

It's lift-off for Blue Raincoat production with Gagarin show

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By Pádraic Killeen

It's been a hectic year for Blue Raincoat theatre company.

The daring Sligo outfit have already revived Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, delivered a series of readings of WB Yeats plays, and even trekked up Knocknarea mountain to perform on the ancient grave of Queen Maeve. Yet they're not finished. This week they debut another show — *First Cosmonaut* — a new play about Soviet space explorer Yuri Gagarin.

Notably, it's written by Jocelyn Clark, with whom the Raincoats created their much acclaimed adaptations of Flann O'Brien in recent years.

"It's very much in the vein of the Flann O'Brien plays," says artistic director Niall Henry. "They were extremely imaginative worlds and the challenge with *First Cosmonaut* was to find an original story that could be as theatrical."

Given Blue Raincoat's love of absurdist theatre, a straight 'biopic' approach to Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, was never on the cards. Instead, the new play centres on a Russian 'fit-up' theatre company who are touring the West and staging Gagarin's life-story.

"Straight away that idea gave us a good comedic world," says Henry. "They have a sort of a 'poor theatre' thing going on. They've got a cart. They've got a ladder. They've got all the things that you might find on a poor collective farm in Russia, and from these implements they build a rocket and illustrate the whole story of Yuri Gagarin. And the core idea is that even with these simple things they manage to present all this complexity."

Evidently, there are nice resonances between the inventiveness of theatre and the inventiveness that saw mankind fling Gagarin into space. It's telling that Henry says he had no interest in using Gagarin to stage a worthy story of human endeavour. Instead, he wanted the play to focus on the wonder and the strangeness of human experience.

"I'm not attracted to the 'Edmund Hillary – first man to go up the mountain' narrative," says Henry. "What's more interesting is that Gagarin was the first guy actually to see Earth. They asked him all these questions when he was up there. They asked him 'What does it look like?' And he said 'It's blue.' And then they asked him 'Are we round?' And he said 'Yes. We're round.' Those answers are extraordinarily simple but also beautiful and wondrous. This person went out there and he could see where we are from and see us in context. And that's what we're trying to get at in the play."

Strikingly, *First Cosmonaut* is part of a thematic trilogy. In 2003 Blue Raincoat premiered *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, based on the real and tragic story of a man who faked a sailing exploit in the 1960s. Next year, meanwhile, the company will debut a show about aviation icon Amelia Earhart.

Crowhurst, Gagarin and Earhart are intriguing bedfellows. (Henry calls them "explorers of the inner mind.") All of them are strange creatures who tested the limits of the human.

"They are strange creatures and that strangeness that affects them on the inside is in a way something that also happens to all of us every day. The guy who sees Earth for the first time is such a brilliant metaphor for our fundamental relationship with our own sense of self and our sense of reality."

First Cosmonaut runs in [Factory Performance Space](#), Sligo. Oct 22 — Nov 2.

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