

Order

in the face of Chaos
An interview with Enda Walsh

The scene is Scotland in the summer of 2007 and I have arranged to interview Enda Walsh in the restaurant above Edinburgh's basement-level Traverse Theatre. Arriving early, I bump into the Irish playwright downstairs in the bar. We say hello and agree to meet in ten minutes, but when the time is up, he is nowhere to be seen. At least, not in the bar. It turns out he has dutifully headed upstairs to the restaurant as originally arranged.

Such a minor instance of miscommunication would not normally be worth commenting on, but it seems to exemplify something about Walsh and, in turn, his plays. "That was typical of me," he says, laughing when I catch up with him. "I was going, 'I know he's down there and he knows that I'm down there, but I should actually come up here, otherwise it could all go to pot.' All my plays are about that."

He is thinking in part about *The Walworth Farce*, a play lauded by one critic as a "mind-blowing combination of Marx Brothers madness and exploded Irish cliché" and a hit everywhere from Galway to Miami. It features a family of Irishmen exiled in London endlessly acting out a ludicrous play within a play. Failing to follow the script, they believe, would risk destroying the order of their lives. Like Walsh and our meeting, everything hangs on sticking to the rules.

As well as that surreal nightmare comedy, which arrives in Sydney as part of an international tour, he is also thinking of *Disco Pigs*, the play that made his name after being the hit of the 1997 Edinburgh Fringe. It has a similar sense of order in the face of chaos, telling the story of two youngsters who have developed their own language, their own way of behaving, governed by its own hermetic rules, as a way of surviving the world. He is thinking too of 2001's *Bedbound* which charted the routines of a vicious father and his polio stricken daughter, trapped in one small room free from outside interference.

Also on his mind is the subsequently produced *New Electric Ballroom*, a companion piece to *The Walworth Farce*, once again set in an intense world with its own rules. In this play two elderly sisters act out their memories of youthful romances while their younger sister plays a tape of sound effects. The retelling of the stories provides a feeling of certainty and control to comfort them amid life's unpredictability.

"I've been writing that play forever," admits Walsh, whose work also includes *Hunger*, about IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, which won the inaugural Sydney Film Prize in the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. "It's my preoccupation with patterns and routine. Getting up in the morning, living a day and being happy with that pattern, but then having moments in the day where you think, 'I really want to detonate this, to find a new way of living or find a new me within this body or else I'll be driven mad.'"

On paper such comments might seem over the top, but Walsh has a keen sense of self-deprecating humour and giggles as he explains himself. But his neuroses are not so rare. The reason audiences respond so animatedly to his plays is partly because of the strange intensity of the private worlds his characters inhabit and partly because of the way they, like us, cling to the certainties of the daily routine. "You're trying to connect with the nine-to-fiver [in the audience] who has somehow recognised themselves in these odd, twisted, warped characters," says the playwright. "The difference with this play is that it's crafted within the rules of farce, so there are a few more turns to it than just one rollercoaster going headlong."

His explanation for doing farce is similar to his explanation for writing another play about Irish exiles in London. He had no love of either. "I really fancied writing that play of Irishmen in London which everyone's had a go at and which I hate," says Walsh, whose play is like a warped parody of Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* in which five Irish ex-pat brothers fill their Coventry home with aggression, hypocrisy and self-hatred. "The notion of Irish people doing farce, when we have no knowledge of farce in Ireland, just seemed right."

In Irish playwriting, there is a strong sense of a legacy passed down through an honourable lineage that includes JM Synge, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel and Martin McDonagh. Today's Irish writer can choose to go along with the tradition or subvert it, but to ignore it is not an

option. Having been commissioned by Galway's Druid Theatre Company, with its history of plays by Irish greats, he felt he was in good enough company to look his demons in the eye. Farce was a form he found unemotional and plays about Irish exiles were a cliché; this was his chance to do both.

"I hate those plays about nostalgia for Ireland," says the London-based playwright. "I hate farce as well, but I knew there was something disabling and devoid of any life or humanity in farce that I liked. It was a bit of a shock for me, so I sat down and learned how to write farce and to write within those constraints. I wanted to do a contemporary, brash play that's really giving to an audience."

He realised that by putting his pet hates together he could satirise and celebrate them at the same time. To get the full measure of what Walsh is doing in *The Walworth Farce*, you have to be aware not only of a culture with a tendency to sentimentalise itself, but also of a history of plays about the Irish in England and about the craft of the storyteller as exemplified by the work of Conor McPherson. Walsh's play is at once a parody and a celebration of these two traditions. It is a dark tragedy presented as a light comedy in which the characters are let down by the kind of romantic fictions that are so prevalent in Irish culture.

In the process of learning the rules of farce, however, Walsh had his eyes opened to a form he

had previously dismissed. "*Noises Off* is the most brilliantly written play," he says, calling playwright Michael Frayn a genius. "It's perfect. I read it and re-read it. I read some of the Ray Cooney stuff – *Whoops*, *Missus*, *Where's My Trousers* – and they're technically amazing. I really enjoyed that choreography, moving so many people around in my head. There are three actors but eight characters. That was a real buzz."

As for his audiences, what he hopes is that, through his surreal landscapes, they will recognise a common humanity. "I skip and bluster through life, sleepwalk through months," he says. "I'm getting older and the years are skipping away and I long for the life-changing afternoons and evenings. I remember in my 20s, all those difficult years, having big conversations, whether I'd split up with someone or fallen out with a friend, and afterwards thinking I'll never be the same person again. With all my plays I want the audience to experience characters having life-changing events, afternoons where they're going to be different people. The situations are heightened – it's too easy to say they're 'absurd' – they're lifted off the stage and are strange scenarios, but in the detail of the emotion they're very simple. The content, the world and the language don't mean that much to me, but the emotion, the silences and the subtext is where you find your play."

Mark Fisher

