

Irish Arts Center Keeps on Rising



Aidan Connolly, Pauline Turley, Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and City Councilman Corey Johnson on St. Patrick's Day at the Irish Arts Center.

THE Big Apple was abuzz on St. Patrick's Day, and not for the reasons you usually associate with the oldest St. Patrick's Day parade in America and all the attendant issues that go along with it.

What captivated most people who associate their Irishness with a cultural heritage that is steeped in the arts was the stunning news that came to a worldwide community through *The New York Times* about the future of the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan.

To the amazement of all, many of whom already knew of the hopes and aspirations but were still curious how and when it would come about, renderings of the new building around the corner from the old and present day tenement headquarters were impressively displayed in the *Times* and last week's *Irish Voice*.

The center's executive director Aidan Connolly also previewed the good news to a packed audience at Symphony Space the Friday before at the Celtic Appalachia Show with Irish Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton on hand.

The Irish government's imprimatur was further established with a St. Patrick's Day visit by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny for a full briefing on the plans, with many principal supporters in the house including Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and local Councilman Corey Johnson. This on the day when the center minions had distributed 10,000 free books dealing with Irish culture to the general public around New York City for the third year in a row.

The facts are staggering in that the center's campaign is unrivalled around New York in raising \$37.5 million already, with a goal of \$54 million through additional fundraising by the time of completion of the new digs just around the corner on 11th Avenue in 2016 after a groundbreaking sometime next year.

The current administration led by Connolly and vice chair of the board Pauline Turley (the former director) built a sturdy coalition that included New York City government (\$30 million from the Bloomberg administration and former City Council Speaker Christine Quinn), generous

board members (\$3.5 million), the Irish government (\$3.4 million on top of additional contributions from Culture Ireland and the Office of Public Works which provided the architect and design assistance for the new building) and New York State (\$600,000).

As incredible as those numbers seem even in the sky-high New York City real estate world, the real success story of the Irish Arts Center over the past decade lies elsewhere and must also pay homage to the many talented people who came through its portals over four decades who help lay the foundation upon which the new center will rest.

A more professional course was set by filmmakers Jim Sheridan and Terry George and eventually Turley, who attracted a bevy of more sophisticated benefactors who were willing to invest in better and stronger programming even within the humble confines of 553 West 51st Street, originally garnered from New York City for \$1 a year as a very delinquent property back in 1974.

Actors like Gabriel Byrne and Liam Neeson helped raise the cultural aims and aspirations significantly along with involvement of Culture Ireland founded in 2005.

On the music side of things, Dr. Mick Moloney found a very willing partner in Connolly for a much more ambitious performance agenda that would set new standards and innovation around town.

While the fundraising is mind-boggling, it is the quality of the stimulating programming that they have brought to Irish music in New York City that I most admire.

On the Friday before March 17 the center took over that Upper West Side cultural bastion, Symphony Space, to celebrate the Irish arts through the time-tested prism of Moloney's Green Fields of America ensemble meeting up with its Blue Grass cousins led by Eddie Blount from Virginia and the Blue Ridge Mountain areas populated by the Scotch Irish who also learned a thing or two about African culture.

As he has done in so many shows for the center and throughout his career, Moloney once again entertained us while educating us to the



roots that were sown and cross fertilized in this country as only he can do so vividly.

The entire show was a well-paced production, but I must single out the appearance of the multi-instrumentalist Michelle Mulcahy, whose harp solo was mesmerizing and indicative of her musical talent that courses through her veins like that of her older sister Louise and father Mick, whom Moloney first brought to these shores a number of years ago.

On Sunday night another musical cavalcade came into town, this time under the moniker of Masters of the Tradition, an ensemble that Martin Hayes put together about four years ago for his Bantry-based festival of the same name and then took on the road to the Sydney Opera House at the behest and sponsorship of Culture Ireland, which also brought it to New York City in 2011 as part of its Imagine Ireland initiative.

It proved itself a most worthy touring show featuring Hayes and long time partner Dennis Cahill, sean nos singer larla O'Lionaird, piper David Power and trio Cathal Hayden, Mairtin O'Connor and Seamie O'Dowd.

They are huge talents who managed to squeeze their concert hall show into the friendly confines of the Donaghy Theatre for a privileged 100 people or so before resuming their 10 day tour which will take them to Maryland and Massachusetts.

Yet it is smaller projects that often tell a larger tale about what the Irish Arts Center is accomplishing like the initiative defining the Masters of Collaboration (IX) taking place this week.

Two exceptional young and very accomplished fiddlers in their own right from different traditions in America and Ireland, Cleek Schrey (Virginia) and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh (Dublin), will spend a week together to see what they can create musically together without much advance

Concert Watch

WHILE the Irish harp appears on the coinage of the Irish realm, many consider the Irish uilleann pipes to be the most appropriate instrument serving as a barometer of the health of traditional Irish music with tunes and song airs being preserved over the centuries. But in the early part of the 20th century it was in danger of dying out due to too few practitioners and more importantly pipe makers.

Seamus Ennis and Leo Rowsome led the effort to preserve and pass on the pipes, and Willie Clancy aided that quest from West Clare up to the folk revival of the 1970s.

Two young pipers emerged in Liam O'Flynn, who starred in Planxty, and Paddy Keenan, who broke out in the Bothy Band. They made the pipes cool in an era when rock and roll dynamics infused the trad music community, and they were the most exciting musicians playing the uilleann pipes.

For over 40 years Keenan has been in the vanguard of Irish pipers which number in the thousands today all over the world while simultaneously boosting the respect for traditional musicians who came out of the traveling people.

On Friday night, March 28, he will be appearing at the Blarney Star Concert Series at Glucksman Ireland House at 8 p.m. along with accompanist John Walsh on guitar. It is a rare opportunity to see him in an intimate setting. www.blarneystar.com.

Scotsman Archie Fisher is one of the great folk singers performing today. He is touring here and has teamed up with a marvelous fellow traveling folk singer, Garnet Rogers (brother of the late Stan Rogers), for a Sunday show at 4 p.m. on March 30 at the Turning Point Café in Piermont, New York.

The Hudson River town just north of the Jersey Palisades makes for a nice Sunday drive, and the Turning Point has a fine menu. Check out turningpoint-cafe.com for further details.

preparation.

Shows on Friday and Saturday nights (8 p.m.) will produce the unexpected and given their past track records. To catch a glimpse of what may be in store or simply to find out more about them, Moloney will interview them on Wednesday, March 26 at 7 p.m.

It is all happening at the Irish Arts Center, and is it any wonder that the fruits from their urban vineyard are flourishing beyond belief these days. Find out more at www.irisharts-center.org.