

THEATRE SHOP CONFERENCE 2004

Friday 1st October

PARALLEL SESSIONS (b)

11.45am – 1.00pm

Irish Theatre in Europe: Language? Money? Or Both?

Chair: Christine Madden, Literary Manager of Rough Magic Theatre Company; also journalist and critic.

Speakers: Krystyna Meissner, International Theatre Festival, Dialogue, Wroclaw; Katarina Dudakova, International Theatre Festival, Nitra, Slovakia; Mária Mayer Szilágyi, Contemporary Drama Festival/Hungarian Theatre Institute, Budapest.

Christine Madden: I'm very flattered to be here to chair this discussion on International Touring. I'm also very honoured to be able to introduce our very illustrious guests. I think it's fantastic that so many people are interested in international touring, and there are many good reasons why it's a good idea. For one, we've just recently topped the four million mark in Ireland, so we just don't have such a big market. If we look outside of Ireland the possibilities of reaching other people with, not only our work but the opportunities to represent Ireland are just enormous. There's also the added perk of how nice it is to be in other places; to get the opportunity to use different venues and their resources. You get such a great buzz out of it. It's so very interesting to see other work and meet other people and work through the languages; and I'll get to that in a minute. Of course there are problems with that, and there'll be lots of discussion about that and I hope that you will all join in later with your questions and your concerns.

One of the difficulties in touring is economic. We have difficulty getting money together to put something on here, it needs that much more money to go abroad. I have to say I think that recently the Arts Council, for all the flack that they get, have taken great interest in trying to support artists that go abroad. I would make every effort to make use of that. Get in touch with Diego Fasciati, who represents the international side

of the Arts Council. They have resources, they have ideas. Also Theatre Shop; an event like this is fantastic for making those contacts.

The other difficulty with travelling abroad and touring internationally is a bit more nebulous. I think it is a mind-set that we have. We don't tend really to look abroad. We don't really know much about it a lot of the time, and we have great problems with our language. A lot of people have said to me they feel very embarrassed or ashamed that they maybe don't know a foreign language, or they don't know how to establish contact. I think you'll find that, strangely, if there are problems in touring abroad, that isn't one of them. Most people do speak English, or have the ability somehow to make themselves understood. You can usually make a contact and carry everything through in English. It's always a very interesting experience. English is a lingua franca; they're very interested in learning English. When they speak English, they speak it through their own culture, so you get that added richness of the language. You learn so much through it, and it is really very enriching.

I'd like to introduce our wonderful guests here. Mária Mayer Szilágyi founded the Contemporary Drama Festival in Budapest in 1997. The festival presents the best of new Hungarian writing, as well as a range of exciting and challenging work from all around Europe. You might want to have a word with her later. The programme comprises performances, rehearsed readings of foreign plays translated into Hungarian, workshops and seminars, a drama translation seminar, a devised theatre workshop, and so on. Conferences, plenary meetings, and musical events. Interest in producing new plays has risen significantly in Hungary in recent years, and many of the international plays presented at the festival have subsequently been produced by Hungarian theatres. Mária is also the Artistic Director of the Contemporary Drama Festival at Budapest and also the Director of the Hungarian Theatre Institute in Budapest.

Mária does speak English, but feels a little bit shy about speaking English at the moment and would like to speak in German. So she has asked you to bear with her while she makes here speech in German. In order that you will all understand the speech, I'm going to attempt to translate it back into English. Given that she has a reluctance to speak in English, and I have a similar reluctance to translate it, I'm making a disclaimer for that right now. If she speaks for ten minutes and I give you a two minute translation which is

whatever she's given in speech bubbles, please don't come back to me later and say, you didn't say that. I can't do the whole thing and I've got to pay attention.

I'd love to pass this on now to Mária.

Mária Mayer Szilágyi: [*paraphrased from spoken English*] I would like to show that I can speak a little English, but I cannot speak fluently. I would like to tell you some important things and so I think it is better that you can hear them translated well into your language.

[*translated from German by Christine Madden, with comments*] I'm from Hungary. Most of you probably don't know very much about Hungary, and as a matter of fact, the Hungarians know quite a lot about you. So be warned. Irish theatre is very much at home in Hungary.

(Christine Madden - *It shows how much we have to catch up really, in terms of our interest in international theatre.*) In Hungary since 1996 we have been producing Irish pieces quite regularly. To date, 41 productions of Irish plays have been put on. I have quite an exhaustive list. Plays from Brendan Behan, a huge number of plays from Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard, Martin McDonagh, Tom Murphy, Seán O'Casey, Brian Phelan, Saul O'Hara, a huge number of plays by Synge, and Enda Walsh. So as you see, we are quite interested in Irish theatre, and would welcome the opportunity to see more of it.

Of all of the pieces, the new work that is produced in Hungary – and there would be a lot of that, British, German, and from all over Europe really and the rest of the world – we feel a tie with Ireland. That is the one we feel the closest to, and the one that we would really be the most interested in. We feel almost a sort of familial relationship with Ireland.

There are a lot of reasons why Irish theatre is so interesting to the Hungarians, so many that I would hesitate to bring them up now when we are so pressed for time. If anyone would like to have a coffee after this talk you're more than welcome to approach me and have a word.

What I'm amazed at is that, although so many Irish plays have come to Hungary, they get the plays but they don't get the ensembles, they don't get the groups

coming over, and I wonder why. I tried once to get Enda Walsh and a company over there with a production, and the monies weren't there so it didn't work. I found that quite disappointing.

I've travelled to a lot of different theatre festivals, and the paucity, the lack of Irish companies performing abroad is quite surprising. I don't understand why this is. I don't think it has anything to do with language. When a play comes to Hungary we always translate it, and we always have a simultaneous translation. You might think it doesn't work in theatre, but it does. (*Christine Madden – I witnessed it in the Biennale we just had in Wiesbaden, where they would translate every piece that went on, because they had pieces from all over Europe. Everybody who goes in can get a set of headphones and they'll have the translation coming through the headphones, and you can sometimes chose the language that you want. It works very well, surprisingly, but it does work.*) Everything that we do we will translate, so it really has nothing to do with the language.

I ask myself why this is. Are the Irish pieces so good that they just have their own life, they don't keep going? So many times when we do get tips about Irish plays, they come from the British. (*Christine Madden - This is something I think we should pay more attention to. We're not really supporting our own work.*)

I hope you will enlighten me. I don't understand why there is so little new Irish work that travels abroad. Particularly premieres of new Irish work. I'm hoping that there are members of the audience who will enlighten me, and you will have your own views on this subject.

Please make contact with me. I'm really, really interested in new Irish work. I'm looking for it. Please, do come if you have some new work you're interested in speaking to me about. Please contact me about it. It's something I'm really interested in.

Thank you very much.

Christine Madden: Our next speaker is Krystyna Meissner.

Krystyna Meissner: From Contemporary Theatre from Wroclaw. For some people who know German history, that is Breslau. It is a town which is in a part of

Poland which was given to Poland after the Second World War by Stalin. This town is a very important one, because it is one of the most important and biggest towns in Poland. The name of my theatre is Contemporary Theatre in Wroclaw. At the same time I am the organiser of the festival. It is the second festival in my life. It's a very, very hard thing to think over and to create two festivals one after the other, but it is the last one, this one in Breslau. The first one in Torauinn, which is a little town in the north of Poland, was called Contact. It was at the moment where nobody from the West knew anybody from the East. Such contact was very, very necessary at the time. Now in Breslau with another idea I organised a festival called Dialogue (International Theatre Dialogue, Wroclaw Poland) because after the first contact we needed a discussion, a dialogue between the different theatres in Europe and the world.

Christine Madden: I would also like to mention that she's a member of the Informal European Theatre Meeting, and a three-time juror of the European Theatre Prize in Taormina. That makes her doubly interesting, as it's a good resource for all of us interested in looking to Europe, making contacts and nurturing those contacts in order to travel abroad.

Krystyna Meissner: What is interesting about me is that I am one of the few people that have invited Irish theatre to my festival. I would like to tell you about it, but a little later.

I've tried to answer very seriously your question posed to us. It was: what kind of obstacles stand in the way of Irish Theatre in winning a wide reception in the Europe and the world? You asked me is it a problem of language, money, artistic differences, or all three? I'll answer. The language shouldn't be any problem today. Here I agree with Mária. The language you use in your country has become our modern lingua franca. It is the language of universal communication in the world. It's true that often commonly used English doesn't resemble the BBC manner of speaking; it's rather a European dialect of English. Still, there is growing knowledge of English in the world, and with the technical possibilities of simultaneous translation, I do not see any serious difficulties on this issue.

The money. Yes, it could be an obstacle. There are usually three ways of being presented abroad: through the festivals, international touring, and partnership exchanges with other foreign institutions, theatres, ensembles or agencies. Like a twin town exchange. The partnership exchange, for example, between two theatres from different countries is the cheapest way of presenting theatre abroad. The cost of such an exchange is very low, divided between the partners. The ensembles cover themselves, their expenses of transport, and the actors' fees. The technical services and the renting of the venue is given free to the guest theatre by the inviting one.

From the perspective of our system of theatre, where in our part of Europe we still have the venues linked with the ensembles, it's very easy to give a venue to another company who come, and not to ask them an amount of money for the rent. The income from the sale of the tickets is a unit profit that can be shared between the two theatres, or given to one or the other. It was a very popular way of going abroad with performances in Middle and Eastern Europe, before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. We travelled a lot in that way in our region of Europe because of this system.

I forgot to mention here, one thing that is easiest, I think, from the point of view of going abroad. It is the agreement between the two governments to organise a season for a national theatre of culture in the other country. For example, the Polish season in France of all fields of culture. It's also now the Polish season in Moscow. If there is a system like that, then both countries pay for these excursions. The problem is only to be in the programme of this exchange at a governmental level.

Touring is usually organised by an agency that treats the enterprise as a commercial one. Both sides, the agency and the theatre, are interested in making the highest possible amount of money. In that case the money really matters.

Taking part in a festival, or in several cooperating festivals in Europe, is dependant on a bit of luck, on what is trendy thematically or aesthetically, and on many other issues that I will be raising later. In a word, coming onto the international market is a really difficult thing, but the difficulties are not especially caused by financial matters.

The third of your reasons for the lack of your theatre in the European world was the artistic differences. This was the third reason you mentioned as a possible obstacle for Irish theatre companies in getting their work presented in Europe. Before I answer, I

would like to present you with my personal definition of the theatre conceived as a means of artistic expression. It is important to help me explain why I think this reason is most important.

The characteristic feeder of theatre as an art is its local character. An artist in need of expressing his artistic message creates a piece of theatre art directed to the nearest environment. To the people with whom he has grown up, with whom he shares an outlook on life and a knowledge of the world. This message is full of signs that are comprehensible mostly for his compatriots. It is tuned at the same wavelength of emotions that could be received and felt only by his fellow countrymen. The strangers interpret such a complex of unusual artistic means as an exotic value of the art. Sometimes it happens that such a local creation exceeds its regional or national reach and wins international appreciation of its worth, and becomes an international success. What I've just described is in my opinion a natural process of theatrical projects coming to life. What I have called the exotic value of the theatre due to its local scale of reach, we can also call the artistic differences that can be noticed in the theatres of different European countries. I have observed this phenomenon thanks to my work as organiser of my festivals.

We can speak about the specificity of German, French, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and the other national theatres. Sometimes we accept it. We can even be fascinated by it. But much more often we cannot understand it. We feel indifferent and irritated with it. The problem of our unconcern towards such theatre could be provoked by an incomprehension of subject, or an entire alien aesthetic language. We can admire the Chinese Opera as a complex of interesting images and sounds, but apart from a small group of connoisseurs, we are not able to understand its nature. The aesthetic of the play could even be funny for us. The differences between the European theatres are not so deep, but serious enough to keep our interest aside. But in the case of a theatre event overpasses its local reach and achieves a large acceptance, all those artistic differences become an important value in strengthening the artistic success. In my opinion, the variety of European national cultures is our treasure. What we have to do is try to attain the mutual acknowledgement of that phenomenon.

Some examples: ten years ago I invited to Festival Contact one of the best productions of the Swiss director Christopher Mattaler, called more or less 'Kill, kill, kill the European'. It was presented at my festival twice. Usually I have simultaneous translation during the presentation of the performance, but suddenly the manager of the Company asked me to take off the Polish, English and Russian translations (we translate every text to those three languages) and to leave the show in it's native language, German. The result was deplorable. Except for a small group of people who knew German, nobody understood anything about the play. I pleaded with their manager to allow me to use the prepared translation during the second performance. I got the permission.

You cannot imagine how enthusiastic the reception was. There was such a big contrast between the reception of these two performances. The production won the first prize in the festival. I asked the manager why he was so afraid of that translation. Because, he said, the subject of the play is so German that I thought it would be misunderstood by Polish people. He fortunately was mistaken. The subject of this performance was the reunion with Eastern Germany after the toppling of the regime. The manager, living in West Germany, couldn't imagine that exactly the same atmosphere was in Poland at the time. We also gave a farewell to our Socialist Utopia.

In a sense though, the manager was right: this misunderstanding doesn't mean the public are normally more wise than the cultural operators. The German theatre, enormously rich and courageous, intellectual and concrete, is so different to Polish theatre, which is much more emotional, metaphoric and romantic. That is why every time when I invite a German production to my festival, and normally I choose the most radical examples of the new trends in theatre, I have a controversial feedback. The audience becomes divided into the enthusiasts and adversaries.

The next example: in the Avignon Festival for years German theatre has been completely absent, until last year when it appeared in abundance. The French audience, not having been accustomed to German theatre was shocked. The French admire the spoken word. They are able to listen to the actors for hours, if the interpretation of the speech is perfect. The visual side of the performance is not so important for them. A

loose interpretation of a classical text, the tainting of a text, or the free adaptation of the old text into a colloquial language of today seems to be a sacrilege to a French audience.

The last example is an examination of Irish theatre with a Polish audience. In the middle of the 1990s I invited the Passion Machine from Dublin with a production based on Paul Mercier's *Buddleia*. The reaction was rather cool. I met some enthusiastic opinions, but they were rather rare. The realistic style of the performance, and the subject of the play consisting of presenting a moving story about the dramatic life and death of a young Irish worker, failed to meet Polish audience's expectation. Why? In that time it was too early or too late for our audience to engage their interest in the themes proposed to us by Irish writers. The Irish performance and the Polish audience weren't properly tuned at the same scale of interest, the same aesthetic taste. This chilly reception in the theatre was entirely in opposition to the success that Irish actors achieved at the same time in one of the Polish pubs. Just after the performance, the actors gave us a concert of beautifully sung Irish ballads. The pub was overflowing with people, not only from the theatre, but also with simple passers-by.

In conclusion, what should be done now to improve the presence of Irish theatre in Europe? The Irish dramatic literature is very well known and spread all over Europe. The names of Beckett, Joyce, Yeats, O'Casey, Synge and the later ones, Brian Friel, Conor McPherson, and many, many others have filled the repertoires of European theatres. Why then is Irish theatre not so recognised and appreciated as Irish literature is? My knowledge of Irish theatre is not very deep. I have seen during my three stays in Dublin about ten or twelve Irish productions. If I may share with you my impressions, my first and superficial observation is that there is a great gap between the vitality of your literature, the plays written for theatre, and the theatre itself. It seems to me that the theatre has been dominated by the literature, that it has been stopped in its development by detailed staging in the story of the play. Following London's Court Theatre practice, the plays are often directed by authors.

Meanwhile, the theatre is something more than the text. The text is one of the several items of the theatre art, but not the most important one. In Europe more and more productions appear without using a text or based on the stage adaptation of novels. What I feel watching Irish theatre is a lack of identity, a lack of distinctive character than be

observed in the behaviour of Irish people in the street and in the atmosphere of Dublin, and even here when I watch your faces. You are so individual, such interesting people, but it's not reflected in your theatre. I ask myself, why a nation that has had so great and courageous literature is so moderate and traditional in the theatre art?

Christine Madden: Our final guest is Katarina Dudakova. She is the director of the International Theatre Festival in Slovakia. It's held annually in September, and she has literally got off the stage over there, got into a plane, and come over here to be our guest.

The Festival presents Slovakian and international theatre that is untraditional, innovative, provocative and controversial. The programme is a result of two artistic boards, one for the selection of the Slovakian theatre, and one for international work. Both are made up of Slovakian theatre experts and the international board relies on the close cooperation of the wide circle of international theatre professionals. Over thirty, from eighteen different European countries.

Katarina Dudakova: I think I'll make it very brief, because the festival finished just two days ago. I'd just like to make a small correction: I'm not the director of the festival, I'm the International Relations Manager, taking care of all the foreign theatres coming to the festival, making contact with foreign institutions like ministries of culture, like cultural institutes, in order to get some support for the invited theatres. Luckily this year we succeeded to have every single theatre from nine foreign countries supported by their governmental institutions, which is the ideal situation. I'll like to apologise if you see me in the next two days falling asleep somewhere. I hope you'll forgive me.

I was asked about the programming policy of our festival. Christine has explained a bit about how it works: we have a network of consultants and advisors in different countries. There is no advisor from Ireland, actually, so maybe I'll meet somebody who will advise us in the future. Then there are these two artistic boards, which are working with the information we get from the advisors. We travel a lot. We try to see many video recordings, which is not the ideal or the best way to select theatre, but it gives you a picture of what you want to bring.

This year it was quite a difficult situation for us. We came to the point where we started to think is our programming policy really important and necessary. You work a whole year; you try to really pick the best pieces you want to bring, ones you really stand behind. Then two weeks before the festival you get a phone call from a manager from Theatre Commedia in Prague saying, we've got some bad news for you. We cannot come because the main actor is filming in Hollywood, or whatever. Then in two days you get a phone call from France saying, we are sorry but the main dancer has a serious back injury and he cannot come. And then you're trying to find a substitute performance which can come and replace the gap created in your programme. We succeeded to find a French dance piece in twenty four hours which was a great success in the festival, but we did not in the Czech case. So, we just sat there and thought why bother yourself with programming all year? Just have a meeting in May or whenever, make some phone calls – 'Are you free on the 24th of September this year?' But I hope this won't be the case in the future. I wanted to say that all these problems have been because it was the thirteenth year of the festival, so you've got to laugh.

We never presented Irish theatre, and I can just say that it's the same situation as in Hungary and Poland, that we know Irish playwrights and Irish literature; Martin McDonagh will be staged this year in the Slovak National Theatre. But there has not been any Irish theatre present either at the festival, or in Slovakia in other kind of events. Except for *Riverdance* we really don't know what a real Irish theatre production looks like.

Christine Madden: I wish we had more time to talk about the different aspects of touring and all of the problems that can be overcome. I would like to take a few quick questions, because I don't want to end it just like that.

Audience 1: Jim Culleton from Fishamble Theatre Company. I'm just wondering if any of the festivals actually have programming funds to pay to bring companies to the festivals, or whether it's more of an exchange, or that the companies would have to raise their own money for these things.

Krystyna Meissner: I can explain from my point of view. There are different sources of funding for such a thing because usually the festivals in our part of Europe are supported by the State, and by private subsidies. Sometimes we are helped - I say we because I also know the Nitra festival in Slovakia very well – we are helped by the the Goëthe Institut, the Belgian theatre institute, they cover the cost of transport. But when you are invited the festival usually pays you all the accommodation and per diems etcetera. All the costs of your stay in every festival. Even more, the fees for the performance. It's very comfortable for the ensemble to be invited because of this. It's only in this case when the ensemble is invited, not in a touring condition. The touring condition is dictated by the agency, and I don't know the criteria of this choice.

Mária Mayer Szilágyi: I know that in Hungary we have some arts festivals too, and the biggest of them couldn't pay anything. In Hungary it is the practice that we work very intensely with the foreign cultural institutes. We make a deal in every case. We try to find some sponsors. With the Germans this is very good; with the French too. But each country has a different situation.

In Hungary nobody can pay when we invite a group. Fees, travel, transport etcetera. Our festival is a private initiative. We don't have a fixed budget. Every two years we begin with zero and try to get money. We can pay hotel, per diems, transport in the city, everything in the city, but not the cost outside. This is always the question; how to do the both parts, but in most cases we can find a solution.

Audience 2: My name is Alan King. I'm from Calypso Theatre Company. This is not really a question. I was part of the company of actors that travelled to Torauinn (sp?) with the Passion Machine. I'm probably the only person in this room apart from Krystyna who has been in Torauinn. That was for me one of the most enjoyable experiences of my artistic life. You said that the production didn't go across as well as maybe you had hoped, but I felt everyone who was there really had an excellent time. I just wanted to say thank you very much.

Krystyna Meissner: I think it was a very, very good experience for me personally, but comparing with the other events at the same festival where you were, it was a rather chilly reception. I think in this play of Paul Mercier's it was something that I felt was crazy in this realism that was performed on the stage. I had hoped that the Polish people could understand that it was something more than only literature on the stage. One group, a very small one, was enthusiastic about it. They enjoyed this realistic way of presenting the very complicated things from the text. I think it is the way of your Irish theatre because you love it; you love to make the observations of the people around you. You present them very realistically. Well, do it. Try.

Audience 3: My name is Marianne Kennedy, and I'm from Síamsa Tíre, the national folk theatre of Ireland. As a result of Theatre Shop, two years ago we toured to the Faroe Islands off the coast of Denmark with a production. It was a non-dialogue based theatrical production called *Oileán* which is the Gaelic for island. We performed it on various different islands in the Faeroe Islands.

We were very lucky in that the arts festival in the Faeroe Islands could not only invite us and give us a huge amount of support in the country when we got there, but they also had the experience and maybe a little bit more money and they were able to provide us with help for the transport. We subsequently got it refunded from the cultural relations committee here and were able to give it back to them. I suppose it's that leap of faith and the actual going for it anyway, even if you're not quite sure it will work out. It did work out, with the cultural relations committee. I know that it's defunct at the moment, but you can still apply to the cultural relations committee in Ireland.

It was such an enriching experience, the experience of the performance and after the show, meeting those people. We were talking about the abandonment of an island off the coast of south west Ireland, and in their culture at the time there was danger of one of the seventeen Faeroe Islands being abandoned. To get that experience to communicate with people. The language was not the most important thing. There are ways of overcoming language. Whether you have it in the piece or not, it's the actual soul and connecting with the soul of the people where you tour.

Christine Madden: Thank you all very much for coming. I'd just like to say wrapping up, it is, as you can see, a really possible and enriching experience. You should take the time to make those contacts. Go abroad, go to the festivals and spend the time over a couple of years, which it will take to make the contacts. See what you can achieve and I'm sure you'll be very pleased with the results. Thanks very much for coming.