

Camille O'Sullivan is looking forward to starring in a piece forged from the works of Schubert and Buchner, writes Padraic Killeen

WOYZECK in Winter is an ambitious music theatre project that director Conall Morrison has dreamt of bringing to the stage for many years.

Mapping Franz Schubert's beautiful song cycle Die Winterreise on to one of European theatre's most seminal plays, Georg Buchner's jagged tragedy *Woyzeck*, it's the flagship event of this year's Galway International Arts Festival. The show is co-produced by the festival and Landmark Productions, who together have enjoyed great success with Enda Walsh's plays in recent years, and it boasts a stellar cast that includes Patrick O'Kane, Camille O'Sullivan, and Rosaleen Linehan.

Morrison has long been one of Irish theatre's finest directors. As an artist, he is always especially strong on vision and concept, and in that regard, the idea to fuse together these two iconic works — one a landmark of theatre, the other of the concert hall — is typically daring on his part.

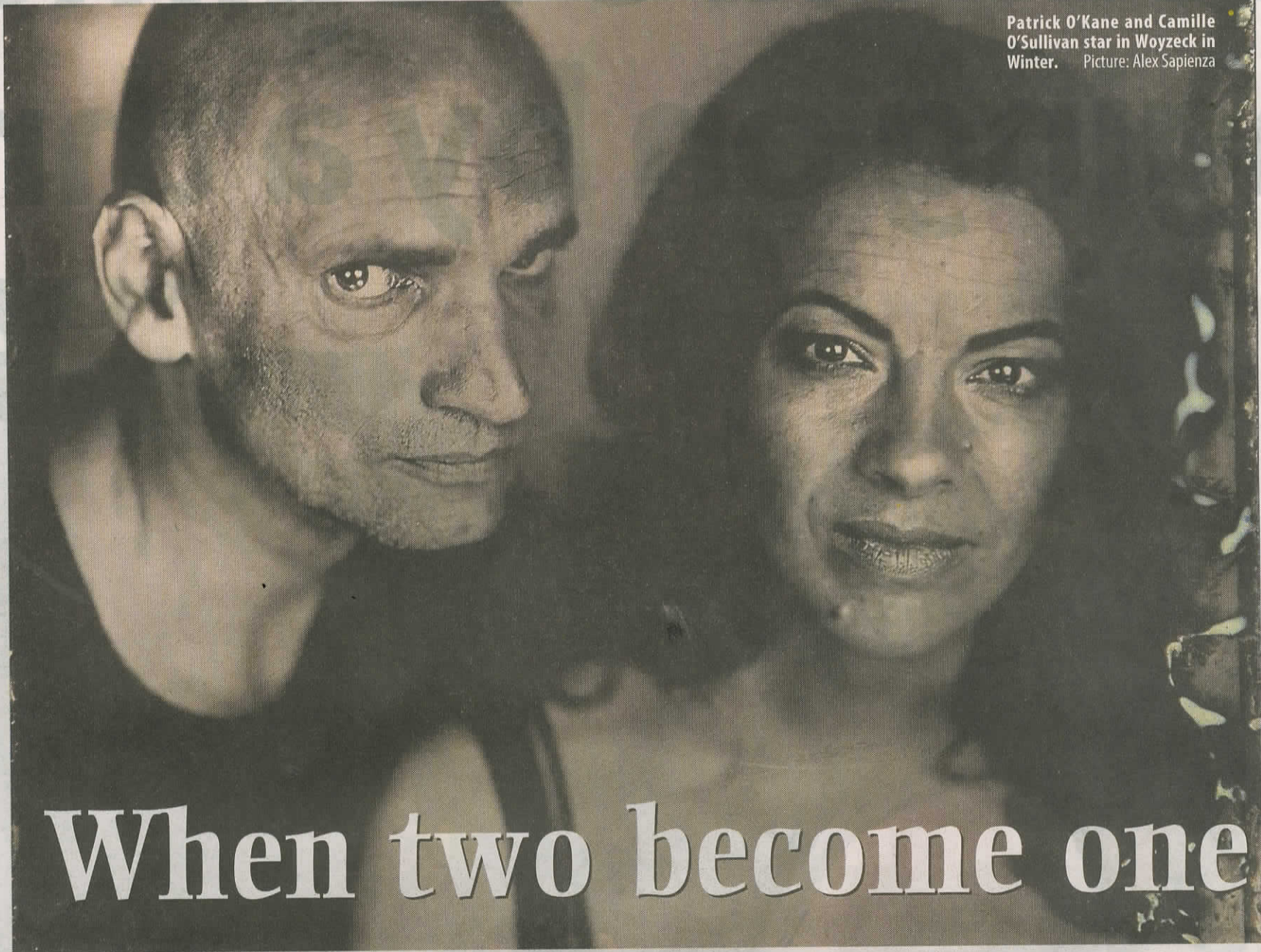
"They're two of my favourite works of art," says Morrison. "I think many people would agree that Die Winterreise is the greatest song cycle ever written. It was only when I sat down and studied different translations of the lyrics that I had this intuition that it was a very similar story to *Woyzeck*. Die Winterreise is about a man spurned by his lover, who is convulsed by grief. He goes out into the world and his senses begin to break down. He suffers a kind of hallucination, where his grief and loss and longing start to find a very fractured expression everywhere in his environment — in the wind, in a weathervane, in the ravens that caw at him."

CORE FEELINGS

Morrison says Schubert's piece has the same core feeling as in *Woyzeck*. "*Woyzeck* is a man who is on a knife-edge because of the military regime that he lives under and because he's the subject of this bizarre medical experiment by a doctor who has put him on a diet of peas for three months. And then his partner betrays him and this tips him over the edge. So the core stories were very much the same and I felt that the atmospheres and emotions within Die Winterreise were very expressive of the *Woyzeck* story."

Having work-shopped the project at intervals over the past decade, Morrison was happy to discover the two pieces did sit well together.

"They're like two x-rays taken from slightly different angles," he says. "And when you put them on top of each other they create a strong and unified composite picture. And there are lots of other connections between them. They were both written within



Patrick O'Kane and Camille O'Sullivan star in *Woyzeck in Winter*. Picture: Alex Sapienza

When two become one

ten years of each other by geniuses who died young. Buchner died when he was 23, Schubert when he was 31. Both had been breathing the same Austro-German air and both were coming out of the Romantic movement.

Indeed, the show's set design — which features over 100 pianos heaped together into a mountain-scape — seeks to evoke the sensibility that one finds embodied in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and other artists of the Romantic era. Conall Morrison plays a piano onstage throughout the production.

"The piano is the central



Conall Morrison directs *Woyzeck in Winter* at Galway's arts festival.

metaphor," says Morrison. "The piano is an instrument capable of infinite expressiveness, but it's such a delicate thing — it can so easily go out of tune, it can so easily get damaged, just like the human mind."

LOVE STORY

Though *Woyzeck* is a play that observes the struggle of the human spirit under immense social and economic pressures, it's also a sad and absorbing love story. Playing the daunting role of *Woyzeck* — which, besides anything else, must involve the ingesting of a great number of peas — is the reliably edgy Patrick O'Kane. Playing opposite him, meanwhile, in the role of *Woyzeck*'s lover, Marie, is Irish chanteuse Camille O'Sullivan.

The latter, a native of the Cork harbour town of Passage West, has staked a fine career on her gift for immersing herself in the micro-dramas of songwriters such as Jacques Brel and Kurt Weill. What has the experience of inhabiting Schubert's song-world been like?

"It's always such a pleasure to discover music for the first time," she says. "I live in a world of Nick Cave and Radiohead and, of course, I know Tchaikovsky and Beethoven, but I wasn't that well-versed in Schubert. It's a more classical style of singing than I'm used to, but I really love it. I find it so modern and beautiful. Conall said I'd get addicted and I have."

In Buchner's play, O'Sullivan's

character, Marie, is no less tragic a figure than *Woyzeck*. Despite her affection for *Woyzeck* and their child, she resents their poverty and — succumbing to desire — pursues a fling with another man. It pushes *Woyzeck* over the edge and brings destruction to all of their lives.

"There's a joy to her, a sadness to her, a longing for something," says O'Sullivan.

"They stay together because of the child and they want to make things work. But there are different colours to her. She's not just 'the nicest girl in the world'. She also gets up to no good. So she's at turmoil with herself. She wants things to work with *Woyzeck*, even though he's ranting away to himself, but she also wants this other life. And

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that's her journey. She gets caught up in the glamour of this other life and she knows that if she goes in that direction, things will not turn out right.

"But like any person who does something wrong in their life, she heads toward the flame."

SAD LOSS

Significantly, for Morrison there is pathos offstage as well as onstage. The words that O'Sullivan and company are singing were penned by Stephen Clark, the English playwright and librettist who Morrison enlisted to translate the Winterreise lyrics into English, who sadly passed away last year.

"It was just a devastating blow to me," says Morrison. "He was one of my dearest friends and a great collaborator and artist. And he did the most brilliant job of translating Wilhelm Muller's lyrics."

"It's a very strange and moving thing to be working with his words and him not being here."

"But it's a way of communing with his spirit and trying to do justice to his wonderful lyrics."

"The production will be dedicated to his memory."

■ *Woyzeck in Winter* premieres at the Galway International Arts Festival, July 13-22; transferring to London's Barbican, Sept 13-16; Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, Oct 3-8. Camille O'Sullivan plays the Olympia on Nov 17