



# Drama behind the scenes

As the comedy hero Ross O'Carroll Kelly prepares to return, producers reveal that life in Irish theatres these days is far from a barrel of laughs

*Katy Hayes*

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Lisa Lambe, Rory Nolan and Aoibhinn McGinnity in the play from Anne Clarke (James Horan)

Anne Clarke needed to raise €350,000 in order to produce *Between Foxrock and a Hard Place*, the next Ross O'Carroll Kelly play, due to open in Dublin's Olympia Theatre next month.

She prepared a prospectus for

investment in units of €10,000, an ambitious target in this economic climate. The first O'Carroll Kelly play provided a return for investors of 36%, but Clarke dutifully adds in a small-print voice that "past performance is not a guarantee of future returns".

She doesn't seem daunted by the prospect. Isn't theatre a hugely risky business then? "It is," she says. "And isn't it funny how investors used to have great confidence in bank shares?"

Clarke is a capable advocate. Employed at the Gate for almost two decades, she worked her way up to the position of deputy director before founding her own company, Landmark, which produced its

first show in 2004. Landmark has two distinct streams of productions: commercial shows such as the O'Carroll Kelly play and comedies by Fiona Looney that play in the Olympia (1,250 seats); and not-for-profit art-led shows that play in smaller venues such as the Project Arts Centre (220 seats). These included Edward Albee's *The Goat* in 2005, and David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* late last year.

Actors and personnel cross from one stream to the other, but the funding model is different. Clarke gets Arts Council support for the more esoteric shows, but the commercial ones are expected to wash their faces, to borrow a phrase from the financial world. All of them have. "Fifty thousand people went to see the first Ross O'Carroll Kelly play, *The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger*," she says.



Producer Anne Clarke (Bryan Meade)

Between *Foxrock* and *a Hard Place* is in rehearsal, and therefore open for advance ticket booking. Clarke describes sales so far as "encouraging". Weekends and the most expensive tickets are going first. I express surprise at this lack of bargain-hunting and she says it's an international phenomenon — the most expensive tickets always sell first. She is mindful that O'Carroll Kelly — or ROCK to aficionados — has a youngish fan base, who would be more price-sensitive. Consequently, matinees are priced lower, and there will be a Sunday show at 4pm.

The Ross concept is a creation for a uniquely Irish audience/readership and is an original in a world where so much cultural fare, especially at the popular end of the spectrum, is a knock-off from concepts that originated in Britain or America. It has also inspired a literary sub-genre focusing on privileged boys who attend private schools in Dublin. *Bad Day at Blackrock*, Kevin Power's novel, based on the killing of a young man outside Annabel's nightclub, is another snapshot of that world, and also achieved great success. Paul Murray's Booker-longlisted *Skippy Dies* also delves into a seemingly pampered and privileged elite stratum of our society. Hasn't Ross O'Carroll Kelly corrupted a

generation? Clarke's eyes flicker at this hint of social criticism. "Surely you mean seduced?" she says sweetly.

Between *Foxrock* and *a Hard Place* is set in the spring of 2010 just as the National Asset Management Agency is being established. Clarke is enthused by its topicality. She says that the previous play — *The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger* — foresaw the recession. It opened in November 2007, almost a year before the banking collapse that put a stop to the national party. One of the discarded titles for this show was *Magnificent Recession*. The Ross character, in his current incarnation as a column in *The Irish Times*, couldn't exactly be described as news journalism, but it has its finger on the national pulse.

How did Clarke's collaboration with Paul Howard, the author, originate? She recalls looking at his books and having a lightbulb moment. Struck by his gift for dialogue and the genius of the Ross persona, she approached Howard about its theatrical possibilities. Howard is said to relish the theatrical process, happily attends rehearsal, becoming chums with everybody. Is he funny in person? "Yes," she answers emphatically.

O'Carroll Kelly made his debut in *The Sunday Tribune* in 1998 when Howard worked as a journalist in the sports section. "The first column was only about three paragraphs long and appeared as part of a miscellany column I used to write called *The Mixed Zone*," he says. In 2000, Matt Cooper, the then editor, moved it to the main news section, where its popular appeal flourished.

The play is in the rehearsal room, always a vortex of energy, and Clarke is buzzing. She recalls with enthusiasm an article in *The New York Times* last month which described Irish theatre tickets as

“amazing bargains”, and assured readers there was “no rip-off there”, in stark contrast to how “last week we had the Financial Times dumping on our country”.

Perhaps there is a connection that The New York Times didn't see. “Big theatres are affected more by the recession,” argues Noel Pearson, the producer, who has returned to Irish theatre after a long break. His recent Gaiety production of Boss Grady's *Boys* by Sebastian Barry didn't wash its face — though “we serviced the play very well”. Production values were indeed high — as anyone who saw Tom Hickey and Pat Shortt poignantly tucked up together in bed as the eponymous boys can attest — but they are no guarantee of bums on seats.

With theatre there is always a risk, Pearson says, but without risk “there is no point in getting out of the bed”. His production of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* last March did rather better. But what on earth brought him back to the theatre in the middle of a recession? “Boredom,” he replies, tongue in cheek. He has a number of feature films in development, including two projects with Barry, but the “feature-film world is slower than ever”.

It's all a far cry from the golden era of Irish film and theatre in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when actors and producers won Oscars and Tonys. Pearson recalls that all round the world “the talk was of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *My Left Foot*, *The Field*, Bono, Seamus Heaney. They couldn't pronounce Lughnasa, but they knew it was a great theatre show”.

It's now exactly a year since the Global Economic Forum at Farmleigh discussed “the importance of Irish culture to the image of this country abroad”, or how to magic that Lughnasa genie back out of the bottle. A year on, nothing has happened. The problem with Farmleigh, Pearson said, is that it was “all talk, talk, talk”. What is needed is what he and Clarke so readily provide — action.

*Between Foxrock and a Hard Place* opens at the Olympia theatre, Dublin on October 15

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