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Between finishing a day of gruelling rehearsals and sitting down to discuss *Woyzeck* in Winter, a passion project that has been in the works for a decade, Conall Morrison nips outside for a cigarette. He quit three years ago, but a recent trip to Serbia has him puffing again.

"The smoking capital of Europe," says the theatre director. "There's a league table and apparently Serbia's at the top. Ukraine beat them one year but that was only a temporary blip. I'm giving myself until the opening night of this show and then that's it."

Although best known for directing other people's work, Morrison was in Belgrade for the staging of a Serbian translation of one of his original plays. A two-time best director winner at the Irish Times Theatre Awards, he has also written successful adaptations. His 1997 take on Tarry Flynn, based on a Patrick Kavanagh novel, marked the arrival of a radical presence in Irish theatre.

For his latest endeavour, Morrison has a new title: creator. *Woyzeck* in Winter is a blending of two distinct works: Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a popular 19th-century German play, and *Die Winterreise*, a song-cycle by Schubert. The works were written within 10 years of each other and Morrison likes to think that the two men "were breathing the same Austro-German air", but that's where any obvious connections end.

Morrison has long been a devotee of both pieces but the idea to combine them came from studying an English translation of *Die Winterreise*'s lyrics. "It struck me that it was a similar story to *Woyzeck*; a man who is almost disfigured by grief whenever his lover betrays him, and begins to experience hallucinations," he says. "It's arguably a portrait of a journey into a kind of psychosis, which makes it sound bleak. But both the pieces are electrifying."

Conor Linehan is musical director, while the cast includes Patrick O'Kane and Camille O'Sullivan. A mountain of broken pianos constitutes the set, and there's some version of a monkey involved. It's an ambitious piece of theatre that has taken Morrison a decade to realise. He's full of energy and enthusiasm, and you get the impression he could talk about it forever.

"It's radical in that I have the cheek to steal Schubert and to blend him with *Woyzeck*. It's radical in terms of its imagery: there's the mountain of pianos and there'll be snow weaving in and out of it," he says. "In many ways, it's a very expressionistic piece, where all the imagery is unfolding out of the central character's consciousness. But hopefully it's also a moving piece of storytelling. Ultimately it's a great story of the pain of lost love and what that can do to the mind."

Morrison is at his best when he feels he can amplify the emotion of an



## SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Conall Morrison's next play, *Woyzeck* in Winter, combines the work of Buchner and Schubert. The ambitious piece has taken a decade to realise, discovers *Eithne Shortall*

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existing work. The classics provide excellent material, and allow freedom to play around. "Some of this is just the frustrated original writer in me," says the 51-year-old, who started out writing plays before deciding he'd like to give directing a go. "That's the hard work, digging these things out of your own heart with a blunt knife – that's kind of painful – and finding something genuinely original and authentic you can put before an audience."

Morrison recently directed Frank McGuinness's *Donegal* at the Abbey, a production that mixed country music with the story of an embittered family. The reviews were not all singing and dancing, however. Morrison considers himself fairly battle-hardened, but criticism still hurts. "I've had the luck to be able to direct works I believe in,

and I thought Frank wrote a major piece there. He really did," says the director. "He was writing at the full stretch of his powers. It was just slightly dismaying, disappointing, that some people took against its tone. But listen, the amount of people who came and came again, repeat viewers, was superb. The reviews are important. We're not made of stone, but ultimately we're doing it for the audiences. If we get those audiences, that's the main thing."

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It's a story of the pain of lost love, and what that can do to the mind

Morrison has ties to the Abbey. He is a former associate director and many were surprised Ben Barnes, rather than he, became artistic director in 1999. But the director felt he was too young. When the job came up again last year, he considered it but didn't apply.

"There was a part of me didn't fancy the burden of running the building. I thought the idea of two people going in was good. That was being talked about and there was nobody I felt sufficiently connected with to do a joint application. So I didn't feel the moment was right or that I would have been the right man for the job."

Morrison is enthusiastic about the recent changes at the Abbey and Gate. He applauds the national theatre's new openness to bringing in theatre companies, but hopes it will also create



**Man of many parts** Morrison enjoys directing and writing; above, O'Kane and O'Sullivan star in his latest play

its own plays. "The Abbey needs to be a generating powerhouse of new work as well as, quite frankly, creating work for actors and designers and directors and playwrights," he says. "But it's exciting days for audiences. There's a great range of stuff coming down the line."

Perhaps the most overt recent shift has been the focus on diversity, particularly increasing the number of women involved in theatre. As a white male director, does this make Morrison nervous? "Yeah, it probably will mean less work for me," he says with a laugh. "But that was one of the most exciting social movements I've witnessed in my time in Ireland, frankly. It was remarkable in terms of what it achieved and the way it was created. For a supposedly political country, we can be quite supine. We get motivated over the water charges, because it was going to financially cost us, but a lot of other government crimes go unmentioned."

When Morrison finishes with *Woyzeck* in Winter, he will be writing an original play for the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire. "What I'd love to do is ring the changes, create an original work or do an adaptation or direct a great play taken off the shelf. The joy of it for me is the breadth of the art form," he says.

"The impulse to write is not the same as the ability to write something that you would genuinely have the temerity to put before an audience. That's why I've done various translations and adaptations, so I get to indulge my love of language and my desire to shape a story. But it is, to some degree, a cheat because Sophocles or Swift or Patrick Kavanagh has done the heavy lifting.

"But the niggles are there, the voice that says, 'No, no. Listen, you've really got to go back and create something from scratch.' That doesn't go away."

*Landmark Productions and Galway International Arts Festival present Woyzeck in Winter at the Black Box, Galway, July 13-23; Gaiety, Dublin, Oct 3-8*

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