

# Bringing a little bit of magical realism across the country



**Sara Keating**

After years of restless experimentation, Blue Raincoat Theatre has found its niche

Niall Henry, the artistic director of Blue Raincoat Theatre, is refreshingly upbeat about the challenges of taking the company's experimental adaptation of Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth* to the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, where it opened last week.

The work premiered last year at the Factory Performance Space, the company's 100-seater home in Sligo, but the transition to a city venue more than twice its size

has gone relatively smoothly. "The biggest difficulty was having to deal with a cast change," says Henry. Yet the act of moving from Sligo's small theatre culture to the capital is not as simple as packing up your set and sending it across the country.

Blue Raincoat was founded in Sligo in 1991 after Henry returned from eight years in France to form a theatre company in his native town, with writer Malcolm Hamilton. Henry had been studying and working with mime artist Marcel Marceau.

"It got to a point where I was thinking about the future, and I was looking around at older, English-speaking actors and what opportunities there might be," he says. "I thought, 'Do I want to be looking for work or do I want to work?' And that was when I decided to come home."

The early years were dominated by restless experimentation with classic texts and producing new work, he says, but it "took a while for us to find out what type of work we wanted to do".

Despite some minor critical successes, Henry admits their early work was hit and miss, but they were lucky enough to get a grant under the Arts Council's Regularly Funded Organisations programme, which guaranteed funding for three years. "We



■ *The Poor Mouth* (starring Jean-Marie Perinetti, left), is the third in a trilogy of Flann O'Brien works adapted by Jocelyn Clarke, and with it Blue Raincoat Theatre has come into its own

thought we probably would not get the opportunity for regular funding again, so we wanted to use the time and money as best as we could. We did as much new work as we could churn out in three years, and it was full-on research. One production would work; the next one wouldn't. It was then that we began to find our niche."

With *The Poor Mouth*, the third in a trilogy of Flann O'Brien works adapted by Jocelyn Clarke, the company has come into its own. Henry is reluctant to categorise the work but suggests that "magic realism on stage" comes closest to describing their aesthetic. It is unapologetically experimental, but Henry insists that, despite the smaller audience pool in Sligo, they have a loyal audience for their work.

"Our job is to be entertaining for two hours. That's it - no matter the form. I'd say there probably was a sense of bemusement in the early days and sometimes now, too. But there has to be, because every

time you get comfortable the only thing you can do is push yourself, and either no one will come and you'll get closed down or you'll get to the next level. You just hope that the failings aren't going to be as massive, but you have to risk it."

If there is a downside to working in a smaller theatre culture, it is that "it would actually be better for the audience if they had more opportunities to see more theatre. They would be exposed to different types of theatre, but it would also force us to up our game."

"Competition is always healthy and if there's a company next door who are 10 per cent better than you, you have to match that. But being the only theatre company in our region is brilliant in another way, because for the ensemble there is nothing else. This is all we do, and we can focus in our entirety on that."

"It means we can have conversations about what we'll be doing two years before we even get to a workshop stage."

That said, touring to Dublin has become an important part of Blue Raincoat's operations. "It is easier to get key people to your shows if they don't have to make a two-and-a-half hour train journey to Sligo," he says. "But more that, it is nice to go to plac-

es where our peers play, like Pan Pan or Fishamble, and it's important too to get that compare and contrast with them."

The company is established enough not to have to worry too much about whether Dublin audiences will be familiar with its work. "We have been lucky in that we do get a good amount of critical attention," Henry says.

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"Obviously if we were from Dublin, our networks would be stronger, but we try to circumvent that by the way we market and in the choice of things we do. But . . . if the show is good enough, people will come," he concludes, before heading up to the theatre to see how the cast is getting on.

*The Poor Mouth* runs at Project Arts Centre until Saturday