposition of Middleton's iambic verse jars occasionally with the idiomatic Limerick cadences of Finn's writing, more often it actually gels, underscoring the vengeful Vinnie's corrupted honour and morality.

Liam O'Brien makes something of a pantomime villain from the complex Vindici, particularly towards the end of the play as the bloodbath begins. This is partly to do with his awkward soliloquies, which director Myles Breen fails to frame sufficiently, but it is also to do with the venue at 36 Cecil Street, whose auditorium lacks the necessary depth for an audience's objective viewing; a more distanced configuration would suit the play's aesthetic far better. There are also some fine performances, however, especially from Aidan Crowe as the luckless Spaz, bastard son and "uncertain man", who eventually comes – like his brothers and father – to an awful end.

The original cinematic score by Steve Ryan is crucial in setting the tone for Limerick Hub's excellent, final production. It is at once suspenseful and vaguely absurd, and it is crucial in facilitating a brilliant play of irony in the closing tableau, as Middleton and Finn's vision of a godforsaken world is ready to be torn apart again as the cycle of revenge plays on.

Until November 21

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