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Galway Arts Festival, 2003: Focusing on Home, Still Delighting

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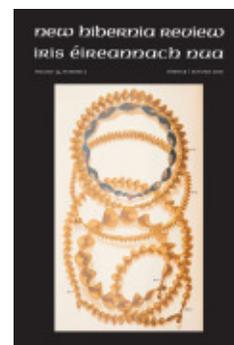
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Galway Arts Festival, 2003: Focusing on Home, Still Delighting

For twenty-six years the Galway Arts Festival has “morphed” the city of Galway into its natural logical conclusion: the city already boasts a young, artistic community, but for two weeks each summer, the festival brings the spotlight and the crowds to Galway for a celebration of the arts. Of late, however, the festival has suffered from decreased government expenditures on the arts—as have all the arts in Ireland. Recent festivals have been far more subdued than the extravagant Millennial Festival in 1999, during which the city teemed with outdoor events and more than one hundred thousand people gathered to watch the nighttime Macnas parade and fireworks.

The Twenty-Sixth Annual Galway Arts Festival, July 15–27, 2003, was wet—so wet, in fact, that some outdoor events had to be canceled. The entire event was a bit more restrained than in years past, owing largely to the lack of a Macnas parade. The parade, which normally provides focus and a reason for people to be outside, also tends to bring with it a magical charm for good weather. Perhaps the Macnas crowd angered the gods by not programming a parade this year. The untimely death of the beloved street performer Johnny Massacre also added a somber note to the festivities. Johnny, born John Doran, took the role of street performer seriously, challenging his audience’s assumptions and performing daring feats of bravado, usually on a unicycle, which earned him the moniker “Massacre.”¹ A spontaneous shrine to Johnny appeared on his pitch, outside the Evergreen Health Food store on Shop Street; the area was blanketed with flowers, cards, and mementos, and seemed to grow by the day as word spread through the town. Massacre died in a car accident and the rest of the festival marked his passing in tributes and dedicated performances.² In a city that loves its street performers, the loss of such a popular one at a time of high revelry was a great shock.

1. Belinda McKeon, “Appreciation: Johnny Massacre,” *Irish Times*, 29 July 2003, p. 12.

2. Riding in a car is among the most lethal activities in Ireland. The National Safety Council of Ireland reported that the number of deaths from November 1, 2002, to September 10, 2003, was 281, which represents a high number of deaths for a country of not quite four million people.

Another factor in the “lack of buzz,” as many people characterized the mood, was the government’s recent decision to require arts—but not sports—producers to pay VAT on the salaries of visiting artists, which meant that the festival had to add twenty-one percent to the fee of every international company. It is interesting that the Galway Arts Festival (GAF) has to pay extra for the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, for example, yet sports figures like Tiger Woods are exempt from the additional tax. The unprecedented move by the government meant that the Arts Festival had to be much more cautious in collaborations with international companies, and had to mind their expenditures carefully. Relying on Arts Council monies along with corporate sponsorship and coproductions, the festival did not have the money to secure and promote international acts on a scale it had previously. In 2003, the Arts Council was unable to meet even half the demand of multidisciplinary festivals. Festivals requested €2,852,000, but the Arts Council’s festival budget was only €1,251,000, down €9,000 from 2002.³ While the GAF received an additional grant, nearly €14,000, this was not enough to make up for the increased tax burden.⁴ In 2003, the GAF received €331,000, the same as their 2002 budget.⁵

Once hailed as “the biggest, most exciting, most imaginative explosion of arts activity this country has” by the *Irish Times*, the festival this year returned to its roots, emphasizing the local talent in Galway and the West of Ireland.⁶ In the early years, the festival’s stated aim was “to celebrate the vigorous local arts activities in Galway and to serve as a venue for visiting national and international musical and theatrical artistes and groups, as well as being a focus for the visual arts.”⁷ In the halcyon days of the late 1990s and 2000, the GAF was relatively flush, and spent a great deal of money on generating exciting outdoor events that drew audiences into what was generally the week or two of good summer weather that the West enjoys. Faced with the VAT burden, a generally decreased budget, and the Deflated Tiger economy, the Galway Arts Festival wisely chose to emphasize local offerings and to concentrate its international offerings in established relationships and in the visual arts, which generates money for the artists.

3. Arts Council (of Ireland), “Budget Priorities in 2003,” 2 September 2003, http://www.artscouncil.ie/2003/budget_budget.html.

4. The Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism, “O’Donoghue Announces Funding for Events,” 21 March 2003, http://www.dast.gov.ie/pressroom/pr_detail.asp?ID=233.

5. Arts Council (of Ireland), “Multi-disciplinary Arts” 2 September 2003, http://www.artscouncil.ie/2003/artforms_multi.html.

6. The Galway Arts Festival web site is <http://www.galwayartsfestival.com/about.html>.

7. According to a program of the 1985 festival. What is interesting here is that even seven years after the founding of the festival, it was primarily a local event that emphasized and showcased the local artistic scene.

Perhaps the biggest visual art hits of the festival were the spectacularly inventive Bernard Pras from France and Nils-Udo from Germany. Installation artist Pras created the most exciting and immediately loved outdoor exhibit of the festival. He created a “portrait” of Irish playwright Tom Murphy at Galway’s famous Spanish arch, using found objects. The result was a stunning piece of temporary artwork that used the Arch to complete Murphy’s head. Approached from the side, the installation looked like just another pile of junk, as it was composed of bits of broken plates, a “please wait to be seated” sign, a disused computer monitor, a mask—all tokens of Murphy’s prolific playwrighting career. Rumor even has it that the garbage collectors in Galway tried to haul away the work, and Pras, speaking no English, was unable to stop them. It took a passerby with a cell phone and a call to Arts Festival higher-ups to save the installation.

Pras’s other works—including giant photographs of his “portraits” of Albert Einstein, Che Guevara, Louis XIV, and Jimi Hendrix—were affixed to various buildings around the center of Galway, providing a pleasant surprise for anyone who happened to look up. The image of Louis XIV, for example, was stationed on Brennan’s Yard Hotel and featured Louis’ ermine collar made entirely of toilet paper rolls. Viewed at some distance and in such a large scale, these constituent parts were not immediately visible. Pras calls these installations and subsequent images *Inventories*.

Another French installation artist, Anne Ferrer was interested in the “ambiguous relationships between humans, animals, and floral species.” She placed a sculpture of bright pink floating pigs in the shape of a flower in the canal behind the Galway Cathedral.⁸ Although this out-of-the-way place might have meant that the sculpture, titled *Esther Williams*, was not widely seen, it did not save it from vandalism. During the first week of the festival, vandals stole one of the six pigs in the sculpture, and later deposited it, broken, on the cathedral steps. Luckily, Ferrer was able to repair the damage and re-install the pigs, but the attack will surely add to her meditation on the relationship between the human and animal world. Ferrer and Pras were two of three artists who were cosponsored with Paris-based curator Bridget Harte, an example of one of the international relationships the festival has built over the years.

The third artist sponsored by Bridget Harte was Nils-Udo. The Bavarian artist visited Connemara for three weeks in the spring of 2003, creating a series of installations composed entirely of natural materials, especially turf. Nils-Udo has found inspiration in nature since he switched to site-specific pieces from painting in 1972. One of the more delightful aspects of this exhibition was

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the prominence of the Irish language. All of the photographs were titled first in Irish, then in English. The exhibition itself was called “. . . muir mas, nem nglas, talam cé . . .” (“. . . the beautiful sea, the blue heaven, the present earth . . .”).⁹ The images Nils-Udo presents seem surreal and more like computer-generated structures rather than installations made entirely of found natural objects.

Of course, there was a close physical connection between the location of the festival in the West of Ireland and the location of this installation, whose aluminum photographs comprised the exhibition. Walking through the space gave the viewer a surreal sense of nature. The spare atmosphere of the Galway Arts Centre provided a sense of isolation, which many of the photographs emphasized. One of the most striking images is *Nead (Nest)*, in which turf eggs rest in a compartment hollowed out of a turf embankment. The image suggests the fertility of the earth and seemed to resonate strongly with the women at the exhibition. Nils-Udo's exhibition was the first collaboration between the festival and the Galway Arts Centre, and we can only hope that more quality thought-provoking exhibitions will result from future collaboration. Judging by how quickly these photographs sold, that hope will probably come true.

Theatrical performances are the highlight of the Galway Arts Festival. Because this year's funding was hampered by the VAT fiasco, the theater remained largely Irish, with the festival showcasing “New Work from Galway,” perhaps as a way to recompense for the dearth of international productions. Luckily, most of the local theater was good or at least promising. The showcase included a lively performance by Little John Nee, whose one-man shows are a festival mainstay. Cumbernauld Theatre for the Scottish Touring Theatre Consortium produced the 2003 Nee performance *Salt O' the Earth*, which, like all of Nee's performances, combined acting, storytelling, singing, and musical performance. Although Nee may have only one note, it is an entertaining one, and you cannot help but be impressed with his energy and stamina onstage. Nee once told me that his secret was oysters, as they fill you up with protein without weighing you down. He performs his own material and although his relationship with the Arts Festival has been rocky at times, it would hardly seem like a festival without a Little John Nee performance.

Two shows quickly sold out: *The Junebug Symphony*, and *Paris, Texas*, a “live film” of the Wim Wenders movie. Directed by Paul Brennan, *Paris, Texas* was performed daily in Irish and English, innovatively contributing to the Irish-language Festival offerings, which included *Scaoil Leis an gCaid*, a football play. *Paris, Texas* fulfilled its promise as a “live film” through its innovative staging; audience members—limited to ten—sat in individual booths, watching the

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revolving stage through a two-way mirror that, despite the audience's proximity to the performance, rendered them unseen. It is exciting to see such ingenuity in Irish-language theater and the hope is that others will follow Diarmuid de Faoite's lead.

The Galway Youth Theatre performed multiple shows this year, a decision that left them overextended. Both *Portia Coughlan* and *Car Show* could have benefited from more directorial attention. Established in 1991, the Galway Youth Theatre provides training and performance opportunities for Galwegians aged sixteen to twenty-five. One of more than sixty youth theaters in Ireland that often stand in for academic or professional training, which is available only on a limited basis and only in Dublin, the Galway Youth Theatre provides a two-year drama workshop alongside practical experience.

Portia Coughlan, Marina Carr's beautiful meditation on classical themes and twisted lives, featured talented performers who seemed restrained, as though not pushed to their limits. Director Andrew Flynn's decision to strip the title character of any kind of empathetic qualities meant that the audience felt no pity or remorse for her. Although the script calls for Portia's twin brother Gabriel to appear to her throughout the play, Flynn omitted him from all but the last scene, leaving audience members confused about the source of his singing and of Portia's obsessive near-madness. The result left Portia disliked by much of the audience, a terrible position for a young actor learning her craft. Caoilinn Hughes's performance felt subdued, as though she knew she could do more with such a rich script. I was left wishing that Flynn, who has directed at the Druid, Abbey, and Gaiety Theatres, had spent more time on this production and had allowed some of his younger members to branch out by directing the other two productions.

The middle Galway Youth Theatre show, *Lovely Betty*, written by Mark O'Halloran and Kelly Campbell, focused on three flatmates' idolatry of a prominent Irish radio host. I opted instead for *Car Show*, premiered in 1998 by the Dublin company Corn Exchange. That year, a similar play premiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actor's Theater of Louisville. The premise of these productions is that each ten-to-fifteen minute play takes place in an actual car, and the audience sits in the backseat. This, of course, limits the audience to only two or three for each play at any given performance. The plays are usually presented in groups of four, and the audience moves from car to car. There no curtain call and no clear moment to signal when each performance begins. The premise is audacious and brings a new level of intimacy to the theater. At times, the actors acknowledged the audience, and every snuffle, cough, or yawn of an audience member takes place only inches away from the actors.

Since 1998, Corn Exchange has toured the show all around Ireland, added new plays, and allowed such companies as the Galway Youth Theatre to add original plays to the repertoire. John McKenna, the production manager for the Galway Youth Theatre, wrote two short plays, *Clown but not Out* and *Love Bites*, specifically for female actors, as the organization has many more women than men. *Clown but not Out* captured the confusion and poignancy of the intersections of teenage sexuality and friendship and provided a platform for Aideen O'Donnell and Sorcha Nevin. While the young actors captured the notes perfectly, the play was ultimately about five minutes too long, which can be a lifetime when you are in the backseat of a car. *Love Bites* combined the dangers of excess drinking with a playful take on an Anne Rice theme, but fell into cliché by the end. Actors Deirdre Hayes and Katherine Graham worked hard but were hampered by the limits of the script. Both of these plays were promising, however, and point to real potential in McKenna. The more successful shows were the original Corn Exchange plays, and the best of these was *Love Me!*, a play with a mystery that unfolds backwards, while the characters and the audience try to figure out what is going on. This exciting play has been a highly successful part of the *Car Show* repertoire since 1998.

Catastrophe Theatre, another local and young company, presented a new site-specific work in the courtyard behind the Army & Navy Store. Clearly influenced by Beckett, *Up the Yard* by American Josh Tobiessen exposed the lives of three poor creatures abandoned by society who have hidden and found refuge in this courtyard. Tobiessen also acts in the production, and the action begins when he finds a haven in the courtyard from the reportedly beefy male family members of a woman he was trying to seduce. Tobiessen intrudes on this secret society and the members put him on a sort of trial: will they allow him to stay? The cycle of repetitions and existential musings pay homage to Beckett, yet are infused with enthusiastic performances that make the characters likable. *Up the Yard* came in at about forty-five minutes, which was good for the standing audience. While this show was flawed, it showed a real spark from Catastrophe and marks it as a company to watch over the coming years. Another company to watch is Teatre Punto, with roots in Macnas, Commedia dell'Arte, and French clowning. Teatre Punto's show *Don't Sleep . . . !* was sold out for nearly its entire run, thanks to good word of mouth.

The major theatrical draws of the festival luckily coincided with some of the biggest delights. The "show to see" turned out to be *The Junebug Symphony*, by a French company of the same name founded by James Thiérrée, grandson of Charlie Chaplin and great-grandson of Eugene O'Neill. With such an impressive pedigree, expectations ran high. The Galway Arts Festival also has a history of bringing sophisticated, physical theater to Galway—dating back to its

original collaboration with Footsbarn Theatre of England—thus, festival audiences have high expectations.

The Junebug Symphony begins when “a man goes to bed and awakens” to a changed world.¹⁰ In this new universe, a painting not only has its own amorous life, but passes judgment on the protagonist’s rather bland existence. Meanwhile, a beautiful, diaphanous, giant Junebug enters the room and takes residence in the closet, which refuses the sleepwalker access to his clothes. Thiérrée was joined by contortionist Raphaëlle Boitel and acrobat Magnus Jakobsson, but this performance was more than just tricks or a circus act. While there was no strong narrative line, the pacing and inventiveness of the show captured the hearts and imaginations of the audience, adults and children alike. The show included enough narrative tissue to connect such varying dream-like incidents as Boitel’s seemingly pouring herself *over* the furniture and Jakobsson’s repeated and exhausting efforts to dive *into* an easy chair. At one point all three of them became some kind of fish in a red ribbon river. At another, Boitel entered as a chandelier and she and Thiérrée engaged in a PG-13 rated trapeze act. *The Junebug Symphony* did not disappoint, the performances quickly sold out, and this company was on everyone’s lips.

Two other featured productions of the festival relied upon physical theater, and included Ireland’s two foremost physical theater companies, Barabbas and Macnas. The founders of Macnas were also largely the founders of the Galway Arts Festival. After bringing innovative theater to Galway for several years, Macnas launched its famous parade based on the kind of work Footsbarn and Spain’s Els Comediants had produced. This year Macnas decided for a second year to forego the parade and focus on more “traditional” theater, but its outdoor performances of *The Mysteries* fell victim to the notorious Galway weather, and Macnas had to cancel several shows.

Based on the medieval Mystery plays, *The Mysteries* clearly signals a moment in the history of Macnas. Macnas took a needed break from the parades, which involve more than four hundred people annually and which it has been performing since the 1980s. Using a community cast of ninety and a much smaller “professional” cast, the play is a coproduction between Macnas and the Belgrade Theatre Company in Coventry, home of one of the extant Mystery cycles. The performance blended two directors, two assistant directors, two sites, and twin impulses. While the company wants to perform high quality, engaging theater, it also wants to include as many of the Macnas “regulars” from the parades as possible to remain true to their roots in community arts. While *The Myster-*

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ies worked on many levels, it was still very much a work in progress at its last Galway performance.

Directed by Barabbas's founding member Mikel Murfi in his third collaboration with Macnas (rumors are that he may be the next Macnas artistic director, de facto or otherwise), the show focuses on Jesus' doubts as he is hanging on the cross. For the first time, Macnas worked with an established playwright, Vincent Woods, described as a "wordsmith" in the program. The elegant and elegiac script reached real emotion, notably doubt and loss. In a series of flashbacks, we hear about Jesus' upbringing, including stories told by his zealous mother Mary to educate him not only on his own destiny, but on the history of the Jews and thus, the Bible. The storytelling education of Jesus was a kind of reimagining of the basic idea of the Mystery plays, which were a way for people to learn Bible stories through performance. This performance seemed to re-create vividly that element of the medieval plays in the very medieval city of Galway.

Macnas's new emphasis on words was tempered by the company's usual elements of impressive set pieces and puppets. The Noah's Ark sequence was a real highlight. Community cast members wearing pairs of puppet animals danced around the performance space. Although much more could have been done with these wonderful puppets, they created wonder on the faces of children of all ages when the animals came in "two by two." While I liked the performance and especially the script, it retained many problems and needs a bit more working out with the company.

Murfi's former company, Barabbas—a Dublin-based company known for the exploration of Irish physicality—presented a new play featuring the Irish sport of hurling. *Hurl*, by Charlie O'Neill, tells the story of Ireland's first multi-ethnic hurling team. The context for this play is the now deflating Celtic Tiger and the increased immigration Ireland has seen since the 1990s. In *Hurl*, directed by Barabbas's founding member Raymond Keane, we see one of Ireland's most innovative theater companies tackle the issue. True to Barabbas's methods, eight actors play thirty-two roles, and puppets, special effects, and music take prominent roles. A small-town hurling team composed of players from Africa, Latin America, and Bosnia challenges the local Gaelic Athletic Association, as well as the complicated rules of the game.

While Irish theater still tends to look backward, a new play about contemporary issues in Ireland is a welcome change. This production, too, underwent serious revisions and staging changes right up until opening night. But the result was an exuberant, if imperfect, performance that did not require extensive knowledge of hurling or the political climate in Ireland. Of course, if you had either, the play experience was enhanced. *Hurl* stands to attract people who enjoy sports but are wary of the theater. One imagines houses full of men

dragged to the theater by their wives and partners, only to find that they really enjoy a play based on the national sport.

Hurling is an ancient Irish sport that used to be part of warrior training. The place of hurling in Irish society cannot be underestimated, and the play captures the excitement of the sport. Choreographed by Dermot Bolger, the hurling sequences are pure delight. O'Neill will not let us or the play fall into sports melodrama—however it may flirt with the idea—as the audience is reminded of the real situations facing Irish immigrants in terms of money, jobs, housing, and legal status. The end of the play presents a stark reminder of this tenuous situation, as one of the former members of the team sits in a prison cell in his home country. His future remains uncertain, and the decision to end on this note, rather than the triumphalism of the match, brings *gravitas* to the performance. As Fintan O'Toole noted in his *Irish Times* review, the tension between the literal fun and games and the political consequences is not always resolved, but that does not make for a bad production.¹¹ Rather, it provides an honesty to the subject matter, and *Hurl* raises questions regarding identity, ethnicity, and nationality. O'Neill is successful in portraying the immigrants as real, distinct people, and in capturing the mood of many Irish people in relation to this issue.

Another salient moment in the festival was the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theater's production of George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*. This play, which sets a Salvation Army major against her munitions tycoon father, comes at a perfect time when issues of war and peace are debated on the pages of the newspapers nearly every day. The production had to be seriously scaled down for performance in the tiny Druid Theatre, badly in need of its upcoming renovation. Shaw's play explores the relationship between capitalism, war, and "good deeds," and the company's shocking, theatrical conclusion condemns the deal that Barbara and Cousins have just made with arms magnate Undershaft: when Cousins removes his hand from the handshake that seals his position as inheritor of the factory, it is stained with blood.

The performances by Bingo O'Malley and Deirdru Ring as Undershaft and Barbara were versatile and believable, but I could never reconcile Ring's Barbara with Scott Ferrar's "Dolly" Cousins and believe they really were a couple. The production values of *Major Barbara* were surprisingly scant for a major United States company and an acclaimed festival performance.¹² The backdrops needed more sophisticated painting and a staple gun. While some of the cos-

11. Fintan O'Toole, "Hurl, Black Box, Galway Arts Festival," *Irish Times*, 18 July 2003, p. 16.

12. The other major American company to bring a show to the Arts Festival was Chicago's Step-penwolf, which presented a new play, *Purple Heart*.

tumes were perfect, others did not even seem Edwardian. O'Malley's performance was forceful and his energy a delight to watch, all of the Festival publicity for the show touted Daniel J. Travanti as Undershaft, and the substitution was disappointing until O'Malley's conniving and convincing Undershaft put to rest any such reservations.

Tom Murphy's new melodrama *The Drunkard*, after W. H. Smith and A Gentleman, gave new life to the genre and provided a shocker—a funny Murphy play. While Murphy is often lauded in his own country as one of Ireland's greatest living playwrights, his plays tend not to garner that level of appeal in the United States. Murphy's relentless pessimism and stagnation in the sins of the past often leaves Americans cold. This production, however—the first Galway premiere of a new Murphy play since the Druid's *Bailegangaire* in 1985—displays an optimistic side to Murphy while still allowing in some of his darkness. Produced by the new b*spoke Theatre Company, comprised of veteran Gate and Abbey actors Jane Brennan and Alison McKenna and directed by the talented Lynne Parker, the play breezily and successfully combined nineteenth-century melodrama with twenty-first century sensibilities and humor. Pauline McLynn, whom American audiences know from her “Mrs. Doyle” on BBC America's *Father Ted*, gave a wonderful performance as three different women, each with distinct personalities and qualities. One of the minor scandals of the festival was that she received a particularly vicious mention in Fintan O'Toole's *Irish Times* review. Fans will be glad to hear that she allegedly promised to turn the tables at the RITAs, or Real Irish Theatre Awards, a spoof ceremony presented each year by McLynn and husband Richard Cooke.

Murphy's *The Drunkard* was stylistically sharp. It asked nearly everyone in the play to portray more than one character and used a garishly painted, severely raked stage. Live music, composed and performed by Ellen Cranitch and Helene Montague, guided the audience's emotions, which melodrama tends to manipulate anyway. Nick Dunning rendered his god-like Sir Arden Rencelaw, complete with shimmery hair and skin, so majestically that the audience could not get enough of him. His romance with one of McLynn's characters was sweet and yet twisted as he tried to redeem her. This was one opportunity for a twenty-first century audience to laugh at a nineteenth-century sensibility. Murphy's signature dark notes found an outlet in the title character's decline to debauchery and subsequent DTs, but they served as a balance to the sweetness of the melodrama. Look for this production to tour if it does well in Dublin, and perhaps more like this from Murphy will endear American audiences to his writing.

In all, the 2003 Galway Arts Festival did not seem to be operating at a loss, although the absence of any real street life took away from the overall festival

mood that patrons have come to expect. The recent decision to move Race Week of the famous Galway Races to the week immediately following the festival also changes the mood in Galway and brings people to the Western city who are more interested in horses than the arts. Yet the emphasis on new writing, both Irish and American, brings a vibrancy to the festival that belies its fiscal problems. The visual art and music aspects of the festival seem to be thriving, and the addition of comedy is especially welcome, as it provides one more appeal to younger audiences. Despite the good quality and varied offerings of Irish drama, it would still be nice to see the Festival able to avoid the VAT requirement and present more international drama. This is, after all, how Macnas found inspiration and undoubtedly how other theater companies find new, exciting elements to add to their repertoire and performance styles. Without an increased international presence at arts festivals, the arts in Ireland could again become too inward-looking and actually take a step back from the spectacular progress and popularity they've enjoyed over the past ten to twenty years.

The Galway Arts Festival might benefit from the visual art sector's lead in coproductions. In the Autumn, 2003, issue of *Irish Theatre Magazine*, Galway Arts Festival director Rose Parkinson challenges artists to take a more European view of coproductions, in which the collaboration is as much creative as financial. She decries the Irish mindset that seeks only financial support and not true "creative exchange and co-operation."¹³ This view of collaboration and coproductions would provide a great opportunity for Irish companies to incorporate innovative ideas and techniques from abroad. The same issue of *Irish Theatre Magazine* devotes a great deal of space to the recent trip to Romania made by several Irish theater producers and directors. The opportunities, it seems, are endless.

13. "Sounding Board," *Irish Theatre Magazine* (Autumn, 2003), 13.