

Arts highlights of 2006, Irish Times 23/12/2006

'Beginning to End' jointly commissioned by the Kilkenny Arts Festival and the Guinness Cork Jazz Festival produced a wonderful response to the literary giant from co-composers Christy Doran and Ronan Guilfoyle, with drummer and Sean Carpio and the astonishing Swiss singer Isa Wiss.

Highlights and lowlights of 2006

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Irish Times critics choose the best and worst of the year in the arts.

VISUAL ART

Aidan Dunne

Best

Camilo Jose Vergara's American Ruins at the Gallery of Photography was an engrossing show in many respects. Not only did Vergara produce some images that are memorable and striking in themselves, he has also amassed an extraordinarily rich archive of historical documents, charting in photographs the process of decline in American cities. Art and more than art.

In a year of good photography shows, including Elina Brodtherus at the Temple Bar Gallery, Tanya Marcuse's Undergarments and Armour at Belfast Exposed and Mary McIntyre at The Third Space in Belfast, Jackie Nickerson's Faith at the Paul Kane Gallery still stands out. It is drawn from a larger project in which she explores the individuals and the environments behind the scenes in Irish religious communities.

The RHA Gallagher Gallery scored a notable double in combining a long-overdue retrospective by Robert Ballagh with a spirited show of abstract painting by Tim Hawksworth, an Irish expatriate artist based in the US. Ballagh threw himself into his retrospective with the bravura showmanship and meticulous attention to detail we have come to expect from him.

126 presents at the Galway Arts Centre was an outstanding group show featuring all the artists who had previously exhibited in the city's innovative 126 Gallery, curated by Austin Ivers and Ben Geoghegan. The project, which consistently managed to avoid the obvious while never compromising on quality, has led to the establishment of a new exhibition venue.

Barry Flanagan's trademark hares (plus one or two other animals) were let loose in O'Connell Street in Dublin during the summer, an entertaining and good-humoured sculptural intervention on the part of the Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane, working in welcome co-operation with Imma, where the artist's retrospective was one of the year's best shows.

Worst

The Celtic Tiger has engendered a boom in the Irish art market. A good thing, surely? Yes and no. It has also meant a huge amount of hype, vastly inflated prices and the delivery to auction of a great deal of artworks that should never see the light of day. It's a free market, of course, and a work is worth as much as someone is willing to pay for it. But one wonders about the long-term repercussions for the Irish art market.

Project 06 was a kind of alternative Galway Arts Festival, but in a disquieting way it was also a

spoiler. There is plenty of scope for the development of the arts scene in Galway and there are positive things happening - witness 126 presents. The city needs a large-scale exhibition venue, and in a way the new Civic Museum, a handsome building (albeit one without climate control), is surely an opportunity missed, as no one seems sure what it is for.

POP/ROCK CONCERTS

Peter Crawley

Best

Came So Far For Beauty, The Point: What it had to do with the Dublin Theatre Festival was never quite clear, but *Came So Far For Beauty* - the icon-studded tribute to Leonard Cohen - had to be the musical event of the year. With interpretations ranging from the sensitive to the bruising to the downright weird, Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Nick Cave, Jarvis Cocker, Beth Orton and several others shared the stage without a shred of ego, while Teddy Thompson, Antony and the Handsome Family laid the most stunning foundations for a tower of song.

Radiohead and Beck, Marlay Park: Although kindred spirits in their restless pursuit of new sounds, Radiohead and Beck made for a strange live combination. Late summer in Marlay Park showed how well they balanced each other, Radiohead supplying the unlikeliest of dark anthems and Beck's silvery genre-hopping accompanied by a puppet show.

Kanye West, the Point: He may boast an ego to match his bank balance, and for such a brash hip hop star Kanye West can be notoriously thin-skinned, but never doubt that he is a consummate showman. Not quite as preposterous a spectacle as you might have hoped, West's Dublin concerts crammed all the pyrotechnics into his set list and proved hip hop still knows how to have fun.

Pink, the Point: At last! A pop concert that had all of the costume changes and light shows but which didn't demand checking your intelligence in at the door. Pink may be losing ground to her rivals in record sales, but when you've seen her singing a ferociously smart pop chorus while spinning on a trapeze, there's no one with the daring or personality to touch her.

We Are Scientists, The Ambassador: Blessed are the geeks, for they shall inherit the earth. The incontrovertibly nerdy *We Are Scientists* gave one of the most blistering performances of the year in the Ambassador, thrilling, surprising and adorably goofy.

Worst

Love him or loathe him, you should at least be able to hear him properly. But Billy Joel at Croke Park sacrificed sound quality for capacity.

Following a High Court action, in which music promoters MCD challenged the decision by the Office of Public Works to award its rivals Aiken Promotions the rights to stage a Rolling Stones concert in the Phoenix Park in August, The Stones's Irish gig fell through. MCD did not set out to scupper the concert, and the reasons for the cancellation are still the stuff of rumour, but one thing is for sure: everyone involved lost out.

THEATRE

Peter Crawley:

Best

Faith Healer, Gate Theatre:

Brian Friel's Faith Healer is still so haunted by Donal O'Kelly's legendary performance that the play doesn't require a revival as much as an exorcism. The Gate offered star-performances without artistic compromise: Ralph Fiennes settled admirably into his role with an absorbing intensity, but Ian McDiarmid's pitch-perfect tragic-comic performance was the real revelation. Ultimately Jonathan Kent's superb production allowed the true star to be Friel.

The Taming of the Shrew, Rough Magic: The winking promise of Shakespeare and "gombeen chic" could have curdled the most hopeful expectations, but Lynne Parker's merrily subversive take on The Taming of The Shrew had a sly charm. Transplanting Shakespeare's problematic chauvinism to 1970s rural Ireland shed new light on both, as an impeccable company moved from outrageously broad humour to intelligent, sexual game play.

Emilia Galotti may have had the fireworks, but Thomas Ostermeier's thorough updating of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler was the Dublin Theatre Festival's more explosive offering. In a revolving apartment of handsome minimalism, somewhere between Bauhaus and Ikea, Ibsen's characters had a frighteningly contemporary dilemma, trading in their ideals for a world of beautiful surface. Like Hedda and her pistols, it possessed chilling beauty and precise aim.

Beckett at 100: You may have noticed that Samuel Beckett turned 100 this year, an occasion celebrated in London, New York, Tokyo, Paris and Dublin, where, in one memorably odd tribute, he was "channelled" by Bono. Other salutations were still more intriguing, such as Selina Cartmell's striking Catastrophe and, for its formal daring, Atom Egoyan and Michael Gambon's mesmerising transposition of the television piece Eh Joe to The Gate's stage.

The Walworth Farce, Druid: In a slow and uneven year for new plays, Druid made one of the most significant contributions with Enda Walsh's surreal, complex and disturbing play, The Walworth Farce. Mikel Murfi's accelerating production stretched beyond the conventions of farce just as Walsh's experiments in form and language extended his dark horizons.

Worst

There are no small parts, goes the old maxim, just small actors. But Babylon Heights, Irvine Welsh and Dean Kavanagh's tiresomely sordid, stultifying repetitious drama about The Wizard of Oz munchkins run amok, proved there were such things as under-sized ideas. Not big and certainly not clever.

The Arts Council's long delay in rekindling touring support amid a clamour of regional venues starved of travelling productions. The success of touring network NASC this year is cause for optimism, and, tentative as it sounds, the council's Touring Experiment is hoped to eventually yield some conclusive results.

"Have you seen this work of fiction?" someone asked in September, holding aloft the Dublin Fringe Festival programme. Tattered with cancellations, misprinted show times, and double-bookings you could understand the frustration: finding some shows in this year's festival felt like a treasure hunt.

Patrick Lonergan:

Best

Galway's Project 06 provided a boost for new work in the west of Ireland. The quality of productions was mixed, and tensions with the Galway Arts Festival sometimes threatened to

undermine the event's positive impact. But it brilliantly showcased emerging artists whose approach to theatre-making is inventive and exciting.

Also impressive was how established theatre companies in the region set off in intriguing new directions during 2006. Blue Raincoat's *The Chairs*, Island's *Outlying Islands* and, in particular, Druid's *Walworth Farce* were all examples of companies re-evaluating their core principles and repertoire to stunning effect.

Worst

The *Empress of India* controversy was a lowlight. Stuart Carolan's play features suicide, self-mutilation, racism, homophobia, and misogyny. But what most bothered a local politician was its bad language and nudity. His protests received national coverage, helping to make *Empress* the year's most talked-about play - for all the wrong reasons.

Mary Leland:

Best

Unusually for Cork, there is some competition for the best theatrical productions of the year, and high on that list must be *Sherlock Holmes - The Last Act* with Roger Llewellyn as both the eponymous detective and his creator Conan Doyle. But it is to the home-grown *Midsummer Festival - Ali Robertson's last act in Cork* - that the most memorable moments are credited: first for the insights and engagement of *The Self-Obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* in the unlikely setting of the Unitarian Church. Then, and this is the choice for top of the list, for *The Train Show*, directed by Tom Creed for Once Off Productions and Playgroup and brilliantly taking its carriage-full of audience along the commuter belt and into the commuter consciousness.

Worst

Usually for Cork, there is also competition for the worst: it has to be Marion Wyatt's direction of *Under Milk Wood* for Stage Centre at the Everyman: a fine play over-decorated to the point of imbecility.

CLASSICAL

Michael Dervan:

Best

Quietly, in the background of the RTE National Symphony Orchestra's once-unimaginable programming adventures - the recent Shostakovich cycle, the upcoming Mahler cycle - lies the annual six-figure sponsorship of Anglo Irish Bank. To the outside eye and ear it seems to be a near ideal combination of discretion, profile and enablement.

The Beckett centenary celebrations brought a first Dublin performance of Morton Feldman's landmark *Second String Quartet* by the Pellegrini Quartet. This mostly quiet six-hour marathon is a kind of consciousness expanding ritual immersion which re-draws the parameters of the concert experience.

Pavel Steidl's programme at the Walton's Guitar Festival of Ireland focused on minor-league, early 19th-century music. But Steidl gripped his audience from beginning to end with the purest display of instrumental virtuosity I heard all year.

The Ulster Orchestra's appointment of Kenneth Montgomery as principal conductor from next September presents the intriguing prospect of a symphony orchestra in Ireland consistently engaging with period performance practices.

Soprano Ailish Tynan is unique among Irish singers. The notable beauty of her voice is allied to a sharp musical intelligence and a quick-witted, disarming charm in her platform manner.

Her art was displayed to perfection in the intimacy of the West Cork Chamber Music Festival at the end of June.

Worst

In spite of windfalls such as a November tax receipts overshoot of 1.7 billion, the Government is still choosing to leave the country with one of the most underdeveloped and inequitable music education systems to be found in the developed world.

The Mostly Modern concert series and festival is a platform for the advocacy of new music. Sadly, the treatment of rarely-heard Italian composer Aldo Clementi's work at this year's festival was not of a standard to enhance the composer's reputation.

The downside of the protracted political stalemate in Northern Ireland continues to leave the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the arts organisations it funds in a bind, as they struggle under an ongoing reduction in funding imposed by the penny-pinching mandarins implementing direct rule.

OPERA

Michael Dervan:

Best

American tenor Paul Austin Kelly, the Don Ramiro in Opera Ireland's spring production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, sang with such style and class he even made the miserly, dry acoustic of the Gaiety Theatre sound better.

The Wexford Festival Opera used a non-RTE Irish orchestra this year. Did the sky fall in? No. Was the playing substandard? No. In fact, it was better than the cheap, East European alternatives that it replaced. Everyone was happy. Bravo all round.

Castleward Opera is a festival with a clear potential - tiny, idiosyncratic venue, atmospheric setting, long, Glyndebourne-style intervals - to which the performing standard rarely lives up. This year's lively and musically alert *La Bohème*, directed by Tom Hawkes and conducted by Brian MacKay, set new standards for the company.

Opera Ireland's production of Andre Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* was not only an adventurous repertoire choice for the company, it was a virtually all-Irish venture, from cast and production team to conductor and orchestra. More of the same is needed if Ireland is to nurture and develop native operatic talent.

Cork has long been a tricky city for opera productions. The major hurdle facing the southern capital's new company, Opera 2005, was to survive beyond 2005 and into 2006. That's been achieved.

Worst

Balfe's Bohemian Girl embodies what most modern listeners regard as the least acceptable aspects of Victorian taste. Castleward's shallow, musically weak production brought out the worst in what is still the most famous opera by an Irish composer.

Arts Council Opera Working Group: The Arts Council's failure to implement the recommendations of its own 2005 opera working group is shameful, especially given the fact that the group chose the cheaper of the options presented to it. Compare the council's inaction on this matter with its recent alacrity in responding to the needs of traditional music.

TRAD/FOLK/ROCK

Siobhan Long:

Best

Skara Brae: Temple Bar offered an unlikely location for the fleeting reunion of Donegal quartet Skara Brae last January. Little did we realise that Micheal O Domhnaill would not live to see the year out. His close sibling harmonies with Maighread and Triona, and his sublime guitar lines still linger in the memory.

Bruce Springsteen: Four opportunities to see this constantly metamorphosing musician over two years have done little to dull the appetite. His ragged-edged Seeger Sessions tour is the ultimate antidote to the burgeoning conservatism of his home place. Woody Guthrie must surely be smiling in assent.

Maurice O'Keeffe: Sliabh Luachra fiddle player and storyteller Maurice O'Keeffe celebrated Bealtaine Festival with countless picaresque tales of how traditional music has infiltrated his life. O'Keeffe's sheer lust for life was infectious as he recounted how his teacher, John Lenihan (the Steve Jobs of Sliabh Luachra), charged eight old pence for every tune he taught him.

Shaun Davey: Sitting in Davey's kitchen in Wicklow, eavesdropping on a gathering of west Kerry musicians as they rehearsed a suite of songs, whose lyrics were borrowed from the poetry of Baile na nGall's late Caoimhín Ó Cinneide, Davey furnished the languorous musical backdrop to what was to become a glorious celebration of Ó Cinneide's linguistic legacy.

Worst

Tim O'Brien: Bluegrass never sounded this good. Regaling his audience with tall tales of Kentucky, dodgy dental care plans, and life south of the Mason Dixon line, O'Brien lured his fiddle where few other musicians dare to tread, impishly accompanied by guitarist Arty McGlynn.

The National Concert Hall's 25th anniversary celebrations: predictable programming at its most yawn-inducing.

Traditional Music Festivals: The incessant fumbling in the greasy tills by publicans who want the best of both worlds: world-class musicians gracing their public houses, and intrusive TV replays of the day's sporting events: a vile and offensive concoction that'll eventually alienate both music lover and sports fan alike.

JAZZ

Ray Comiskey:

Best

Joe Lovano Nonet: Lovano harked back to the 1940s and the music of Tadd Dameron and Miles Davis's *Birth of The Cool*, put old wine in old bottles, stirred it vigorously, added a contemporary tincture, and uncorked one of the few vintage moments of a non-vintage Guinness Cork Jazz Festival.

Beginning To End: A Beckett Centenary Celebration, jointly commissioned by Kilkenny Arts Festival and the Guinness Cork Jazz Festival, produced a wonderful response to the literary giant from co-composers Ronan Guilfoyle and Christy Doran, with drummer Sean Carpio and the astonishing Swiss vocalist, **Isa Wiss**.

Misha Alperin/John Taylor/Stefano Bollani: three concerts on the final Sunday of Kilkenny Arts Festival, by three very different masters, who gave us depth, musical poetry and some great good humour, in a feast of solo piano good enough to stir anyone's porridge.

White Rocket: Sean Carpio, pianist Greg Felton and American trumpeter Jacob Wick made a case for jazz as the contemporary classical music, with a mix of their own material and their responses to a wide range of influences and sources; adventurous, coherent, rigorous, and un-pofaced.

Kai Big Band: this 14-piece ensemble of young Irish musicians is further evidence of serious talent on the local scene, even if economics dictate its appearances. In that sense it's a bit like a second marriage - the triumph of hope over experience. But reason to be grateful.

Worst

McCoy Tyner: his sextet's bash at the NCH was just that - an assault on the eardrums, led by his drummer and his sound man. Worse than watching milk turn sour.

Fleischer-J'neemann Quartet: Despite being prodded by the great American drummer, Adam Nussbaum, this German group remained resolutely underwhelming at JJ Smyth's earlier this year - and provided proof that nice guys sometimes don't finish first.

Benny Golson's Clifford Brown Tribute: Respected tenor veteran Golson showed how not to approach the music of the past, with this insultingly casual, marketing concept-driven use of good musicians at the Guinness Cork Jazz Festival. If you weren't there, count your blessings.

DANCE

Michael Seaver:

Best

Everything harmonised while sitting in St John's Church in Limerick for Michael Klien's *Limerick Trilogy*. Daghdha Dance Company's new home provides a perfect setting for Klien's choreographic structures and in *Limerick Trilogy* the process and result dissolved into each other, satisfying both viscerally and cerebrally.

Rex Levitates's *Sweet Apollo* wasn't the biggest dance event of the year, but probably the most intimate as four dancers moved inches from your seat in Project's Cube. Like a whispered secret it has remained in the memory.

The long wait is over as DanceHouse opened its doors on Foley Street in Dublin 1, and while

there are a whole lot of other challenges ahead, all those who got it to this stage should pause for celebration.

During Deborah Hay's A Lecture on the Performance of Beauty for Critical Voices, she advocated dance as a form of political activism. Along with berating the "ancient" custom of rehearsal in favour of "practising the performance of a piece", she outlined how her daily physical engagement with philosophical questions creates movement that isn't improvisation, but choreography.

Worst

The Arts Council is once again replacing jobs and programmes in Cork with reports and tenders in Merrion Square. The Institute of Choreography and Dance (ICD) is gone and although local interests seem placated, national and international initiatives have been lost forever.

Cork City Ballet's unlicensed performances of Balanchine's The Man I Love from Who Cares? which earned the company and its guest artists a rap on the knuckles - but so far no legal action - from the Balanchine Trust. Not just illegal, the bootleg ballet was well below the impeccable standards set by the late great choreographer's estate.

Christine Madden:

Best

International Dance Festival: Les Ballets C de la B; vsprs: With his portrayal of the Armageddon-like quality of insanity, Alain Platel created a work of immense power and beauty. More feline than human, the dancers contorted and juddered themselves on and around a mountain of white rags in an overwhelming display of human misery. Each individual searched fruitlessly for love, communion and salvation among their peers - all hermetically self-contained within their madness. A devastating allegory of modern society.

Worst

International Dance Festival: Raimund Hoghe, Swan Lake: Particularly at the moment, with so much traditional ballet on, the memory of Hoghe's stark interpretation of Swan Lake sustains the spirit. Distilled down to minimally symbolic images and emotional archetypes, the production indelibly imprinted its eloquent imagery on memory. A work of intensity and great beauty.

Michael Flatley, Celtic Tiger: It's not just films that provide an excuse for marketing. The memory of this production's shameless self-promotion, hagiography of Irish/American popular and corporate culture and mediocre aspirations still makes me feel unclean.

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