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THEATRE TALK

Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners

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Peter Sheridan in Conversation with Deirdre Mulrooney

DM: *Peter Sheridan – what brought you into theatre in the first place?*

PS: Well it wasn't particularly a family tradition or anything like that, but when I was fifteen my father started a local amateur drama society in the Seville Place area called the Saint Laurence O'Toole Dramatic Society – which we shortened to SLOT players later on. And we started off by reading the plays of Sean O'Casey, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge – the whole Abbey revival plays – and then we staged a production of *Shadow of a Gunman*. I played Tommy Owens and my father played Seamus Shiels, Jim directed and we had a gang of people from around the area in it. And from the moment we started working on this I was in love with it. I just thought this is the most incredible way to tell a story. The idea of dialogue and characters in a specific place, at a specific time – everything about it appealed to me. And the play felt like an extension of our house. Because our house was a pretty flamboyant place to grow up. As well as us children, there were these lodgers that my mother took in. And there were discussions and rows every night with my father acting as head honcho at the table. So there was always activity going on. There were always stories with the lodgers. Like one lodger had a woman staying in his room. And that was strictly forbidden. Just crazy stuff. Anything you could imagine. Another lodger who used to take down his trousers and show me a thirty inch scar on his leg that he got in the Congo when he was an Irish soldier out there.

DM: *So you had to work it all out on stage?*

PS: Yeah. It felt like I was away working out all this stuff. So that really was the start and from there we progressed and we did *Juno and the Paycock* in which I played Joxer. Then we did a famous production of *Waiting for Godot* where my dad played Pozzo, I

played Vladimir, my brother Johnny was Lucky and Vinnie McCabe played Estragon. Jim directed. We toured it around some of the amateur festivals. People stood up and shouted at us, and walked out, storming out saying "this is not a play." It's amazing when you think in 1970 *Waiting for Godot* hadn't been seen in rural Ireland. It was still regarded as almost Satanic. It was "anti-theatre." So this was all part of my theatrical/dramatic education from 1967–1970. Then my father faded into the background and Jim and myself really took the reins of the group. We brought in other people from outside the area, and we staged a production of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* in which the music was Pink Floyd.

DM: *You were groovy guys.*

PS: Yeah! We combined that with Johann Sebastian Bach for example, and original songs. Neil Jordan and myself played Valdes and Cornelius. We were like two roving singers, throughout the play. Vinnie McCabe played Faustus. We staged it in the Oriel Hall and in amateur drama festivals. We got to the All-Ireland finals in Athlone in 1971.

DM: *Did you have any theatrical influences?*

PS: Well our influences would have been much more music when we were cutting our teeth on getting into theatre and drama. I saw the Rolling Stones in 1965, The Animals in 1966 and The Pretty Things. I saw The Who smash up their instruments in the National Stadium. We watched a documentary about The Doors when The Doors came out in America. I always remember seeing the early Jim Morrison and thinking "what a guy, what a performer." So our influences were much more in the music area than they would have been in the theatrical area. The one big theatrical influence was The Living Theatre of New York when they came to Dublin in the late 1960s. And after the show we marched from the theatre to the Bridewell and held a protest about how prisons were run, with Julian Beck and his wife. That was amazing. I began to see shows in the Abbey. I saw the original *Borstal Boy* with Niall Tóibín. That blew me away I had never seen anything like that. I saw MacLiammóir do his one-man show in the Gate, Ray MacNally in *The Field*. So I certainly did go to stuff. But we weren't coming out of theatrical tradition and continuing that. We were coming out of an experience of being in Dublin in the 1960s, my father introducing us to theatre and the combination of those elements. Music was always really important. It's probably not a much understood thing about Jim and myself, but music was a huge part of what we were doing in the theatre.

DM: *You mentioned a protest – that’s quite interesting, because your theatre is quite “social” – is it social realism?*

PS: It certainly was in the early days. But we moved out of social realism pretty quickly. The production we did of *Oedipus Rex* in UCD in 1971 was anything but social realism. It was very expressionistic. The centre piece was “The End” by The Doors. I played Oedipus Rex, Neil Jordan played Tiresias, Des Hogan, the novelist, played King Laius. Deirdre Nunan played Jocasta. We had an amazing crew of people in that show. It was very music-based. A lot of original music. We built a courtyard with scaffolding on three sides. We put the audience up three levels on the scaffolding and we played the play down on the courtyard in the middle of them.

DM: *Was that influenced by anybody?*

PS: That would have been The Living Theatre of New York. They were very much into scaffolding-type sets, where the set was very basic, very primitive and just – it was like Sheriff Street. It was like being in the flats in Sheriff Street. Where you’ve got the flats up there and you’ve a courtyard in the middle. So it was an extension of that. In a way DramSoc was never the same after that – I don’t think.

DM: *Then when you went on to the Project, did you bring those principles on?*

PS: That’s what we brought. We brought all of what we’d been learning for those years. Before the Project there was the Children’s T Company, which came out of the UCD experience. Neil, myself, Jim, Susie Kennedy, Garret Keogh, David McKenna, Ruth McCabe, they were all members of the Children’s T Company. We did children’s theatre. It was a way of earning money. We brought the plays around to schools. We did the beaches in the summertime and brought the plays around to parks. And again – the plays were not naturalistic. We did a version of *Ulysses* on Stephen’s Green in 1973. Again very heavily music-based. *The Unhappy Birthday* was a fairly traditional kid’s show that we did. I played a character called Tatty Mattie. I always remember that. That went on for a couple of years. And then, out of the experience of SLOT Players and the Children’s T Company when the Project moved from South King Street in 1975 to the disused factory in Essex Street, Jim and I made moves to get involved there. In early 1976 we did our first show, my play *No Entry*. It was very much social realism, set in Sean MacDermott Street about a couple who couldn’t afford a house and were squatting. They had to break into a house to squat and found a dead body in the bed. And then from 1976 to 1980 Jim and I ran the Project, did shows that we wrote ourselves and a lot of

original work by other Irish writers. So the Project became this breeding ground for new talent, both acting and writing. It became a focus for a lot of the energy that was around at that time. Ex-punks say that the seminal event of the 1970s was the Dark Space Event which was a punk celebration in 1978. We ran thirty-six hours non-stop punk music. There were side-shows. We had all kinds of things going on: visual art, a bit of theatre, the Virgin Prunes, U2, The Undertones. The Project was the place that people naturally gravitated to because it had the feeling of a garage space. But one of the great things we did of course was that we bought the building.

DM: *You did?*

PS: Yeah, that's how the Project is still there. The board bought the building – at our instigation. We learned that from Sheriff Street too!

DM: *To buy a building, and rent it?*

PS: (*Laughs*) Well, to own something.

DM: *What about funding?*

PS: We went from virtually zero funding – the first big grant we got from the Arts Council was £3,500 and that was in 1976 – to £32,000 in three years. And then there was a big row about the money because when we brought over the Gay Sweatshop from London in 1978 that caused such a furore.

DM: *What was that?*

PS: They were a gay company that I had seen in a show in the ICA in London. I brought over a play of mine to the ICA, and met the Gay Sweatshop people there. I thought this would go down so well in Dublin. The idea of people getting up and being proud to be gay. There was a debate in the Dail about it and a leader in *The Irish Times*. There was a lesbian play and a gay play.

My mother was great with them. They had a kid with them – my mother used to give out hell about the way they used to leave the child to go off and rehearse. But I was saying, “Look Ma, you know you have to rehearse when you’re doing theatre.” So my Ma would be minding the baby for them when they were off rehearsing. Then when the row erupted, my Ma went up to the local Fianna Fail councillor saying: “What’s going on here? These are lovely people staying in my house. How dare you be saying things about them.” But they did the show in 1978 and it caused a lot of controversy. There were pickets outside and Dublin Corporation withdrew their

grant. The Arts Council suspended their grant and we were left with no money and survived on box office for about six months.

We revived *Waiting for Godot* as a result, because *Godot* is an easy show to stage. It's just four actors and a child actor. It was a new production we did in 1979, but we did it because we had no money. We eventually got the money back. We won the war. Famously Ned Brennan, a famous Fianna Fail politician from up the road here [Clontarf] described the Gay Sweatshop as "funny bunnies from across the water."

DM: *As a joke?*

PS: No in all seriousness.

DM: *Condemning it?*

PS: Yeah. "Why should Dublin Corporation be funding the funny bunnies from across the water?"

DM: *Were you happy about it?*

PS: Delighted. Wasn't the controversy what it was all about? The era of the beginning of gay rights and gay consciousness and gay pride. And the Project was right in there at the forefront of the debate. So when you say "social, political", yeah we were right in there at the cutting edge. My play *The Liberty Suit* based on Mannix Flynn's experiences were very much an attack on the juvenile prison system. So a lot of the stuff we did had an edge. When we did a show called *The Ha'penny Place*, which was a loose working of *The Beggar's Opera* set in Dublin. The central character was based on Haughey. The opening scene was all these crates with "Libya Handle With Care" marked on them, because of the arms coming in, in 1970. The whole thing was set around the idea of Ireland at that time in 1969/70 being like the Weimar Republic, where the crooks were very close to the centre of power. The people bringing in the arms were very close to the government. There was this duality in Irish life at that time which the play explored. So a lot of the work that we did had a definite political cutting edge to it.

DM: *How did that go down?*

PS: Great. Mannix played the lead, Jeananne Crowley was in it, Peter Caffrey, Agnes Bernelle doing a wonderful Madame dressed up all in black – in black leather with a whip with which she whipped her customers –

DM: *Type-casting.*

PS: And boots up to here (points to his thighs) with Agnes just strutting her stuff. It was wonderful. Pirate Jenny was the character she played.

DM: *For you, then, is theatre to provoke?*

PS: Well I think it has to be relevant. For me it's a way of addressing the world I'm in, of being engaged in the world I'm in. It's not a retreat or an escape. That's not to say you can't have good escapist theatre. But the best theatre is the one that is pulsating right now in this second, in this moment in time. And of course you can take a thirty year-old text and make it vibrate. Shakespeare is great like that. Shakespeare just seems to be capable of resonating in all sorts of different ages – because he's such a great writer. You can take the Greek legends and make them have a relevance to today. It doesn't necessarily mean that the play has to be written yesterday, but it means that there's a consciousness about what you're doing, that you're engaging with the world as you see it. That's why I write books now, because I can write freely about the world as Peter experiences it. I'm talking about my family, I'm talking about my family and society and how I experienced it as a kid, and as an adult, and why it interests me, why I'm intrigued, and why I'm involved.

DM: *And who are you writing for?*

PS: Myself. I always have been. I am the audience for my work. And then if it translates to other people that's great. That's the bonus. But I'm never thinking of a person that's reading a book or seeing a play except myself. I've always been working for me. I don't work for a specific audience. I want everybody to see the play, to read my book.

DM: *Why?*

PS: Because I think that ultimately the people I have loved best in the performing world have been the people that are the most popular. So I regard Shakespeare as the ultimate dramatist. He was also the most popular. I regard the Beatles as the best rock band of the twentieth century, they were also the most popular. So it doesn't necessarily follow that you have to be obscurantist or elitist or in a corner or a minority interest. I'm not interested in being a minority interest. I'm interested in reaching a huge audience. I believe that really good art can reach a really wide audience and move them and affect them.

DM: *So are you thinking about entertaining?*

PS: Yeah but entertaining is my lifeblood. I don't have to think "Am I entertaining?", that isn't ever a discussion for me. I'm an entertainer. That's what I do. I grew up in a house where it was entertainment twenty-four hours a day. I know how to do plays. I know where the drama is. One of the problems I see a lot of the time when I go to the theatre is you watch stuff and neither the director nor the actor knows where the drama is. The drama is a very specific thing – you have to find it. And then you explore it and you present it. But you have to know where it is. And very often you see stuff and – it has no point of view. They get up and they say the lines but they don't have a point of view. Art must have a point of view. Art to me is about getting really clear about those things. Really specific.

DM: *Are you trying to educate people?*

PS: That sounds like a grandiose idea of "I'm an educator and you should be very grateful that I'm going to give you my pearls of wisdom." By definition it does educate. But it doesn't educate necessarily on the level that we think of school as an education. Because education can be an emotional thing. Like when we're moved to tears by something. When we're brought to the point where something engages and makes us laugh or makes us cry, makes us experience those big emotions – we're in a learning situation automatically.

What makes *A Whistle in the Dark* a great production is – here's a play that was set in 1961 that is resonating today as if it was written yesterday. It's about the tribe of the Irish in Coventry, still at war. We've moved the war, i.e. from the war of independence in Ireland. It's now happening in Britain, and we're looking for recognition. We don't want to be Paddies any more. So we've brought the war to England, and we're fighting among ourselves. We're looking to be accepted, we don't want to be patted on the head and put down. And that's why Murphy's play is so brilliant and so brief. It has that feeling of a tribe pulling itself apart, looking for an identity in this foreign place. It's a war play, a *casus belli*. It's powerful stuff. It feels like it's on the point of war. It has huge resonance today because the world is on the point of war right now. We're hearing the war drums. We're seeing the manipulation of the forces, the cranking up of the machine, the having to buy into stuff that makes it OK to kill people. And that's what *A Whistle in the Dark* does. The death at the end of that play is so inevitable. And we accept it, because it's about war. Because that's what happens in a war situation.

DM: *And this is obviously from a Greek model – I wonder in your own work does it always go back to a well-made-play structure? In terms of theatrical form do you consciously do that?*

PS: No. I wouldn't in my own writing. I haven't written for the theatre in ten years. Though I have just finished a first draft of a new play for a young audience. And the reason why I've written for the theatre again is I think we are losing the young audience in the theatre. I don't think people under twenty-five really go, and the audiences seem to be getting older and older. Which is a real tragedy because I think the theatre is fantastic. When it works there is nothing like it. I mean the cinema is great but it doesn't compare.

DM: *Why? Is it something about having people physically together in a room?*

PS: It's just that you are part of it. When you're an audience you are part of the performance in a theatre. You are not neutral. You are part of something. It's like a great spiritual experience. The kind of thing you would get at a great mass, or Mecca, or being with 7,000 or 700,000 other people in the Ganges. There is a sense of community, of a shared purpose. It doesn't happen very often in the theatre but when it happens it is special. It happened the other night at *A Whistle in the Dark*. It's electric. But I still hanker for that. I still love that feeling.

DM: *So you've moved into film.*

PS: Yeah.

DM: *What do you think the relationship is between those two media?*

PS: I think it's been a logical move for both Jim and me. Because I think that our upbringing, and the kind of theatre that we did, was always very filmic, in essence.

DM: *In a narrative sense?*

PS: Yeah. So I think that film comes natural to us. We think film. We think "story." And story is very important to film. The narrative structure of film is actually much more locked off than theatre in many ways. A classic three-act structure and that's what you stick to. And film is also more encompassing. Theatre is expensive; it's a place where people are intimidated to go into. In America no one would have the thought of "should I or shouldn't I go into the cinema?" Going to a cinema is a part of the culture. And it's part of the culture here too.

DM: *Or you get them on television.*

PS: Yeah. So it doesn't feel like you're having a cultural experience. It feels like you are doing something that is entirely natural. Whereas going to the theatre feels like you are paying to have a cultural experience. And it's expensive. It has all of those trappings with it. So by definition it's less encompassing. The cinema is much more embracing.

DM: *So you reach more people.*

PS: Yeah and it feels much more comfortable to where Jim and I are coming from. We were always trying to break down that sense of the theatre being an elitist space. Which is why I've always worked so hard at the idea that creative expression should be available to everybody. There's nothing about it that says to me you have to be born into a certain class, or you have to have a special kind of training, or you have to have a special eye or any of that nonsense which other people foist for their own reasons. There are a lot of people that are very, very happy with the idea of theatre as an elitist tool.

DM: *What do you think of training in Ireland? Do people need training?*

PS: Well it's come a long way. Of course people need training. The training for us was that we did it in situ – by actually doing it. But I've met the people who've come out the other end of the Gaiety Schools and the Samuel Beckett Centres and some of them are very, very good. So what can you say? Obviously the training is working to some extent. I'd prefer to see it much more based and involved in community than engaging with itself.

DM: *How do you mean?*

PS: Go into the north inner city, and have a drama school there. Operate in that environment. Do shows about the drugs. Come on, immerse yourself in it. That's where I come from. I've done the community-based work. It was probably the most exciting time of my life when I did the city workshop from 1982 to 1984. I developed the trilogy of plays with that group in the north inner city.

DM: *What were they about?*

PS: They were about Dublin. The first one was about the Monto [Montgomery Street, a red-light district at the time]. The second one was about the collapse of the docks, the third one was about the start of the heroin scourge. So I've been engaged in that debate in a community context and I just don't think there's enough of it being done.

DM: *What about Northern Ireland? You did Diary of a Hunger Strike, and you worked with Charabanc...*

PS: In a break from working with Jim I went up to Belfast in 1970 because I was really interested in what was happening there. The Troubles were a year old. And I had a girlfriend from Derry in 1969. I had spent time in Derry in September 1969 just after the whole thing blew up. And you just knew that "this is going to go on and be so important in terms of our history, and in terms of who we are and where we're going." Northern Ireland felt to me like the most important political issue, not just in Ireland, but probably in Europe. In Derry at that time you could feel it. The sense of anger, the sense of "we're not going to let them walk on us again." The sense of "this time it's going to be different. We're going to really take control of the situation." The Provos were beginning to get organized. And there was tremendous energy around. So I got hooked into the whole thing in 1969/1970. I went to Belfast in 1970, and got a job in the Lyric. I just happened to be walking by the door and I saw "forthcoming production *Shadow of a Gunman*. So I just went in, auditioned on the spot for Tommy Owens and got the job. I spent the next six months in the Lyric doing shows in Belfast. It was a really important time for me. So that cemented the connection. And my mother had been raised there, so she always told us stories about Belfast. I always wanted to write about it. When the hunger strikes happened I thought "I've got to do something now, I really really have to write something about this." So I lived in Belfast for three months, commuted up and down, just absorbed the atmosphere and then wrote *Diary of a Hunger Strike*. And again there was more furore over that in 1982 at the Edinburgh Festival.

DM: *What happened?*

PS: Well just the fact that the two guys were naked, and the set was a cell with shit all over the walls. It upset a lot of people. There was a furore about bringing the show to Dublin. And Michael Colgan, who was the head of the Dublin Theatre Festival at the time, said he didn't want a H-Block image in the Dublin Theatre Festival. Imagine, a play about Ireland – about something as seminal as the hunger strikes – could not find a home in Dublin.

DM: *So what did you do?*

PS: We got into Limerick for a week. It just did astonishing business. I remember being on the radio with Jim Kemmy and Bernadette McAliskey debating the play, and debating the issues. So again it was like art, politics and current affairs.

DM: *What was your point in doing it? Were you trying to open it up to discussion?*

PS: Yeah, absolutely. The basic proposition was “are these guys criminals or are they politically motivated?” To me there was no argument that they were politically motivated. These were young guys who’d come out of the experience of 1969-70: Bloody Sunday, 1972 and the whole birth of the republican movement. These people were trying to change the society in which they found themselves. And they found themselves in prison with no option left but to go on a hunger strike. And we’ve a British Prime Minister telling us that these people are criminals. And you go and live in Belfast, and everybody to a man on the nationalist side is saying these people are political. You’ve got the essence of Greek Tragedy right there. Two immovable objects. And I just wanted to write something that explored and showed these people in the light in which they found themselves. The horror of finding yourself in that situation where you feel you’ve no option left but to actually starve yourself to death. By definition, someone who is prepared to make that sacrifice is politically motivated. Criminals don’t do that. So Thatcher’s argument was defeated. And while she may have won the battle, she lost the war because within two years they had all the demands they were looking for on the hunger strikes. And also, they had given birth to a political movement that now fifteen to twenty years later is at the centre of political life in Ireland. It was the hunger strikes that taught them the lesson. When Sands got elected they realized that they had a political way forward. Obviously America [the events of 11th of September] has changed it to an extent. But there is no question about it that the hunger strikers taught Sinn Fein that the strategy they had been adopting of indiscriminate bombing was doomed to failure and that the political way was the way forward.

DM: *And do you think that theatre somehow parallels the political?*

PS: I think it better be talking about it or else it’s not going to be relevant. I think it better be in there. Otherwise what is it?

DM: *Did that get shown in Belfast?*

PS: No, but I was up at a twentieth anniversary production of it about four months ago. It was a very moving experience, particularly in Belfast, in the Waterfront Hall. The families of some of the men who died were in the audience.

DM: *How about your work with Charabanc?*

PS: Well that was a logical extension to the work I had done on the hunger strikes, and the work I had done in the north inner-city. Charabanc was a women's community group. The issues they were addressing were "there are no roles for women." They were addressing a very important question – what is the role of women in contemporary Irish theatre? They set about devising and writing plays about women's issues. They had seen my work – I had toured my community work to Belfast. And I had seen their early work in Dublin and we became friends. They asked me to come and work with them in 1987 and I directed *Somewhere Over the Balcony* for them. It was absurd. Three women, in the Divis flats which is this high-rise block of flats in the centre of Belfast, who basically spend the day watching helicopters landing on the tops of the buildings, and their imaginings – this fantasy world they create about what's going on in the middle of this absolute horror. It's a completely funny play – a black, black comedy. And it was just the three girls, the three Charabanc women. I worked with them on five shows between 1987 and 1992.

DM: *What about the importance of writing – is it going by the wayside?*

PS: I think there has been a total resurgence on the writing front. I was on an interviewing panel for writer-in-residence at the Project which they've just introduced. It gives a writer two years, and a good stipend – I think it's £30,000 over two years to concentrate on writing. I think we saw fourteen people and I was so impressed by the standard of the people we interviewed. Nick Kelly got it. So there are talents coming through. There are definitely people writing for the theatre. I think probably what's lacking is a little bit what the Project provided. There are plenty of theatre spaces – but do they have a vision, I wonder. People relate to something that has a vision, has an analysis of what it's trying to do, of its way forward. I think good plays come out of a fairly radical analysis of society. I think the Abbey came out of a radical fairly nationalistic view of Ireland and where Ireland was at, at the turn of the century. And you've got the twin pillars of Synge and O'Casey, one being a rural poetic voice, and the other being an urban working-class political voice. But they were all about a fundamental analysis of Ireland.

DM: *Say you were going to be Artistic Director of the Abbey, what would your agenda be?*

PS: Well I think you've got to combine the bums on seats part of the policy – which is difficult. You've got to do a certain level of business. You've two theatres to run. They say there are fourteen plays you can do in the Irish canon that will do business. And that's probably about right. Take four classical Dublin plays. Take an

O'Casey. Take Behan. Take Jim Plunkett. Take maybe even Seamus Byrne's *Design for a Headstone*. But you take a number of classic plays about Dublin and you present them over a two-year period as well as a series of plays about the contemporary thing that's happening in Dublin. So you'd have something about the refugee situation. Maybe something coming out of the experience of what's happening in terms of the whole revolutionization of the docks. That community is gone. There's the financial services centre and the whole thing has changed.

DM: *And the Abbey moving...*

PS: I think that would be a fatal mistake for them. They are in a community where they are. Do you want to move them somewhere they are...

DM: *They're part of a shopping mall?*

PS: Yeah, what's that? Most people would give their right arm to have a theatre in the city that's fifty yards from the centre; fifty yards from O'Connell street and fifty yards from the centre of the Irish rebellion, the GPO. Almost on the river, and they could extend to the river. You want to put them in a car park down on the south quays somewhere? Please!

DM: *Do you think it still has a function, as it originally started out "to forge the national identity?"*

PS: There is no question about that. The question of Irish identity and what is the nation is still a pivotal question in Ireland right now. We have the machinations of what has been going on in the North, and that movement that I would fully support – the peace process and so on. The Abbey or any arts institution that doesn't see that it has a role in that isn't worth its salt as far as I'm concerned.

DM: *And how would you see the Project in the same light – say you were Artistic Director again?*

PS: It's a different thing because the Project has a different remit. And I think the remit of the Project has changed since the time that Jim and I were there in the mid-70s. I think probably what the Project is moving towards is much more showcasing alternative art and alternative art-forms. So dance has become very strong – which I think is great. There's always been a real lack of a venue that showcases real, professional dance work in Dublin. Much more avant-garde type work – like *Desperate Optimists*. It might be good for Project to engage with some of the acting schools to develop some kind of a policy in relation to some of the work that they

might do. I think the Project is in a different world than the world that we found ourselves in.

DM: *Well with the new building it has a whole new vibe off of it – a little sterile...*

PS: Yeah. It is a bit. But it seems to be moving in that direction. Much more specialized. Fairly avant-garde contemporary music. And that's great, I think that there is a need for that kind of stuff. It seems that's the home of it now. It wouldn't suit me. It wouldn't be somewhere I would want to run. It's not my thing. My thing is much more populist than that. I'm a populist at heart.

DM: *Do you think critics can show the path theatre should be going?*

PS: There have been very few critics who have been able to do that. But Fintan O'Toole would be up there without question as one of the best drama critics in the world.

DM: *What do you think is the role of a critic?*

PS: The role is to be able to relate to the play as you see it and to be able to relate to it in a broader context. And see Irish theatre and its relevance to Britain, and to New York, Broadway, or wherever. To be able to go beyond just a very narrow insular view and to inform. I think good critics inform. I think you need those voices.

DM: *Now we're here talking about theatre and you actually haven't done theatre since ...*

PS: *(laughs) Brighton Beach Memoirs in Andrew's Lane.*

DM: *So why is that?*

PS: I love the theatre. It's my first love. It's my home. I just got to a point in the late 1980s where I made a decision to resign from two or three different boards of community-based arts projects. And I said I'm going to spend the next ten years on Peter's work. I'd been doing everybody else's work, facilitating a lot of other people. I'd been involved in the coal-face in helping other people's creativity. And it's great and it's really rewarding but I really, really needed to take time to develop some of my own stories. I'm glad I did because I gave myself the time to develop. I now have a book career, which was unimaginable to me ten years ago. And the books are about family, and relation to society, and society in relation to the arts, and the arts in relation to society. Obviously, *Forty-four* deals with the creation of the drama group in Seville Place. I'm going to finish the third book and then in between times I've written a show for young people, *The North Wall Witches*, for the Draíocht Arts centre which will probably go on in the Spring. It's

been a hoot going back to write for a young audience again. I'm a big Harry Potter fan.

DM: *They are very entertaining, and very imaginative.*

PS: But they're dark as well. I love the darkness in them. The Harry Potter books were inspirational to me. Because I thought I'd really like to do something for the audience that reads those books. I'd like to write a theatre show.

DM: *With their fresh imagination.*

PS: Yeah. So I've written a thing about friendship between two boys. It's about friendship and morality, but essentially it's about having a great pal in your life. And this is about two pals.

DM: *Have you plans for more plays?*

PS: Yeah. I'd have plays in my head that I want to someday write.

DM: *And what about how difficult it is to do theatre? To make ends meet, to fund it?*

PS: It's really difficult. It's really, really difficult. I didn't make any money until I wrote books.

DM: *Do you think that people should take the initiative and secure corporate sponsorship or private funding? Where is the responsibility?*

PS: The responsibility is at the state end of it rather than at the corporate end of it. But the Abbey has been very fortunate with that Ansbacher Writer-in-Residence scheme. I don't know what the commission is now for a play in the Abbey. I'd imagine it's about £7,500. I could be wrong. A play is a year's work. So what value do you put on a year's work? I would say for me to be able to concentrate on writing a play for the next year I'd want £20,000-£25,000. That's what a commission should be. If you want to seriously engage and really take the time and have the freedom and the space to do it, that's the kind of money you'd need to be putting up. And it's about a third or a quarter of that. It's ludicrous.

DM: *So why would anybody do it?*

PS: Love. Vocation. In your blood. Can't stop doing it. That's why it needs to be supported.

Peter Sheridan was born in Dublin in 1952 and has spent most of his adult life writing, directing and collaborating in the theatre. His plays have been seen in the major theatres in Ireland and in London, Montreal, New

York and Los Angeles. He is a founder member of the community arts movement and believes in access to the arts for all. His short film *The Breakfast* has won several European awards and his first feature, *Borstal Boy* was released in the autumn of 2000. He was awarded the Rooney Prize for literature in 1977 and was Writer in Residence at the Abbey Theatre in 1980. He has written two novels, *44: A Dublin Memoir*, and most recently *Forty-Seven Roses*. He lives on Dublin's North Side with his wife Sheila and their family.

Deirdre Mulrooney is a freelance writer, director and lecturer. Her book *Orientalism, Orientation and the Nomadic Work of Pina Bausch* is published by Peter Lang. After directing Jennifer Johnston's *The Nightingale and Not the Lark* in 1998 Deirdre was invited to participate in the Lincoln Center NYC's Director's Lab. Earlier this year she produced, co-directed and adapted *Shesawhore*, based on Angela Carter's concept for John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, at Project Cube. She has lectured in Drama at UCD Drama Studies Centre, The Samuel Beckett Centre, The National College of Art and Design, and NUI Maynooth. She was awarded an annual DAAD scholarship for her Ph.D. research in German dance theatre, and continues to write on contemporary dance. Among many other newspapers and magazines Deirdre has contributed to *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, *Liveart Magazine* and *Dance Europe*. She contributed an essay on Tom Mac Intyre to *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* and has reported on the Arts for Lyric FM's *Artszone* and for *Rattlebag* on RTE Radio One.