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HOME-GROWN DANCE AT THE FRINGE:

A REVIEW OF TEN WORKS

Since its establishment in 1995, the Dublin Fringe Festival (in this year's incarnation titled Absolut Fringe) has come to play such a vital role in the showcasing of new work, that it is hard to imagine the Irish performance landscape without it. This is particularly true in the case of dance, as over the past fifteen years of its existence, the Fringe has arguably developed into one of the most important platforms for established and emerging dance artists to introduce their work to both dance and non-dance audiences. The presence of dance at the festival increased significantly with the appointment of dancer and choreographer Wolfgang Hoffman as director in 2005. On Hoffman's departure in 2008, the loss of his connections with the dance touring circuit witnessed a notable dip in the participation of international dance companies. However a positive development to be seen in this year's offering, under the direction of Róise Goan, has been the marked increase in the number of works by Irish-based companies. This is no surprise given the current vibrancy of the dance scene in Ireland. Yet when it is considered that the history of the festival is concurrent with the life - and disastrous afterlife - of the Celtic Tiger boom, and that the economic backdrop for this year's Fringe is easily the bleakest to date, the appearance of ten works by Irish companies feels like a kind of triumph. The reviews of the pieces that follow, provide not only a critical response to the ten works, but also function as a snapshot in time, highlighting the wonderful diversity of styles and genres being practiced by the newest generation of Irish-based dance practitioners and choreographers.



The Ballet Ruse

Muirne Bloomer and Emma O'Kane
Project Upstairs

In the cleverly titled *The Ballet Ruse*, two of Ireland's best-known contemporary dancers, Muirne Bloomer and Emma O'Kane, take us back to their classical roots, providing an alternately humorous and critical look at their experiences of ballet training and performance. Donning tutus and pointe shoes and demonstrating a deft ability to puncture and manipulate the iconicity of the ballet world, the pair highlights some of the more absurd aspects of ballet training and performance to a soundtrack of *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* and Lady Gaga's *Just Dance*. Making literal reference to ballet's punishing corporeal regime, they enter dressed in boxers' robes and carrying a barre across their backs as if trapped in medieval stocks. *Bourrées*, *échappés* and ballet mime become military drills and much fun is had with the more well-known dancers' survival tactics: bubble-wrap is stuffed into pointe shoes, eccentric warm-up habits are performed at the resin box (which is treated with a kind of holy reverence), and ballerinas smoke to kill the tedium during lengthy onstage corps de ballet posing sessions, later downing pints of Guinness with an alarming rapidity at sessions of another sort. Amidst the humour, Bloomer and Kane are not afraid to also highlight some of the more tragic survival tactics associated with the profession. In a scene reminiscent of the Kingdom of the Shades from *La*



The Ballet Ruse

Photo:
Jonathan Mitchell

Bayadère, lengths of toilet paper are substituted for the usual gauze, and after some wafting around, are held in the mouth and eaten, before being vomited out in the wings by Bloomer (who later speaks of her ten-year struggle with bulimia), while O’Kane tries to conceal her actions from view with forced smiles and poses. Some scenes, such as the opening exercises at the barre or the head-banging release towards the end, suffer a little from overstatement, yet overall this is a wonderfully conceived and performed work.

Hang On

Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Theatre
Project Upstairs

Founded in 2000 by choreographer Chantal McCormick and musician Jym Daly, Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Theatre has forged a niche for aerial dance in Ireland with their indoor and outdoor works that attempt a fusion of contemporary circus, theatre and dance. *Hang On*, an intimate indoor work for two performers (McCormick and Lee Clayden), a musician, and a trapeze, shows the transformation of a couple’s relationship from a state of aggressive competition to the (literal) achievement of peaceful balance through mutual reliance. Dressed in business suits, McCormick and Clayden mingle with the audience before the show begins, rushing through the foyer and the auditorium while performing harried time checking gestures. When they meet onstage, their dance becomes a combat until McCormick takes to the trapeze, lifting herself out of the squabble below. In keeping with the mood of the choreography, the live electronic music is aggressively loud (perhaps a little too loud at first), and an interesting layer of kinaesthetic interaction is added through the reverberations of the thumping base line, which are powerful enough to have the effect of mimicking the palpitations of a stressed heart in the viewer. Clayden continues the aggressive dynamic by drawing a large chalk circle on the floor - a boundary that keeps him separated from McCormick until the shedding of their suits and partial erasure of the circle allows a shedding of pressure. In the strongest moment of the piece, McCormick’s series of static, hanging positions on the trapeze achieve a startling resonance with the iconic Falling Man images, transforming the chalk circle clock into a ground zero, and momentarily suggesting a suspension of time. Clayden’s frantic circling of the boundary is less successful, at times verging on the pantomimic, and in the final section when both performers begin a pas de deux on the trapeze, their changing

of position sometimes breaks the otherwise convincing blending of disciplines, allowing the mechanics of their trapeze technique to come into view. Yet despite some rough edges, *Hang On* is a compelling work on the whole, and the closing moment, in which the performers curl up together on the trapeze in a suspended embrace, is beautiful.

Paradise Dance Hall

Maurice Joseph Kelliher
Project Upstairs

In *Paradise Dance Hall* by Maurice Joseph Kelliher, a woman (Olwen Grindley) wearing a white men’s shirt and undone tie, dances what is essentially a lengthy solo to a continuous, recorded soundtrack made up of song and spoken text. During a pre-set tableau, and at various points throughout the work, the woman is joined onstage by a rather shadowy male figure who, after providing a dramatic beginning to the piece by exiting the stage and turning the lights off as he leaves, returns at various points to the darkened upstage area to lie on the floor, dance a slow phrase across the back wall, or finally attach a bunch of flowers to a stage right lighting boom. His presence (or absence) does not seem to have any discernible effect on the woman’s dance, and the lack of interaction between the two, coupled with the unbroken focus on the woman’s solo throughout, causes his appearances to seem a little redundant. Perhaps this complete dislocation was intended, yet it proved a puzzling element. This sense of disconnect was also to be found in the relation between the soundtrack and the movement. The piece opened with Patti Jerome’s melancholy Nashville recording of *Hurt O’Clock*, and was followed by what seemed to be a rape victim’s testimony, and then a collection of people’s autobiographical stories about their sexual desires and experiences. Again, the connection between the woman’s dance and the heavily meaning-laden text of the recordings appeared to lack direction. Despite these difficulties, however, the piece did succeed in delivering some memorable moments, such as Grindley’s pas de trois with her socks and duet with her tie, and a brief, exhilarating section in which she executes just-barely-in-control strides around the space in an anguished manège. Dramaturgically, this piece has many interesting ideas that if further integrated, or perhaps more purposefully dislocated, might create a more coherent whole.



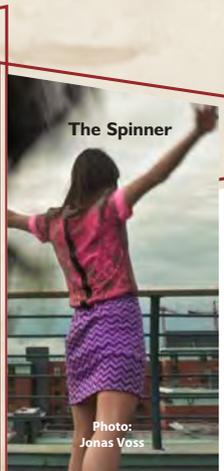
Hang On

Photo:
Annika Johansson



Paradise Dance Hall

Photo:
Victor Cibulka



The Spinner

Photo:
Jonas Voss



Anybody waitin'?

Photo:
ponydance



Listowel Syndrome

Photo:
Emma Martin

The Spinner

Aoife McAtamney
DanceHouse

There was much to enjoy in this short work for three dancers (McAtamney, Emma Martin and Anna Kaszuba) inspired by the three fates of Greek mythology. Personifying birth (the spinner), life (the measurer) and death (the cutter), McAtamney lent each of her fates distinctive movement qualities that, in keeping with the spinning theme, were woven together in sections of group synchronicity at the opening and closing of the work. The re-occurrence of small details, such as the twirling of fingers above heads, or a bourrée sequence in which the dancers are linked at the waist in a manner reminiscent of the muses in Balanchine's *Apollo*, showed a skilful use of repetition, and the group sections moved well through the space, making good use of levels and depth. The three solos were a little unbalanced in terms of length and exposition, (death's solo seemed somewhat short and undeveloped in comparison to the other two), but the dancers each gave engaging performances, with Kaszuba's solo being particularly strong. The live music performed on electric violin by the composer, Tom Lane, was excellent. Throughout the work Lane followed the dancers with an acute sensitivity, and his ability to coax all manner of tones, moods and rhythms from his instrument was magical. Altogether, a very promising work.

Anybody waitin'?

ponydance
No Name Bar

Outdoor site specific performance in Ireland is always going to have to deal with the distinct possibility of rain, and it is to Ponydance's credit that they soldiered on through several downpours during the performance of *Anybody waitin'* that I saw in the garden area of the No Name Bar on Fade Street. Commissioned by the Fringe, this highly energetic blend of street performance, dance, and theatre was shown at fifteen different locations over the course of the festival by the intrepid cast of four (Leonie McDonagh, Paula O'Reilly, Carl Harrison and Neil Hainsworth). Unfortunately it was difficult to follow the show's narrative through the din created by the rain, but it seemed to loosely follow a love story between a hard-to-please dancing diva and her acrobatically talented stage manager. Despite the nasty weather, the show held together well (the costume change in the opening section seemed unnecessary, but maybe that was due to my missing

parts of the dialogue), and the fun blend of hip hop, x-factor posturing, dodgy ballet, headstands in underpants, and acrobatics had a lot of the audience bopping along to Stevie Wonder even before the arrival of the dedicated section of audience interaction.

Listowel Syndrome

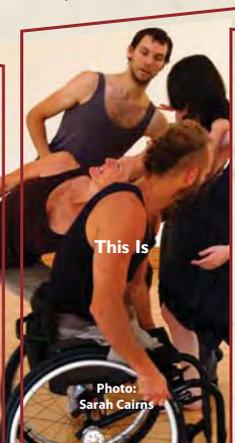
Emma Martin
Project Theatre Upstairs

Choreographed and written by Emma Martin, *Listowel Syndrome* is an ambitious dance theatre work inspired by the recent incident at a rape trial case in Kerry, in which fifty members of the Listowel community queued up to show their support for the convicted rapist by shaking his hand. Performed by a cast of five dancers, one drumming percussionist, a humming and whispering choir of four singers, and two actors who provide the narrative framework that links the danced sections, the piece also features a beautifully subtle lighting design by Stephen Dodd. Martin does not attempt a literal rendition of the incident, instead distilling the essentials of the story to take a more general look at the functioning of belonging and exclusion in tight-knit communities. As the piece focuses on charting the events leading to a rape, rather than on the behaviour of a community after its occurrence, the particularly disturbing aspects of the Listowel case inevitably get lost. Nevertheless, there is much to be admired in this work. Martin uses a simple and effective storytelling structure that divides the work into four stages of 'predation', and as the piece progresses, we see a victim being singled out from a group, being stalked and cornered, and finally being 'consumed' by a predator. At times I felt that some of the narration by the actors was perhaps unnecessary, as their words often only served to double the very clear message articulated by the choreography of the group. This quibble was further underlined by the excellence achieved by Martin in moments where she allowed the dancers to speak while moving. A particularly strong example occurred in a solo by the victim, whose moving vocalisation of a desire to go back in time was lent a piercing reality by the shuddering articulations of her body. The fusion evident in this scene was not always achieved, and the inserted asides to the audience by the victim and predator during the otherwise admirably choreographed rape scene felt a little awkward. However, the wonderful energy of the ensemble cast and the choreographic potential displayed by Martin mark this as one of the most notable dance premieres of the festival.



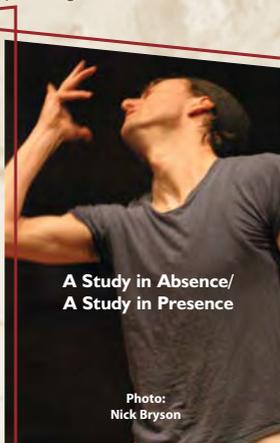
The Work
The Work

Photo:
John Graham



This Is

Photo:
Sarah Cairns



A Study in Absence/
A Study in Presence

Photo:
Nick Bryson



Never look in the Mirror
When You're Dancing

Photo:
Sarah Murphy

The Work The Work

Fitzgerald and Stapleton
Project Cube

Emma Fitzgerald and Áine Stapleton's latest offering shows some significant developments in the duo's practice since the founding of their company, Fitzgerald & Stapleton, in 2008. As in earlier works, the influence of Deborah Hay is evident in the pair's fascination with playing with quotidian movement and sound, in their desire to be 'present in every moment', and in their use of a pre-written score (this time originating from autobiographical experiences collected from their everyday lives). Yet in *The Work The Work* there is an increasing use of theatrical devices - if consciously and carefully spare - and it seems that a lot more of the previously wholly internalised score has been given an external visual or aural presence. An example of this included a scene in which an offstage voice (Fitzgerald) recites both sides of an interview with Stapleton, who remains silent and motionless throughout while seated under a bright spotlight on a chair facing the stage right wall. Another example is the short film showing images of Fitzgerald dancing in woodland, which includes captions of her thoughts: 'what happens to the words we don't say?' Other familiar elements that have been further developed include the continued use of nudity as a critical response to the portrayal of female bodies in the media. This might seem a little paradoxical, but as the choreographers themselves explained in the post-show discussion, their commitment to fully inhabiting their 'normal women's bodies' (Fitzgerald states, 'my body is my own') is intended as an intervention into a world full of airbrushed images of unobtainable corporeal perfection. In *The Work The Work* their determined, uncompromising display of comfortably inhabiting their unadorned bodies results in an early scene in which they both lie on their backs to masturbate in a quietly matter-of-fact fashion, and a brief moment towards the end in which Stapleton engages in audience interaction by leaning up against people seated in the front rows. Due to their conspicuously tactical nature, these explicit interventions are in danger of losing their integrity within the performance structure as a whole. Yet overall this work is engaging, often very funny, and rather wonderfully different.

This Is

Croí Glan Integrated Dance Company
DanceHouse

A Study in Absence/ A Study in Presence

Legitimate Bodies Dance Theatre
DanceHouse

Double bills inevitably produce comparisons and connections, and the two works in progress shown in DanceHouse provided some excellent food for thought. These pieces are at different points along the scale of 'readiness', with Croí Glan's *This Is* presenting several moments of polished surety, while Legitimate Bodies' *A Study in Absence/A Study in Presence*

allowed a glimpse into a process of choreographic questioning in its raw stages. It was the theme of accessibility that became the point of connection between the works. In *This Is*, guest choreographer Adam Benjamin's interest in sculptural form and obvious delight in exploring the movement idiosyncrasies of his differently-abled performers, allowed the viewer, for some fleeting moments, to access an integrated performance from a position beyond the binaries of difference. Some sections of the work, such as the exploration of the pendulum effect in the middle of the piece, could do with some editing, and others, such as the potentially tantalising duets between Tara Brandel and James O'Shea, felt a little underdeveloped. Coming from a different perspective, Nick Bryson's take on accessibility was approached through a philosophical questioning of performance *qua* performance. A comparison of juggling and dance intersected with spoken musings, Bryson's work turns the mechanics of his practice into the performance itself. He does this by showing the repetition that lies behind his juggling virtuosity and choreographic creation, highlighting our (presumably) different perceptions of these two performance idioms along the way. Comparing the audience reception of dance and juggling through an interrogation of accessibility is a fascinating endeavour, yet at times I wondered if the rather obvious implicit answers to some of Bryson's many questions left enough room for the audience to ponder the matter for themselves, which I am guessing was Bryson's commendable intent. Nevertheless, this is an intriguing work that I look forward to seeing as a fully developed piece.

Never look in the Mirror When You're Dancing

HaveMoreFun
Boys' School @ Smock Alley Theatre

In this half-hour dance theatre piece, Kay Scarah digs into the past to tell the story of why her father could not take his eyes off her mother when they practiced ballroom dancing in their living room. Between sections of narration that jump in time between 1935 and 1957, Scarah plays herself as a child, young enough, and tiny enough, to fit into a stool made out of an orange crate (the original crate has cleverly been rebuilt to the scale of Scarah's adult-sized body). Making up the rest of the cast, Megan Kennedy and Jessica Kennedy energetically, and sometimes acrobatically, dance the other figures in the story, including the all-important ballroom dancing parents. The positioning of the audience on balconies above the action works well to enhance the kinaesthetic sense of being observers of a world created from the memories of a child's experiences - we look down as Scarah reaches up on her tiptoes to offer us a cookie. While the reiteration of some choreographic motifs is a little overstretched (such as Scarah getting yet another limb trapped in the crate while her parents continue fox-trotting or jiving), and the ending arrives rather abruptly, the piece succeeds as an evocative sketch that joins a study in nostalgia with playful creativity.

Aoife McGrath is a dancer, choreographer and dance scholar. She is currently in the final stages of a PhD researching dance theatre at TCD, where she also lectures in dance theatre, performing and contemporary Irish theatre. Her dance research has been supported by several awards including a DAAD research scholarship, a Trinity College Scholarship and gold medal, and an IRCHSS Government of Ireland postgraduate scholarship. She is the Ireland correspondent for *Dance Europe* and publications emanating from her doctoral research are forthcoming in *The Contemporary Theatre Review* and edited collections from Oxford University Press and Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Commissioned by Dance Ireland (2010): www.danceireland.ie