

IRISH THEATRE SCENE

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PEER GYNT. Gate Theatre

THEATRE FESTIVAL—WEEK 2 / Fintan O'To

A week of marriages,

A FAMOUS beauty wrote to Bernard Shaw suggesting that they have a child together, since, with her beauty and his brains, it would be uniquely perfect. "Ah, yes" he replied, "but what if he has your brains and my beauty?" Theatrical cross-fertilisations, like physical ones, can be either a potent fusion, the best of both worlds, or an unfortunate compromise. The second week of the Dublin Theatre Festival has been one of marriages — of the Irish and English theatres, of the Irish and the Greek, the Irish and the Norwegian, of the verbal and the visual. Most, though not all, have been successful.

The week's outstanding success in this regard is undoubtedly Patrick Mason's production of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" at the Gate, which, by matching an Irish sensibility to a European classic, makes something fresh and powerful. The basis for the achievement is in Frank McGuinness's adaptation of the play which grounds it in a colloquial language

like a lament for the 800 years of oppression of Old Ireland. And, there are broader connections too in the costumes, the beer bottles and most notably in Shaun Davey's fine musical score, suggesting that rural Norway is not too far from rural Ireland. All of this is subtle and indirect and is done without violence to Ibsen's intentions, but it gives a backbone of reality to the production which allows the meat of Ibsen's poetry and fantasy to hang well.

This solid base provides the grounding for a production that is often operatic in its scale and movement. With the verbal language so firmly established, Mason looks to the visual and invests the accumulated capital of much of his previous work, from McGuinness's own "Innocence" two years ago to his collaborations with Tom MacIntyre, so that his work with designers Joe Vanek and Mick Hughes in the former or images from MacIntyre's "the Bearded Lady" are extended and developed. This gives "Peer Gynt" the sense of being a summation, of drawing not just on its own period of rehearsals but on much of the best of Irish theatre in recent years, including the work of

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sion is a translation not just from Norwegian to English, but from poetry to dialogue. It is muscular, tough and, above all, clear, and it is that clarity which gives body and substance to the performances.

You can see what McGuinness has done if you compare his version to that of another well-known English-language playwright, Christopher Fry. Early in the play, for instance, Peer's mother is berating him for telling lies. Fry has her say: "You can turn a tale inside out, polish it up with a lot of swagger." McGuinness has: "Lies can wear new clothes and let on they're gentlemen." Later, Fry has Peer, alone in the forest and contemplating his fate, say: "You're outlawed, my boy, condemned to the forest. Yes, you're an outlaw." McGuinness has: "You're out of order, boy. Into the forest with you. That's banishment. It's official." It's not just that McGuinness's version is full of Irish inflections. It's that the Irish inflections make for a speech that is credible, speakable, rooted in ordinary language. It's not in itself enough for a powerful piece of theatre, but it's an essential prerequisite.

Mason's production, too, picks up on points of contact between Ireland and Ibsen's play. Ibsen's one-eyed trolls, content with the darkness of their underground life, become Irish nationalist trolls. The lunatic Huhu's lament for the 400 years of oppression of Old Marabar begins to sound very

this consummation should come in confronting a work written by a Norwegian 120 years ago is a remarkable testament to the genuine internationalism of the theatre.

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THEATRE FESTIVAL

Great Gate Gynt is without peer

Peer Gynt at the Gate

In celebrating their 60th anniversary with a production of "Peer Gynt" by Ibsen, the Gate company has given this year's Festival not only the outstanding production so far, but one that must rank as the finest presented in Dublin for many's the year.

This work was the company's first production at the old Peacock in October, 1928, with Hilton Edwards in the title role of a translation by William Archer. This time

indomitable spirit of the true adventurer that is perfectly realised by Barry Lynch, Garret Keogh and Joe Dowling in turn.

McGuinness has coloured his dialogue with the strains and colloquialisms of Northern Ireland and while the epithets and aspirations of may not be of the original, they seem perfectly in character for this romantic son of the soil.

Peer, the drunken dreamer, is played with an infectious recklessness by Lynch that is carried through by Keogh into

With a cast of 24 players over 100 roles, as they hit through over 30 different scenes, the physical technical demands are enormous, but the entire production flows with the momentum of an inspired orchestral arrangement. And it's encapsulated in Joe Var brilliantly executed set and enveloped in Si Davey's atmospheric music. The three Peers apart, there are some highly memorable performances, especially besotted and bedevilled mother of Dagon Head