

Treading softly in Sligo

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The Yeats festival is much more than an attempt to cash in on the artistic brothers' association with the area, writes Alan O'Riordan.



IRELAND tends to celebrate its literary heritage in a parish-pump-priming way. The starting point is not words, but locality. There is a certain logic to this, to Bloomsday wandering around Dublin, or Kavanagh pilgrimages to Inniskeen.

Even Samuel Beckett, who, unlike those other two greats of Irish literary modernism — Joyce and Yeats — is not readily amenable to tourist-board oversimplification involving period dress, now has a festival in his honour in Enniskillen, where he attended the Portora Royal School.

This approach is followed by the Tread Softly festival in Sligo, now in its second year of celebrating the region's ties not just to WB Yeats, but to his painter brother Jack too. For a first impression of Tread Softly's populism, you only have to go to YouTube to see people in Edwardian costume reciting 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. But further investigation soon belies this twee packaging. Driven by the local arts community, the festival mixes in a good deal of artistic and intellectual rigour.

For instance, whatever about Yeats's poetry, you could never attach the rubric of populism to his austere, experimental plays. Yet, Niall Henry and Blue Raincoat will be performing rehearsed readings of eight of Yeats's dramatic works during the festival.

"We're doing eight plays, and one Synge play, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, because we needed nine," says Henry, "We needed nine, and Yeats wrote a lot of bad plays! There are, I think, eight of the 26 plays that are good, four that are very good and one or two that are really great. His intention was to mix forms, long before anyone was talking about Total Theatre, so he was ahead of his time."

Blue Raincoat's recent version of *Purgatory*, which brought 300 people up to Knocknarea and that, says Henry, was before the spell of good weather.

"It's something we do below the line here," he says, "because you can't tour it. Well, you can, but will people come? Yeats did write a lot of bad plays, and there were also a lot of bad productions of good plays, so as a dramatist he wouldn't have a reputation good enough, or should I say, fair enough, for us to tour."

Yet, for Henry, Yeats's drama was an early, formative influence. "When growing up, there was a local man, Walter McDonagh, who was big into the Yeats plays, so we all got sucked into them that way. The plays were exciting for me because we were doing the masks, the dancing, the fights."

Henry would later train in Paris with Marcel Marceau, before teaching mime, and since then Blue Raincoat has built a reputation for its physical brand of theatre which nonetheless keeps writing at its core. Something of the same versatility is in the Yeats works. "The mask and movement plays, like *The Cat and the Moon*, and *At the Hawk's Well*, aspects of those fell into our laps at Blue Raincoat because of our background."

The readings will be held in Source, a spacious, three-level wine-bar and restaurant, part of the festival's drive to be as visible as possible in the life of Sligo town. And while the prominent event at Tread Softly will again be the vintage day on Saturday, the serious intent of the festival is seen with events like a lecture on 'The Winding Stair' by Helen Vendler, one of many visiting academics.

At the Model arts centre, an exhibition of Jack B Yeats's paintings focuses on the importance of the circus as a theme in his work. At the Hawk's Well Theatre, musicians and artists have collaborated to make a multimedia exhibition where visitors can view artworks and listen to music alongside the poems that inspired them, while the Yeats Summer School will be opened with a lecture by Mark Patrick Hederman, the abbot of Glenstal.

Yeats's six-year tenure as an outspoken senator was a model of what the Seanad could have been. Whether the institution has a future will be the subject of a timely debate at the festival.

As well as these events, there will be a host of concerts, including a new composition by Steve Wickham, and readings by authors including Séamus Heaney and John Banville.

The overall aim, says Henry, was to put the art back into the tourism. "The programmers here are purely from arts organisations," he says. "It is funded by Fáilte Ireland, and generously, but the programming is managed directly by the Model, the Hawk's Well, and ourselves at Blue Raincoat. We try to keep the standards as high as we can."

The Yeats thing, says Henry, has been something of a latent legacy. "We are tapping into it now. The thing primary is that as we build it up we try to do so with the correct respect and quality. These things can become a means to an end, but the end here shouldn't be business. It shouldn't be big names, full pubs, off we go.

"The intention is that the programme is excellent, there's lots of it and that it comes out from the traditional arts spaces and can be accessed by people."

* [Tread Softly](#) runs from Jul 25-Aug 9.

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