

Walls fall away in Walsh's weird world

THEATRE

Ballyturk

By Enda Walsh

Black Box Theatre, Galway

Rating: ****

Reviewed by Nadine O'Regan

How do you describe a play like Ballyturk? In interviews ahead of the play's premiere on Monday night in Galway's Black Box theatre, playwright Enda Walsh refused to try. "I don't want to even talk about the situation on stage," he said with a grin. "Three people are definitely in the play. It's about how we exist as people"

After 90 minutes spent in the hermetic world of Ballyturk, you understand his reticence. Designed by Jamie Vartan, the set catapults us into a strange enclosed space where red balloons scatter the floor, a shower juts from one corner and a cuckoo clock is stuck on a wall.

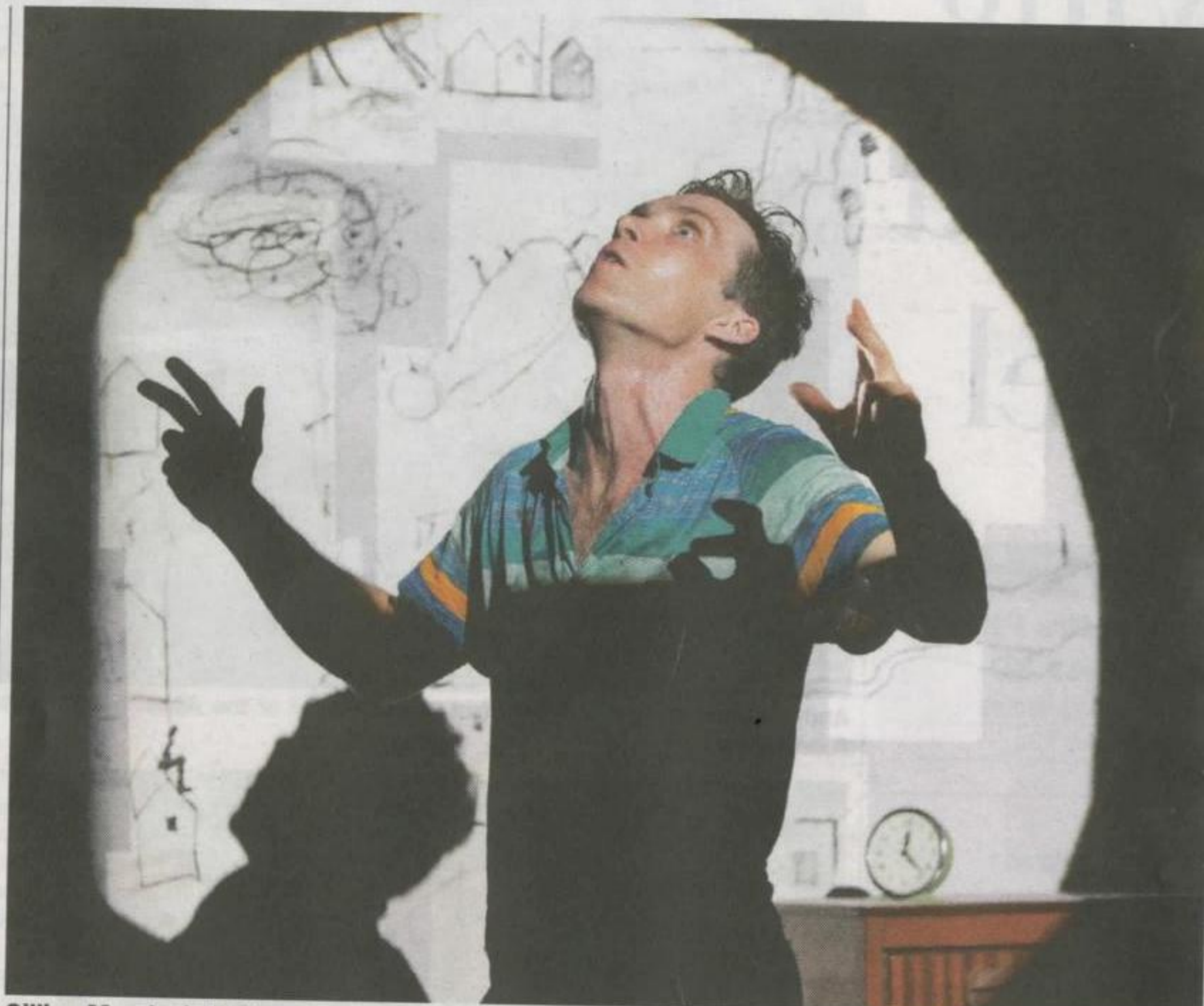
A neon sign says Ballyturk. Sketches of residents embroider the walls.

This space is inhabited by two nameless characters (Cillian Murphy and Mikel Murfi), who are trapped but not thinking about it. In fact they are frantically busy, giddily gabbling, exercising, showering, waltzing to the 1980s synths of ABC's *The Look of Love*.

They are hilarious, surreal, chattering about yellow jumpers, throwing talcum powder on each other, and enacting fictionalised sketches of small-town Ballyturk residents with amphetamine-charged finesse.

Their comic timing is virtuoso and marvellous to behold. Walsh's language (daft, full of brilliant metaphors) is another joy.

Of the two, Murfi is the senior figure: stronger, commanding, an advisory leader committed to



Cillian Murphy in Ballyturk

Patrick Redmond

their routine. Murphy – needy, helmet-clad and sweating, his voice moving in the sketches from a gruff male to a whining high female – is an almost Gollum-like presence, crouching his body in the foetal position.

But it's Murphy who provides more honesty. "Sleep is freedom," he cries. "It feels like we might be less than we were in a place we don't know now."

Music – from 1980s synth songs to compositions by Teho Teardo – works brilliantly to snap tension or contribute to it.

But what's actually going on? Gradually – as with a crime scene investigation – things become clearer. Voices beyond the walls remind them of things they hav-

en't seen, lives they haven't lived. (Walsh himself provides a cameo voice.) A buzzing fly is a small marvel.

Just when you think they could continue, Godot-like, in this fashion forever, their world – and ours – falls away, as an entire wall of the play is lowered, revealing the dark figure of Stephen Rea, a terrifying figure for a few minutes until – in a typical Walsh reversal – Rea chats absent-mindedly about his left and right hands, before saying he'd like tea with biscuits.

For all that Rea does his gloomy best in the role, Walsh has already done so much to build up a deeply specific and particular idea of a world that Rea's arrival is jarring; his explanations have the feel of

training wheels that Walsh should kick away.

Equally, some of the later speechifying from all the characters is intended to be profound but fails to connect: you can't help but feel that when Walsh is explaining, he's losing.

Still, the profound sense of menace and despair left by the final scene of the play, a clear sibling of *Misterman*, is undeniable. When the lights dim for the final time, the applause is delayed by a shocked audience simply sitting in the darkness, taking in what has come before them.

That silence – rather than the standing ovation that followed it – was Walsh's real reward on the night.