

The Brilliance of Bandon

FROM THE HOB

Paul Keating



MAYBE Ireland's first blush with wealth and fame enjoyed during the decade-long era of the Celtic Tiger realm wasn't such a disaster as its many critics and survivors would admit.

After all, didn't it unleash a newfound confidence of Ireland's youth and potential and dividends in investing in its educational system to train students for the modern world of the new Millennium and the 21st century where the internet and technology would revolutionize the world?

And can we not accept the seismic sensation of the now 25-year-old *Riverdance* spectacle that entered the world stage, opening the doors for Ireland's rich cultural treasure trove in many and varied disciplines that were way under appreciated.

The success of the Celtic Tiger and *Riverdance*, each in their own way, raised the profile Ireland, whose Diaspora is measured at 70 million people worldwide, and today we are reaping the benefits of many initiatives that have come to fruition in the first two decades of this new millennium.

Such grandiose notions have swirled in my mind in the past two weeks as I marveled at the creativity of a simple theatrical production rolling through the New York area mounted jointly by the Fishamble theater company and the Irish Arts Center and shared with three other Irish cultural centers here in New York and Connecticut.

The play, *The Humours of Bandon*, was a one-woman show written and acted by a multi-talented artist, Margaret McAuliffe, drawn from her own experiences as a long-time competitive Irish dancer with a dramatic flair.

Her massive acting and dancing skills served as the powerful potion that made the show so riveting and entertaining. And we'll return to that show after some more background as to how it came visiting for an action-packed week.

Ireland's meteoric rise in the 1990s economically led to a greater awareness of the boundless cultural creativity already extant in the country that had lured visitors for decades, fascinated with its rich musical and literary history but in need of new vehicles to express that cultural heritage.

Riverdance, in particular, was a liberating and contemporary model for Irish music and dance which had never stopped evolving, but was doing so in a manner that only those inside of it were paying attention. Its commercial success spawned other similar shows and opened up new audiences and exposure worldwide from which countless artists have now followed in myriad ways and forms.

Aiding and abetting that on a corollary plane was the global success and outreach of the Celtic Tiger economic juggernaut where Ireland's diplomatic mission tapped into the cultural appeal of its homegrown artistic assets as the elixir to expand business and trade with old and new customers in the global economy.

Building on Ireland's abundant legacy in the literary arts and theater and in music and dance and other creative forms, it was easy to draw on their heritage through a new generation who were passionate about their culture and re-inventing new ways to express it.

In 2005, the Irish government recognized that culture was one of its most enduring assets and dedicated a new department towards it called Culture Ireland under the aegis of one of its pioneering pro-genitors, Dr. Micheal O'Suilleabhain, who had built a university-level program around it at the University of Limerick.

Funds were delegated to the new ambitious agency to underwrite a new mission of promoting Irish arts and artists abroad which continues today as a very vital organ to their promotion.

The Irish government also recognized the role of the diaspora in helping to make Ireland the nation that it had become and, in particular, those immigrants who still looked fondly on the Old Country and supported it through every means possible since emigrating.

On a similar trajectory in New York was the emerging Irish Arts Center established back in 1972 in the wild and woolly days of revolutionizing everything in counter-cultural mode.

In the late 1990s, there was a sea-change of sorts at its Hell's Kitchen that saw its visionary artistic home become more open to working with a wider group of people in the Irish community in New York.

Those same winds of change in Ireland swept over the Irish Arts Center and as the new millennium dawned, it soon became the staging ground not only for the nascent Culture Ireland unit but increasingly as a powerful adjunct for the cultural mission of New York's Irish Consulate which correctly viewed the varied cultural assets of the Big Apple as notable stakes to build its supportive community within its diaspora. That is the short-hand history.

Now back to the main reason for this column. Fishamble (the new play company) has partnered with the Irish Arts Center on a number of productions beforehand as both are happy recipients of grant funding from Culture Ireland. Working in a sophisticated and organized fashion in what you might call a meitheal-like environment (the Irish farming term where the neighbors help one another

harvesting for mutual benefit), the tritium can leverage logistics, travel costs and quality productions that could use their assistance in bringing the art to more and more people. And that was accomplished in *The Humours of Bandon*.

The creator of the play, McAuliffe comes from Malahide just outside of Dublin and spent almost

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decades in the world of competitive Irish dance through competitions and then as a teacher before forsaking that world for the stage as an actor.

As a way of acknowledging her transition from the field of dance to the theater, she tackled the life-long journey of her former life as a competitive Irish dancer and along with the supportive work of an actress and director Stephanie Preissner and Fishamble, turned out the one-woman play only after the concept and title had been submitted and approved.

The play was a smash success at the Dublin Fringe Festival, with McAuliffe winning a prize as the best new performer and also for the play. Fishamble gobbled it up for its touring menu but in keeping with the simplicity of mounting it on the road as a "show in a bag."

So on the road it went to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and then back to the Dublin Dance Festival where the Irish Arts Center programming director Rachel Gilkey saw it and recruited it for a residence in the current season there.

Gilkey has considerable experience at the center and knew it was also a viable candidate for sharing with the New York Irish Center, the Mineola Irish American Center and the Irish Cultural and Sports Centre of Southern Connecticut.

So it was a win-win-win for *The Humours of Bandon* which attracted and enthusiastic crowds at all the shows. It was a powerful show with brilliant acting and dancing (often at the same time) and a brilliant script that was heartwarming and heart-breaking.

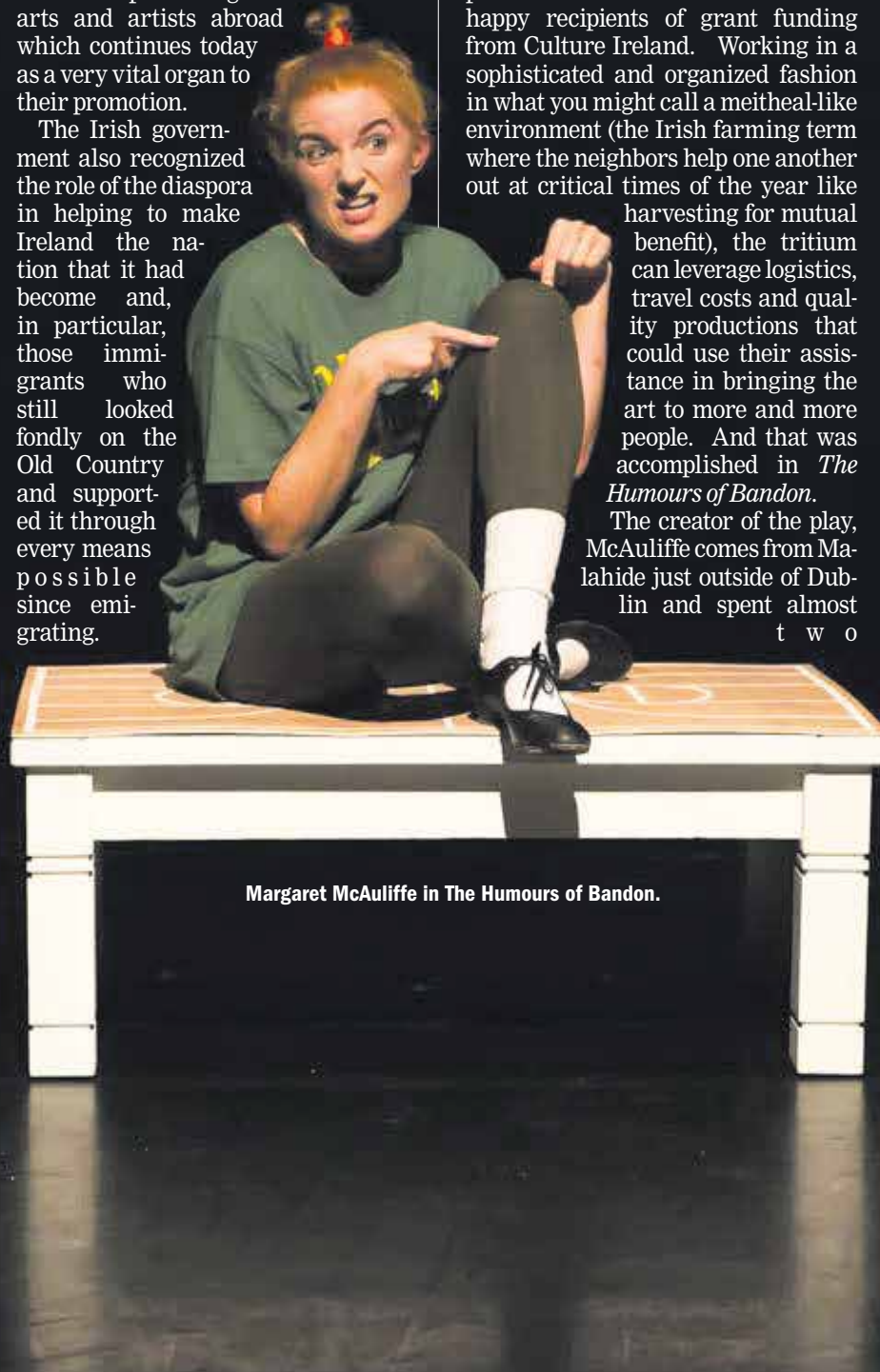
The show is also very credible for those who can recognize the intense devotion it can take to stick to the training, routine and highs and lows of an Irish dancer.

It was a full-on energetic performance of over an hour with agile shifts between the characters: the dancer Annie O'Loughlin-Harte, her mother, teacher Assumpta and Tanya. McAuliffe mixed the comedy and dramatic elements unfailingly in each performance that I saw conveying the edge that she still no doubt feels as she revisits her own dancing life in each performance.

Great theater allows us to view familiar and unfamiliar aspects of the world around us in a thought-provoking way and when it comes to the world of Irish competitive dancing,

The Humours of Bandon teaches us many lessons about those who devote their lives to it and how it changes their lives on a very human and personal level beyond the pageantry we often fixate on.

The Humours of Bandon was a massive collaborate effort on behalf Fishamble and the Irish Arts Center and, of course, McAuliffe, who has managed to build a cultural bridge between Irish dance and theater. I hope it comes around again.



Margaret McAuliffe in *The Humours of Bandon*.