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The second hint that we are in for an unusual evening is Joe Vaněk's odd but lovely setting: a series of five gossamer panels hanging before an open space, with hats hanging from the walls, piles of shoes on the ground and a tall panelled doorway centre stage. But the most compelling evidence of this production's strange beauty appears when the radiant young actor Catherine Walker pulls down the panels one by one and speaks directly to the audience: 'You're thinkin', She's a prisoner ... Bridgie's a prisoner ... And you're not, I suppose?' The setting, we realize, is the afterlife, where Bridgie sits at her Singer sewing machine, listens to distant heron cries, and tells stories with a compelling combination of intensity and matter-of-factness: 'Bridgie Cleary, who made weskits for the gentry, hats for the quality. Bridgie Cleary, always the step or two above buttermilk ...'. She is joined by her husband Mikey (Tom Hickey), now an old man because he outlived her. Indirectly and allusively, they exchange stories and information, working their way towards an inevitable reckoning. A third party then appears, their snooty neighbour William (Declan Conlon), who was previously Bridgie's lover.

Director Alan Gilsean keeps the focus on Bridgie's emotional and sexual life: the high point is Bridgie's soliloquy to the man she truly loved, Phildy Reddon. Exceptional production values, including Kevin McFadden's lights and Cormac Carroll's sound design, superb ensemble acting, and Mac Intyre's dense and colloquial prose-poetry combine to create a haunting event.

Anarchic and Strange: *Only an Apple*

Bernadette Sweeney and Marie Kelly
with interview material from Selina Cartmell.

In advance of the 2009 opening of *Only an Apple*, *The Irish Times* published 'Born with Storytelling in his Blood', a feature article on Tom Mac Intyre by Sara Keating. Keating contextualized Mac Intyre at this point in his career:

Mac Intyre is one of the lesser-known playwrights of a particular generation who, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, used the theatre to challenge the legacies of de Valera's Ireland. Where Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy and Tom Murphy put alternative Irish realities onto the stage, Mac Intyre was interested in looking beyond reality altogether, in seeking a

symbolic space in which the unconscious desires and needs of those repressed and repressive years might be explored and maybe satisfied.¹

This description by Keating prefigured *Only an Apple's* exploration of a world where the real and the unreal meet and merge. The play opened on 21 April 2009, and featured Taoiseach, a modern-day political figure trying to hold onto his power during a (much-relished) visitation by Elizabeth (I) and legendary pirate Grace (O'Malley). The two women are matched by a third, described in the character listings of the published script as 'The Wife ...'.² The Wife is a character who is 'playing at' invalid, a role to which she's accustomed and which she can assume or discard as she pleases' (47). These women are offset by the three men who surround the Taoiseach, butler Sheridan, press secretary Hislop and Cultural Attaché Arkins, while on the margins lurks would-be political usurper McPhrunty. Mac Intyre's Taoiseach references the former Irish political leader Charles Haughey, whose extravagance and corruption generated much controversy at the end of his career. The Taoiseach of Mac Intyre's play resides in Taraford – a culturally-recognizable reference to Haughey's home Abbeville in Kinsealy. Mac Intyre's Taoiseach is a broader reference too, to Irish politics, to the preponderance of corruption and the seductive powers of extravagance, be it material, sexual or political.

Mac Intyre has always given his audiences something familiar – a place, a person, a myth or story – on which to ground their experiences in the theatre. It is from the depths of the audience's own associations with these historical, mythological or iconic figures that the live performance springs. How deep can you go with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? And how deep can you go with an infamously corrupt political leader at a time of economic recession and government scandal?

Mac Intyre has spoken about what he strives for as a playwright:

In my experience of the theatre I know there's only one note that would give you what I call 'an edible silence' and it's what the playwright works for: 'an edible silence'. How do you get that note? You can only get it from the themes of sex and death, and that's what I work for in the theatre'.³

The Taoiseach of *Only an Apple* is balanced precariously between Mac Intyre's favourite themes of sex and death, and in one of his final speeches he references jockey Mornington Wing to describe his own gamble:

TAOISEACH. Any gamblers among you? I keep a few race-horses. The father a close friend of Morny Wing, the great jockey. Mornington Wing – what a name for a jockey! Had I been named Mornington Wing I'd have been fine. Or if I'd a child – girl-child – called Morning. A girl-child called Morning – whom I could have watched playing. Or picking primroses in March. Or staring astonished, at a white horse. (*Long pause*) Tell you something, and for free: I'm minded to gamble – just go for it – y'know, like closin' your eyes and walking over a cliff. Donegal. Or Clare. Aran Islands. Am I going mad? I feel in balance. I think. [...] I want the trip. Am I ready to pay the price? Will there be a price? Always a price. For coming. Going. Pray for me (98).

Much excitement was generated by the Abbey's choice of director Selina Cartmell for this production. Of a younger generation of directors, Cartmell is renowned for her visual sensibility and her experimentation with imagery and theatricality, and seemed the perfect match for Mac Intyre's latest play. *Only an Apple* lived up to Cartmell's reputation on all of these fronts with an audacious staging of the female and a vibrant and playful sense of the performative. The play projects make-believe on the characters and us as the audience by staging barely-concealed political commentary through farce, musical and the surreal.

From the director

Cartmell spoke about her involvement in the project and her experience working with Mac Intyre in response to a series of questions:

MK/BS. How did you become involved in this project and what is it about the work of Tom Mac Intyre that interested you?

SC. Tom called me about another play he had written that he wanted to discuss with me after he had seen some of my previous work. I remember it very clearly – I met him for breakfast at Elephant and Castle in Temple Bar and we just hit it off. I enjoyed his company and the way he spoke about the world and theatre and why we do the work we do. He was also a good friend of Marina Carr's and I remember leaving breakfast thinking he was certainly one of the tribe if not the leader of the tribe.

A few months later I was asked by Aideen Howard if I would read his latest play, *Only an Apple* that the Abbey had commissioned. I then met with Fiach MacConghail to discuss directing the project.

I had seen very little of Tom's previous work but remember hearing a diverse array of responses, some cult-like in the intensity of the following of the stories he told and the way he told them. The first time I read *Only an Apple* I remember thinking this is one of the most anarchic and strangest plays I had ever read. I was inspired by the imaginative leaps of the language and haunted by the visitation of Elizabeth (I) and Grace O'Malley at Taraford. I also remember finding the story outrageously funny and entertaining.

MK/BS. How do you feel that Mac Intyre's use of imagery matches the visual aesthetics of your own work as a director?

SC. When reading *Only an Apple* it was clear here was a writer and poet who loved images, dance and physical language as much as the written text. It is rare to find a writer who is so willing to experiment with different styles and bold forms of theatrical language and I found this challenging and inspiring in equal measure.

As a director it is important to create a safe environment where the actors and creative team feel free to 'play', and this is the word I most associate with the visual aesthetic of the Mac Intyre world. I found when directing *Only an Apple* that it is only by 'playing' that you can fully unlock the true spirit of Tom's vision.

MK/BS. Can you give an outline of your approach to the rehearsal process and how the work developed? (How did Mac Intyre contribute to the work in the rehearsal room, for instance? What particular hurdles were overcome? How did the actors respond to the complexity of the text?)

SC. *Only an Apple* is an ensemble piece of work and this is where the challenge lies for both actor and director. I was blessed when directing this production by being given an inspiring and immensely talented company.

I feel the Mac Intyre actor needs not just intelligence but strong physical skills and energy that transcend the spoken word. I also feel a Mac Intyre actor needs to be fearless as what he demands and asks of the actor sometimes pushes you beyond any logical understanding of the world.

We had a five-week rehearsal process for *Only an Apple*. This consisted of mostly scene rehearsals, with a few weekly dance and singing rehearsals for the madcap 'Pussy Drives the Train' that ends Acts 1. For the first three weeks of rehearsals most communication was done over the telephone between Tom and myself or via e-mail if new scenes were being written. In the last two weeks he was more

present in the rehearsal room looking at sections of the play that he would then respond to with new scenes or ideas.

The text of *Only an Apple* is dense and complex and has multi-layered meanings. As we discovered during rehearsals Tom sometimes wrote phrases or words because he likes the sound of them or it gives a speech a certain musical pulse. I think the actors found it helped to find a physical score for speeches or sections of the play that lifted the language to a more heightened style of presentation. I hoped the actors found his world in which to play a liberating experience where anything is possible and where anything can happen.

Staging Strange

It is clear from Cartmell's comments that many of the defining features of Mac Intyre's other work were present here too – a need for the actors to be playful and indeed brave, an ensemble approach to the work and its 'physical score', and a willingness to go beyond 'any logical understanding of the world'. Mac Intyre was working once again in the realm of the unreal. He himself described *Only an Apple* as 'surely a dream play. And as such it is choc-a-bloc with the energies and motifs and symbols of my dreams. But if you call the whole thing surreal, you have to admit that it is as real as the cup in your hand as well'.⁴ In fact, in a talk at the Abbey theatre as part of the 'Meet the Makers' series, Mac Intyre advised young writers to 'start dreaming fast' as this is the 'most immediately available door' to them.⁵ He continued: 'there's only one story – are you going to wake up or are you going to stay asleep? Are you interested in becoming conscious?'⁶ Mac Intyre's latest play gives evidence of this process of dreaming, and stages a world where the dream and the reality are hard to distinguish. This allows for exuberant political satire, free from the ties of historical exactitude or documented record. It also allows for an overt theatricality, well staged by Cartmell's visual response to the play, as captured by stage photographer Ros Kavanagh.

Dick Bird's startling setting brings the audience directly into the classic splendour of a Georgian drawing room with its imposing bay window, floor to ceiling bookcases, and large framed portraits which extend out along the auditorium walls. Kavanagh's images (see figs 6.1-6.3 included here) document the production's staging of the ostentatious lifestyle of the political leader which houses the iconic

and incongruous images of the two historical figures Elizabeth (I) and Grace O'Malley. They also highlight Matthew Richardson's brilliantly garish lighting which further disrupts any naturalist response to the piece.

In Ros Kavanagh's photographic images there is no mistaking the atmosphere of this shared space and its tantalizing extravagance. Somewhere between *Alice in Wonderland* and Taraford/Kinsealy there is the playful and then the foreboding. Kavanagh's three images capture this movement in the darkening sky and the narrowing or tunneling from three panels of the bay windows to one as the play comes to a close.

Cartmell emphasized the theatricality of the play through her use of half-mask, allowing the 'contemporary' characters to become other for the musical number 'Pussy Drives the Train' at the end of Act 1, and for the end of the play as the characters gather around the fated Taoiseach. Arkins also dons the mask when in conversation with the Taoiseach towards the end of the play, see below and fig. 6.2.

Figure 6.3 shows Fiona Bell as Elizabeth with apple, (standing), Michael McElhatton as Hislop, seated, Marty Rea as Arkins, (seated), and Cathy Belton as Grace (seated on one arm of the sofa, with her head up). Here we see the imagery of the apple staged overtly as Elizabeth teases and tantalizes in a suggestion of Eve, to the smiling fascination of Hislop. Arkins, meanwhile, in the luxurious setting of 'Taraford', gazes raptly at the unlikely figure of Grace O'Malley, perched at the other end of the sofa.

Figure 6.2 depicts Marty Rea as Arkins in mask opposite Don Wycherley as Taoiseach. Here the men are seated on the arms of the leather sofa involved in an intense conversation. The real is disrupted here again, however, as the Taoiseach is in everyday shorts and tennis shoes while Arkins is wearing an Elizabethan ruff and halfmask, with a heavy beak giving it a bird-like profile. Here we see the Taoiseach perched across from his shadow self, between them one panel of the great bay window, a symbol of the entrance to that unknown place, the place for 'closin' your eyes and walking over a cliff' (98).

Figure 6.1 shows Cathy Belton as Grace (at door left), Michael McElhatton as Hislop, Don Wycherley as Taoiseach, Marty Rea as Arkins, (at table centre) and Fiona Bell as Elizabeth (at door right). This image documents the stage picture and shows how the design encroached on the audience's space by extending the décor of

Taraford out onto the walls of the auditorium. This both drew the eye of the viewer to the stage and implicated the audience – making us somehow complicit in this corrupt and distorted world.

In Mac Intyre's plays we have become accustomed to an element of consciousness in the material object – the effigy in *The Great Hunger* as mentioned earlier, the refrigerator in *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, more recently, the Singer sewing machine in *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*. In *Only an Apple* this is carried through to the architecture, as the drawingroom itself represents consciousness as interrupted by the unconscious. This is not entirely a haunted house, but a haunted self. Throughout the play doors fly open of their own accord and secret compartments magically slide open to reveal the repressed, the forbidden, the carnal. The action takes place on a red chequerboard tiled floor, the game of life underfoot. The relentlessness of such powerful images throughout this magical play speaks volumes. Together with the dramatic weight of Mac Intyre's beautifully poetic yet symbol-laden text, there is little room for the audience to breathe, to have time to luxuriate in either of these vibrant aspects of the piece. *Only an Apple* exposes the competition between this poetic text and the strong visual and physical aesthetic that is well underway in the later plays of Tom Mac Intyre.

**... the males: unsure of what's next ... the women:
altogether commanding ... (29)**

In *Only an Apple* Taoiseach and his male colleagues are like putty in the hands of three voracious women. *Only an Apple* stages archetypal women, and as such it follows a tradition established by Mac Intyre: in his staging of *The Mother* as an effigy in *The Great Hunger*; as iconic in the character of Jacinta (present onstage in *The Chirpaun* and central, though absent, in *The Gallant John-Joe*); through the merging of characters' subjectivity in *Good Evening, Mr Collins* with the device of three female characters as played by one actor (Karen Ardiff); and the female as purgatorial and ethereal in *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*.

While extremely effective this tradition of Mac Intyre's begs the question, are his female characters empowered as figures, or disempowered as they are robbed of individuality, or, in some cases, agency? Do they serve simply as objects onto which the male characters project their desire(s)? This is an especially apt question

in relation to *Only an Apple*, which is overt in its staging of the female and sexuality, from the staging of *The Wife* to the voraciousness of the two historical women to the, in the words of the director, 'madcap' musical number 'Pussy Drives the Train'. The sexual power of the female as threatening is indicated by the final stage directions for this musical number, as included in the published text. Here Mac Intyre stipulates that 'As soon as the celebratory thrust has been established, the colour of the proceedings should take a turn towards the troubling, the menacing, the chasm, i.e. sure pussy drives the train, but pussy, by the same token, is high octane, and the mere lighting of a match has blown many away' (46).

Elizabeth (I) and Grace O'Malley are described as 'succubi' (demons who take female form to have sexual intercourse with men in their sleep) variously throughout the text, and the male characters are simultaneously wary and in thrall:

ELIZABETH/HISLOP. *She takes him by the hand, leads him downstage left. Next she positions him so that the two are standing together in conversational mode, ELIZABETH brimming with seduction, HISLOP en garde and then some. Locking eyes with her prey, ELIZABETH lets her beautiful upstage hand drift to her cleavage, dally there, and, from that sweet nest, she fetches a lime-green apple. She admires the apple, kisses it, listens to it.*

ELISABETH. *(to the apple) Vraiment? She glances at HISLOP, apple now resting on her palm, extends her palm with its precious cargo.*

ELISABETH. *Touch it (29).*

By locating extreme female sexuality in these two historical figures Mac Intyre clearly draws these women as fetish objects as well as agents of another world. Thus Mac Intyre adroitly removes them from the everyday and they become projections of Taoiseach's desire rather than characters in their own right. The only 'real' female figure then is 'The Wife' who, in her position in the Taoiseach's reality, does not merit a name of her own, and mirrors Taoiseach's sexual games with one of her own, an ongoing affair with the butler Sheridan.

TAOISEACH *on. Decidedly on edge. Snaps out of that, tours the room, sniffing, sniffing ...*

TAOISEACH. *My wife and my ever-obliging butler are now in bed together – the ravenous two-backed beast! Well, I suppose*

they could be at worse. What she sees in him – perhaps he has a big cock? Does size matter? If they tell you it doesn't, they're lying (55)

These three women, then, are unabashedly staged as cyphers, functioning as different elements of the Taoiseach's sexual life, rather than as independent characters.

The male characters fare little better. Taoiseach is of course the centre of this world and is, as such, the architect of all we see. The characters that surround him – male and female, contemporary and historic – are there to serve in one capacity or another. Mac Intyre draws a very unflattering picture of Irish politics (including sexual politics) with very broad strokes, which conversely allows him to make some very fine points. Sheridan the butler is obsequious but knowing, McPhruntly is the 'inflated-in-waiting' a political rival treated with contempt, Hislop the press secretary has a dubious level of power which is swiftly compromised by his fascination with Elizabeth, and Arkins the Cultural Attaché is the token (and gay) artist:

TAOISEACH. It's the poet in you understands, that's why I've always said 'Have a poet on the premises' (23).

Thus Taoiseach is surrounded by a group of sycophants and enablers, unchallenged and indulged. The visiting *succubi* herald a change in his circumstances, which the action moves us towards inexorably.

Script in process and performance

There are significant differences between the published script and the performance of the play at The Peacock in 2009. One of these Mac Intyre commented on: 'the snake vanished in the whirligig of rehearsals', as it was 'deemed a biteen too literal'. Mac Intyre went on to state that, for him, the snake is invisibly there, and that the afflicted Taoiseach, driven to a cliff-top, must concede 'a lot of terrifying, beautiful truths that he has excluded from his breathing and his bloodstream all his life, the snake among them.'(23). However much Mac Intyre might still see the edited snake, such differences raise an interesting issue about the performance life of a piece, when it becomes definitive, if ever, and whether or not the published text, when published before performance, can claim any kind of authority. Of the writers of his generation, Mac Intyre's work

is the most responsive to the processes of rehearsal and performance, and therefore the least likely to remain unaffected by the collaborative journey that an ensemble production can be. The traditional rules of production and publication don't apply so easily here as Mac Intyre's work, in its performativity, resists such typical transactions.⁸

Critical Response

Only an Apple, like so much of Mac Intyre's work, prompted mixed responses from critics. Mick Heaney of *The Sunday Times* felt that, as in previous works by Mac Intyre

the fate of the protagonist is bound up with his libido, though in this case the problem is a surfeit of sensuality. But the playwright's latest gambit is an unwise move. The drama is idiosyncratic, daring and, in a flawed way, entertaining, but it lacks the earthily mythical quality that marks his best work.⁹

However, Emer O'Kelly of *The Sunday Independent* argued that

Mac Intyre inhabits a magical world where it's possible to right wrongs if you have faith and courage. But he then transfers it to the real world, where such moral alchemy is far more difficult.¹⁰

Patrick Lonergan reviewed the play for *Irish Theatre Magazine* [reprinted here, see next article]. Like O'Kelly, he is supportive of the play's political ambition, and identifies Mac Intyre's use of form as key to realizing this. Lonergan concludes his review with the following provocative overview:

Only an Apple, then, is vacuous, crude, and infantile. It is consistently sexist and occasionally homophobic. It is incoherent and self-regarding. And because it is all of those things, it is a stunningly appropriate and stimulating portrait of our political system – one that allows us to imagine what the world looks like from the perspective of a mediocre man with serious responsibilities. So many recent Abbey plays have suffered from trying too hard to be topical; *Only an Apple* is relevant and absorbing precisely because it chooses to leave itself open to interpretation, trusting audiences to relate what they are seeing to their own lives, and their own situations.¹¹ (*Irish Theatre Magazine* 6 May 2009)

If *Only an Apple* has anything to say about the development of Tom Mac Intyre's theatre craft over the last forty years it is that here

is a relentlessly daring risk-taker, a writer who fears nothing when it comes to trying something new or exposing his own funny, fantastical and often dark or alternative side. Of course, it is just this alternative side that compels us to go back again and again to see what it is that Mac Intyre is up to this time. It is this alternative side, moreover, that speaks to the very place in us that recognizes the darkness and alterity that exist within ourselves.

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¹ *The Irish Times*, 25 April 2009.

² Tom Mac Intyre *Only an Apple*, (Dublin: New Island, 2009), unnumbered.
 All quotations in this essay are taken from this edition of the play.
 References to the play will be incorporated in parenthesis in the text.

³ Tom Mac Intyre speaking at the *Meet the Makers* talkback series, Abbey Theatre, 26 May 2009.

⁴ *The Irish Times*, 25 April 2009.

⁵ Tom Mac Intyre speaking at the *Meet the Makers* talkback series, Abbey Theatre, 26 May 2009.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ As mentioned in the introduction to this book, *Only an Apple* shares some themes with Mac Intyre's *Fine Day for a Hunt* (first produced as a full-length play in 1992), such as the presence of the Big House, the symbol of a pack of hounds and a merging of the real and the unreal. *Fine Day for a Hunt*, however, staged a much darker fate for the female protagonist – not so much an archetype as a timeless victim.

⁸ It must be acknowledged that his work also resists, to some extent at least, the project that is this publication.

⁹ *The Sunday Times*, 4 May 2009.

¹⁰ *The Sunday Independent*, 4 May 2009.

¹¹ *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 6 May 2009.



Fig 6.1 *Only an Apple*. Actors: (from left) Cathy Belton, Michael McElhatton, Don Wycherley, Marty Rea, Fiona Bell. Set design: Dick Bird. Photographer: Ros Kavanagh. Courtesy of Ros Kavanagh.



Fig 6.2 *Only an Apple*. Actors: (from left) Marty Rea and Don Wycherley. Set design: Dick Bird. Photographer: Ros Kavanagh. Courtesy of Ros Kavanagh.