

'A woman said my play was terrifying but that I was a lovely boy'

Enda Walsh has already been compared to Beckett and his new play is a wild blend of Dylan Thomas and Buster Keaton, says **Benedict Nightingale**

His plays are so often so dark, so intense, that he's been compared by reviewers to his great compatriot, Samuel Beckett. He's also on record as having called critics "sub-animal". And when he was asked to write the book for that charming Irish musical *Once*, a friend of mine said it was like asking Charles Manson to script *It's a Wonderful Life*. No wonder, then, I was wary when I interviewed Enda Walsh at the National Theatre, where his strange, unsettling *Ballyturk* is about to open.

Well, I was doubly, trebly sure of my error when he fell about laughing at the Manson comparison, as he did at much else. Indeed, I had already seen that I had him wrong — as soon as he proudly introduced me to Ada, the sweetly smiling daughter he was soon to take to Chessington World of Adventures as a ninth birthday treat. Even the critic slur turned out to have been directed not at professionals but at online amateurs delivering nasty one-liners. I've seldom interviewed as warm and outgoing a person.

Yet the 47-year-old dramatist readily admits that his plays are indeed dark, not least *Ballyturk*. This opens with Cillian Murphy and Mikel Murfi, playing two intimate friends,



exchanging surreal, escapist, often crazily comical thoughts and memories as they evoke life in the imaginary town of the title, only to be interrupted by a scary gentleman played by Stephen Rea. In Galway, where Walsh's own production of the play opened to rave reviews in July, Michael Billington wrote that it was "*Under Milk Wood* as interpreted by Buster Keaton". Fintan O'Toole said that it was as if Beckett and Sartre had jointly composed a sketch for Morecambe and Wise. But, added O'Toole in *The Irish Times*, it's also "astonishingly bleak".

Actually, it was Ada who inspired her father's first new play for four years: "When she was six she turned around to me and said, 'So people die?' And I went, 'Yes, everybody does,' and she was, like, 'Oh, and do you think about that when you're living?' And I said, 'No, you get on with your life, you have a job, you get married and have kids if you're lucky, you hop on and off trains and buses, but you don't think about it.' But she was still surprised by its mystery and quiet horror. It seemed quite bizarre to her."

Hence a play in which two unusually innocent friends are

Michael Fassbender as Bobby Sands, left, with Liam Cunningham, in *Hunger*, written by Enda Walsh

***Ballyturk* is at the National Theatre, SE1 (020 7452 3000), from Sept 11 to Oct 11**



suddenly confronted with what a sinister Rea surely represents: not just reality, but death itself. But Walsh had little idea how or even if this would occur when he started *Ballyturk*. "When I write I don't know what the next page or even the next line will be," he says. "It always happens in real time, so the characters are dealing with an hour and a half of their lives. And, like me, they're trying to find out where they're going. I'm sticking a flag into the world and saying: 'Where am I at the moment?' They're forcing their way to clarity and truth."

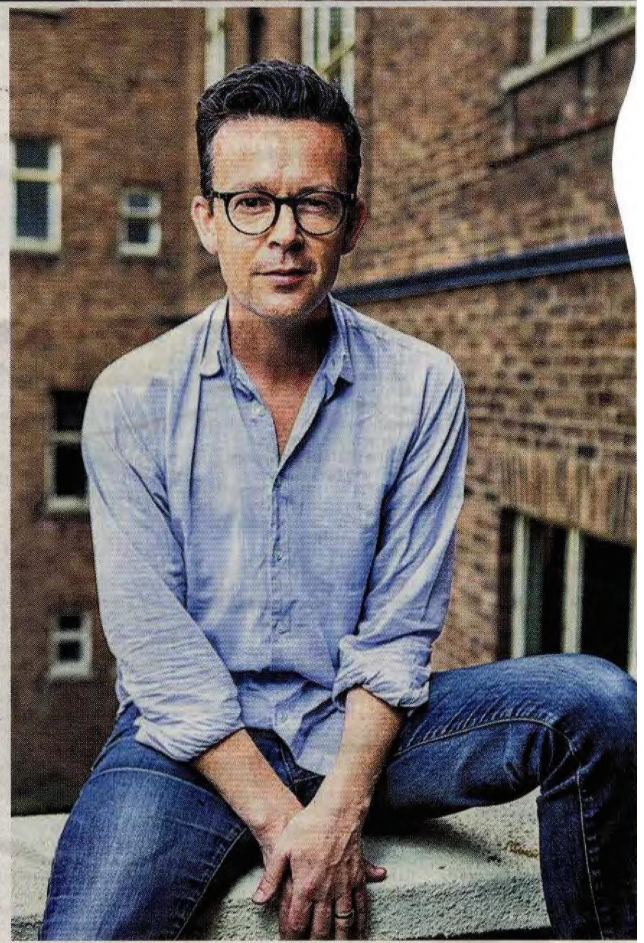
So what does it signify? Walsh talks

of "a friendship, a clinging to each other, almost a love affair, being subjected to extreme pressure", but says that he's never fully sure of his plays' meaning and doesn't expect his audiences to reach easy conclusions.

"I've had people in the street in Galway say, 'Enda, Enda, come here! You're going to have to explain your play to us.' And I go, 'That's not my job, that's your job, and my understanding of the play may be completely different from yours. What I wanted to do was to leave it open for you to interpret it.'"

Brought up in Dublin, the fifth of five children, Walsh went to a community school where an influential teacher was Roddy Doyle. He encouraged his students to write short stories and led them in discussions of literature, liberating the imagination of a boy whose parents had their theatrical aspects. Walsh's mother had been a professional actress and his father a furniture-shop owner who, he says, was in effect a terrific actor, somehow getting people to buy during Ireland's downturns and himself buying big cars during upturns: "He was a flamboyant character, a fantastic salesman, a great mimic, and he'd change shape. He was a real playwright's education."

Walsh attended film school, but felt the call of live theatre and went to Cork, where he drew on a local dialect he found "fascinating and hilarious, more proclamation than conversation" to write plays for Corcadorca Theatre. In 1996 he achieved local, national and eventually international success with *Disco Pigs*, made into a film in 2001 (Murphy starred in both versions as Pig), which involved two teenagers' fierce and eventually destructive bond. Then came the series of plays — *Bedbound*, *Misterman*, *The New Electric*





Bottom: Enda Walsh. Left: Elaine Cassidy and Cillian Murphy in *Disco Pigs*. Above: *Once*, whose libretto Walsh wrote. Below: his next project is an adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Twits*

“ Theatre should be raising the dustbin lid and looking inside



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Watch a clip of Enda Walsh, Stephen Rea and Cillian Murphy discussing *Ballyturk* [tableteditions and thetimes.co.uk/theatre](http://tableteditions.andthetimes.co.uk/theatre)

Ballroom, *The Wabworth Farce*, *Penelope* — that established him as the most boldly imaginative of the many fine Irish dramatists now illuminating a British theatre that, says Walsh cautiously, “tends towards the sociological”.

He firmly believes theatre should be, well, theatrical: fresh, unpredictable, verbally inventive, dangerous, even feral. “Not televisual,” he says, “not simply holding up a mirror to nature — but raising the dustbin lid and looking inside.” *Ballyturk*, he adds, is “the wildest thing I’ve written”, an advance on work he felt had become too neat, “too clean”. And the two main characters are, like many in his plays, weird, cut-off and clearly pretty damaged. They’re also stuck with their fantasies in what he calls “the dark ages of Ireland, when it was like Albania and at the height of institutionalised child abuse”.

Yet they haven’t been transformed by circumstances into the monsters that people much of Walsh’s work. For him *Ballyturk* is in many ways a playful piece, its two main characters engaging men who, he hopes, will win audiences’ sympathies. “The world may be dark,” he adds, “but I believe in the human spirit and people’s innate goodness. I believe we have the capacity to pull ourselves out of the s***. Sometimes I think I’m a bloody romantic.”

Certainly he’s hard to categorise. There’s his delightful libretto for *Once*, which won him a Tony award in 2012, and there’s *Bedbound*, which involved a tyrannical, murderous father trapped in a tiny room with the half-mad daughter who fears and hates him, and led one critic to dub him “Beckett with a broken bottle”. And there’s his screenplay for *Hunger*, Steve McQueen’s film about the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, which won awards galore in 2008 (though *Chatroom*, the film he scripted in 2010 for director Hideo Nakata, was considerably less well-received).

Despite the hard-hitting *Hunger*, Walsh denies he has strong political leanings, mysteriously adding that his most political piece will be his adaptation of Roald Dahl’s tale about malevolent tricksters, *The Twits*, which opens at the Royal Court next year. For children? “For the family,” he replies with a chuckle.

It was at the Court in 2002, during the run of *Bedbound*, that a member of the audience pinpointed the Walsh paradox: “After the show we had a question-and-answer session and a little old lady put up her hand and said: ‘Your play was absolutely terrifying but I can see you’re a lovely boy.’ I was slightly horrified. I certainly didn’t know how to react.” And Walsh shakes his head and laughs.