

THE IRISH TIMES

An Roinn
Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta
Department of
Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Gate makes its German debut with two Becketts

Derek Scally

Festivalgoers have warmed to Michael Gambon and Barry McGovern's takes on absurdity

Michael Gambon is concentrating on his spaghetti bolognese, and on keeping it away from his green tweed jacket, when he announces: "Oh, Beckett is great fun." The Irish-born actor didn't appear to be having fun onstage a few minutes earlier in *Eh Joe*, taunted by the disembodied voice of a past lover as a camera captured his tormented face in pitiless close-up, the image projected on to a gauze screen.

The Gate's stage version of Beckett's teleplay *Eh Joe*, paired with Barry McGovern's one-man show *I'll Go On*, marked the Dublin theatre's German debut last week, at the Ruhrfestspiele.

The festival in Recklinghausen is Germany's leading stage celebration, with participants this year that include Isabelle Huppert, Charlotte Rampling and the directors Luc Bondy and Jan Bosse. This year's festival is also a month-long celebration of Irish drama, with German productions of Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* and Sean O'Casey's *Purple Dust*. This week the Abbey's production of Owen Mc Cafferty's *Quietly* joined the proceedings.

But first to fly the Irish flag in Recklinghausen, supported by **Culture Ireland**, was the Gate's artistic director, Michael Colgan. "This is important not just for our work with Beckett but also for the Gate itself," he says. "We've done Beckett all over the world, even in China, but in our 86 years we've never been to Germany. As my mother always said, you wait to be asked."

It's Michael Gambon's second time performing in Germany. The first was in Royal National Theatre productions of *King Lear* and *Othello* in a 1966 stay that includ-

ed a meeting with Helene Weigel, Bertolt Brecht's widow and head of the Berliner Ensemble theatre.

"At the checkpoint into East Berlin, when the guards came with the mirrors on sticks they used to check under cars, she told them to f**k off, or the German equivalent," he says. "She was a fierce lady."

This time around in Germany, the fierce lady is the recorded voice of Penelope Wilton. She fires a series of posh-vowelled poison darts at Gambon's Joe in a 30-minute indictment of how he mistreated past lovers.

"I sit there and listen to her. I just act with my eyes and respond to what I am hearing about the life I've been leading," he says. "It's very simple, very straightforward."

So is playing Joe no more difficult a role than Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* films, which, he once said, involved showing up and playing himself with a stuck-on beard?

Slowly, Gambon reveals the challenges of returning to Atom Egoyan's 2006 Gate production, in particular keeping his head immobile for half an hour. One false move and the enormous projection of his face vanishes from the gauze screen. "I'm trying to convey to the audience what is upsetting him while I'm trapped in a cage," he says. Then, to counteract what may sound like the intellectualising favoured by the Beckett brigade, he adds: "If I sneezed, I'd be in the shit."

His masterful silence in *Eh Joe* gives way to Barry McGovern's brilliant Beckettian blizzard in *I'll Go On*, a 90-minute virtuoso filleting of three Beckett novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*.

After performances at Edinburgh Festival Fringe last year and earlier this year in the US, McGovern sees his German debut as a chance to leave his comfort zone with a work he has now performed 258 times, spaced out over almost 29 years.

"You get a lot of laughs in an English-speaking audience, but it was quite silent out there," he says after his first night. "Because English is not their first language, I didn't know what the reaction would be at the end."

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The concentrated silence gave way to three euphoric curtain calls. German audiences, big Beckett fans used to reverential productions of his major works, were bowled over by Gambon's disarming simplicity and by McGovern's cheerful obscenity. For them the Gate's Beckett was fresh, accessible and far more human than the academics and critics would have them believe.

"They really brought out feelings we all recognise, the regret of what it means to be human," says an enthusiastic local man, Rainer Keller, as he queues up for a pint of stout at the interval with his green-clad wife. They are taking in the Gate's Beckett productions, he says, to "get a breath of Irish air" ahead of their trip to Ireland two days later.

The critical reaction to the Gate's German debut is nothing short of ecstatic. Deutschlandradio Kultur, essential listening for Germany's cultural class, calls it a "fascinating, unwieldy evening for which Beckett fans should travel great distances". The newspaper *Die Welt* concludes its review: "One can ask no more from theatre."

With accolades like that, it seems that

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securing the Gate's Beckett expertise has been a coup for the Ruhrfestspiele's director, Frank Hoffmann. "German theatre audiences are very educated, very literate and don't get fazed by anything," he says. "They even have a side to them that loves being tormented. That suits Beckett's later works that are increasingly merciless, with fewer concessions to audiences."

His invitation to the Gate closes a gap between Beckett's homeland and a productive home from home for Beckett. Germany was where *Eh Joe* was first shown on television and where *Happy Days* had its European premiere, and Beckett directed his own *Waiting for Godot* in Berlin. A quarter-century after his death this is a gift both welcome and unexpected.

"There is a big Beckett affiliation here," says Colgan, "and we hope we are opening a door to something good."

PHOTOGRAPH (TOP): RAPOPORT/GETTY ruhrfestspiele.de