examiner.com

In conversation with Annie Ryan

December 1, 2015
6:55 PM MST

Richard Gilligan

Actor Dominic West called her "the best director I have ever worked with: the most frightening, the most creative and the most inspiring." Filmmaker Lenny Abrahamson described "Foley," which she directed in 2000, as being "as close to a perfect piece of work as I think it is possible to get." For twenty years theatre maker Annie Ryan has been making some of the most innovative theatre in Ireland. With The Corn Exchange, the company she founded in 1995, Annie has constantly sought out new ways of making theatre and new challenges as a director, writer and actor. Her latest production, "Through A Glass Darkly" based on Jenny Worton's adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's classic movie of the same name, is currently running at The Project Arts Centre.

COR: **You're originally from Chicago? Is that where you first encountered the Commedia style?**

AR: Yeah, I was born and bred in Chicago. In the suburbs. From a very early age I was trained at the Piven Theatre Workshop, which was run by Byrne and Joyce Piven. They were part founders of the improvisational wave that happened in the 50's in Chicago. They were at the University of Chicago with people like Mike Nichols and Ed Asner, and the people who eventually founded Second City. I started training there at the age of twelve and trained extensively during my teenage years. Then I became a sort of apprentice teacher there in what they call The Young

People's Company. It's like DYT, but the training was very particular and intensive and had a very, very strong ethos and artistic rigor to it. Later a lot of the actors who trained there went off to L.A. because the movies came in the 80's to Chicago, so we were all in movies and stuff like that. But John Cusack and Jeremy Piven, their son, hooked up in Los Angeles with a company called Actor's Gang run by Tim Robbins. They were introduced to the Commedia style there. And that style was taught to them by an actor from Ariane Mnouchkine's company Théâtre de Soleil, called George Bigot, who toured to America and stayed in L.A. and started teaching. Through Chinese whispers it went from L.A. to me in Chicago and I became part of the Commedia Company.

COR: **Was that in Los Angeles?**

AR: They brought Tim and formed a theatre company in Chicago called New Crime. They were lucky that loads of people who had been trained by Jeremy's parents in improvisation and mime technique were well able for the style. The training at Piven was about playing on physical impulse, which was vital for playing the style. There's a very physical connection to it, which is very Chicago theatre, compared to say New York, which is more method acting.

COR: **Getting out of the head and into the body?**

AR: Yeah. I very much come from that Chicago school.

COR: **So how did you go from Chicago to Dublin?**

AR: I sort of got disillusioned by what I thought might be my career if I followed John Cusack out to L.A. like everybody else did. I thought I'd be cast like Monica's sister in "Friends," or something like that. So I went to NYU to train as an actor, but the work was all method based. It didn't agree with me what we were doing. I felt the training I received at the Piven's was much richer. Out of my frustration I came to Dublin for a year and was in Trinity and did loads of Players shows and met extraordinary people. Eventually I decided to come back because I felt that here there were people who were really innovating and just operating with an intelligence, and that kind of particular sensibility with humour and language.

COR: **This was the early 1990's?**

AR: I was over in Trinity in '89 to '90. And it coincided with Michael West, who was writing a film with Lenny Abrahamson, which Dominic West was in. I don't know, it was just a very magical time here. It was before the boom. And I was aware I had something to bring here in terms of the training, which was really needed. There was no real technique in terms of actor training. There was the Gaiety School of Acting, but nothing like what I'd learned in Chicago.

COR: **A lot of people see that period as a second Irish Dramatic Renaissance. During that period, the late 80's through to the late 90's, there were a lot of gaps that luckily people and companies came in to fill.**

AR: I felt I had something to do. There was a real hunger there and the company, The Corn Exchange, was born from it. I moved back in '92 and over three years we started doing workshops

in the old Ormond Multimedia Centre. Bedrock had started up so by the time the Fringe came in 1995 we had already been showcasing stuff and I had already been teaching workshops because there was just such a demand for it. We were ready to platform ourselves when the Fringe happened so we formed the company. Then the boom happened, and while that turned out to be hideous in so many ways, in the beginning there was a very strong push to professionalize the arts sector and we really benefitted from that. I think we're still the youngest theatre company who still get regular funding.

COR: **When the money came along, with all the administrative costs and administrative responsibilities, some people feel something changed, and not necessarily for the better.**

AR: There was that perception, but the truth is the administration costs weren't really that big and they're really, really needed. You can't really do the work without that support.

COR: **And when the boom was over?**

AR: I think there was really a lack of joined up thinking when those cuts were made in 2010, cutting Bedrock and Barabbas and many, many companies down to zero. And we were cut in half. And ever since we've been really, really struggling to really work in the way that I want to work. That's part of the problem with the show I'm working on at the moment, "Through A Glass Darkly." We're pulling it off and I'm really proud of the work, but it's difficult to have a long enough process to train the actors in a certain language. We only have money to rehearse, we don't have money to develop.

COR: **That must be hard. You're known for having a particularly intensive and rigorous process.**

AR: Yeah, but that doesn't come cheap. Your budget is basically made up of how many people can you fit into a room for how many weeks. The challenge is to find the resources to allow us work in a more organic way and in a slightly longer process. That doesn't mean to say the show has to have a cast of millions or big, expensive sets. It's just that slightly longer development period.

COR: **So the loss of that development time is something you've found particularly noticeable?**

AR: In 2009 we did "Freefall," and though that was a show that didn't have that much development, we had a longer rehearsal process. In that rehearsal process we went into a theatre with our designers for a week, which is expensive, but vital. It was then I realized this is how really successful people work. They make work in the theatre where all the departments can talk to each other, as opposed to being in a rehearsal room and hoping to God it's all going to come together in a tech. We were cut immediately after that show so since then I haven't really been able to work in that way. "Man of Valour" had a decent production, but that was a one-man show and Paul Reid very graciously wanted to do it enough. He became a very strong co-creator, and it meant we could have meetings in someone's house or whatever so you don't have to rent a room. You make it happen anyway even if you don't have the money.

COR: **It sounds like, despite getting more professional, in some respects it's going back to the early years of The Fringe where you had to find rooms or basements where you could go to**

rehearse.

AR: It's a much more guerrilla approach to what it used to be. And that's not all bad. But the real key is that if you want to make anything of any scale you need to be in a decent rehearsal room. And you need to pay the actors. If you're not paying them, then you can work for as long as you want with as many people as you want, and work for five years on a piece if you want to. But if you're paying people, if you're putting value on people's time in a financial way, which is as it should be, it becomes very expensive very quickly. Doing that reduces the time you then have to make the thing.

COR: **When you start the process of actor training, what are the key ingredients for you?**

AR: I always start with Yoga. Yoga practice has become much more intrinsic to the work now. I would do probably a 30 to 40 minute yoga practice before we begin everyday no matter what I'm doing now. It really just grounds everybody into their own sense of what their own intention is for their own work. And it provides a kind of level playing field for everyone. From there I would always work with some of the ensemble training I got from Piven, which is based on the principle that you lead by following. Allowing something to transform organically from the group as opposed to one person in the group making a proposal. There's certainly that too, but it's not about one person leading and everyone following. It's really about listening for the moment to change. So there's a lot of exercises around teaching what that means in a physical sense. What physical transformation really is, and what leadership in that sense really is. The cuts have been good in that I've become an expert in creating an ensemble really, really quickly.

COR: **And for the Commedia work?**

AR: The Commedia work takes it onto a whole other energy level. The Commedia work is very particular and hugely demanding. It's kind of a package deal where the players, on a scale of one to ten, have to be in ten all the time. The technique is basically that the actor finds, through a character, a narrative form. So they're always playing a character. Then you recognize in yourself what emotional state you're playing in. You play your state, then you physicalize your state into a gesture, so you send it through the body with this very high frequency of energy. And then you speak. So the rhythm is state, move, speak. That's very strange for actors initially and really does take a lot of time, and it isn't for everybody. It's a training tool and I always incorporate it, but I've come away from using it in performance because it's such a broad strokes technique. There isn't any space in it for subtlety at all. Everything wants to be at this very high point of energy. But if everything's at that peak of energy then there's no nuance. If everything is really important, nothing's really important. So I've come away from it now in the staging of the work because I'm interested in a more sophisticated, more nuanced way. Though when I'm usually looking for those high points I use the style to get there.

COR: **Would it be fair to say, in terms of directing at least, you're re-evaluating its application?**

AR: I'd be curious to use the style in performance again. I made two devised pieces with The Lir through it, which were exhausting but really fun. It is something I would like to come back to, but

maybe because I'm getting older I am more interested in what's going on on the inside of people. Certainly the Bergman piece, "Through A Glass Darkly," attracted me because there is this internal landscape and a very subtle sense of drawing the audience's attention, which is what I tried to do. The same with "A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing," though that was easier with one actor. If you have a cast of people all working together, the eye goes to wide shot, but if you have one actor it goes to close up. I would be very mindful of finding the shot, as it were, in the staging. And I would be looking a lot of the time for real precision in the physicality, and yet at the same time I try to be extremely open to the impulse of the actor. While I'm looking for real exactitude, I'm not someone who knows what that exactitude is by myself. My job is to provide a set of tools and open the door for the actor.

COR: **Create the conditions through which they can express themselves?**

AR: Yeah. So they then need to step into it. Does it want to be set in stone, not really, but there still has to be a language of precision to draw the give and take of the eye.

COR: **You mentioned "A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing" which was adapted from a novel by Eimear McBride. And, of course, there's "Through a Glass Darkly" which was based on a Bergman movie. That process of adapting books or film into plays, what is the attraction there?**

AR: I guess...I'm not that interested in doing plays that have been done already. Part of that is that you're usually not allowed to cut them if you get the rights to do them. With Jenny Worton's, "Through a Glass Darkly" I was very lucky that she was so gracious in letting me make cuts to the text. The experiment with "Through a Glass Darkly" was could we actually be in contemporary Ireland and could the story really happen here? And I really think it can. I think there are plenty of Dublin families who would go down to Valencia Island on summer holidays. More deeply, it's conceivable that a women of privilege to some degree, who's married to a doctor with a domineering writer father, it would just never occur to her to have an outlet creatively. I still think we are living a very misogynistic, old fashioned idea where even the idea of divorce is difficult. I think most middle class people wouldn't go there. They'd just stay in their unhappy marriage. That's part of why I wanted to do this piece. But it's pretty subtle, to get that message, with Bergman, but that's what I wanted to speak to. It's really looking at how that oppression can manifest itself into total psychosis if you're staying in a bad situation. You're not nurturing that part of yourself that wants to dream or wants to think in a bigger way. And the Bergman work also drew me because he was a man of the theatre, so this piece is extremely influenced by Strindberg, Chekhov and Ibsen. Bergman himself called it a "theatre piece in disguise." I probably would have preferred to do my own adaptation of it, but I didn't have the time.

COR: **Many playwrights have adapted classic works from Chekhov say, or Ibsen or Pirandello. Brian Friel and Thomas Kilroy are prime examples. Why do you think that is? Is it indicative of something?**

AR: I want to learn from the masters. That's what I wanted to do, which is part of my real reason for doing "Through A Glass Darkly." My first impulse was to do "Uncle Vanya." But I couldn't afford to have a cast of nine. And I would not want to do "Uncle Vanya" in four weeks. The idea is to do a

classic text so you can really learn from it, and then that learning feeds into the original work.

COR: **Were there specific challenges with the Bergman piece?**

AR: The challenge was to take Jenny's version, which took the film into a much more naturalistic world, and to cut it back, bring it closer to the movie. To try bring it to a starker, more Bergman-esc place. We don't have the spider at the end, but I really did bring the earlier sections much closer to the film.

COR: **Another thing you've been involved with recently is "#WakingTheFeminists." You spoke briefly at The Abbey during their public meeting.**

AR: It's the greatest thing to happen all year. What has changed immediately is that anyone who has any programming power in this country has been confronted with the decisions they've made in the past and decisions they'll make in the future. And with the quality of engagement they'll have with artists across the board. I even think it will extend beyond gender issues to issues like disability. It was great to see Rosaleen McDonagh there, up on the stage. Really it's about why is it that we value certain stories? Is it true that Western culture has to be from a male perspective? Why is that true, if it is true? To me, with programming, the most important question to be asked is "what is it you want to do?" It's about knowing how to make new work and how to really empower the artistic vision of writers and directors. About how you engage with the artists you engage with? How do you get them to articulate what they want to do and empower them to do it? Then you can decide if you want to program it or not. The truth is that anyone running The Abbey has to turn down ninety percent of the people. But that's not the problem. The real change is about opening up the engagement to begin with, with artists, not just male and female, but artists that work in a different way to the old traditional way of submitting a script and reworking the drafts. I think the conversation hasn't opened up to other ways of working.

COR: **How would you suggest that conversation might begin?**

AR: We're commissioned by the National Theatre in London at the moment, and what's amazing with them is that we kept thinking they'd have an agenda for us. So we kept asking "what do you really hope we'll come up with?" And they said, "you do what you want to do." And not only that, "no deadline, you do it whenever you're ready and you submit it in whatever form you want. It could be a script, it could be a presentation, whatever you want." What's so brilliant about that is that all the pressure is on us to deliver. And if they turn us down, we can't blame them. We have to take full responsibility for the work.

COR: **So it is a case of more long term planning?**

AR: Yes, of course. But it's really about conversation, and the quality of engagement with a range of artists. With "#WakingTheFeminists" we've just moved into another era. Programmers now have to pay attention to who they're talking to and not talking to. Gender is not so much an issue in much of the independent sector. There's plenty of women running their own companies, plenty of women making really interesting work on the Fringe. Women are really well represented there. But it is an issue in the big houses. It's really hard to make the work, even if you are well funded to do

it. So conversation is needed. Another issue under gender is the issue of childcare. With the pressure and cost of childcare, many people feel it's not sustainable working in theatre. It's very moving to watch young women coming out of The Lir and Trinity and elsewhere, brimming with fire and ready to eat it up. I really do think there will be a future for them in a way that there wasn't for so many.

COR: **Is there anything in the immediate future for The Corn Exchange?**

AR: We're doing a major international tour with "A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing" and we have a lot of really important work coming up. We've this commission from the National Theatre in London with Michael West and I also have an Arthur Miller piece that I'm working on. I don't have the money to really play as much as I'd like to play, it's just me and my ideas, but there're loads of conversations happening about other things.

COR: **Meanwhile there's the Bergman piece currently running at The Project**

AR: I'm very proud of the work. It hasn't ignited audiences yet, but it might pick up. People who know the company might be wondering how does it fit into The Corn Exchange work if it's so close to naturalism. The dramatic structure doesn't quite deliver in the way that "A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing" does. But the work is very detailed, it's very fine. I think it's very sophisticated. The performances are beautifully balanced and the atmosphere we created is really very strange, very other worldly. I guess if there's one thing the Bergman piece has taught me it's that the next one just has to have a lot of fire and probably a bit of humour.

"Through A Glass Darkly" by Jenny Worton, directed by Annie Ryan and produced by The Corn Exchange runs at The Project Arts Centre until December 5th

For further information on times and tickets visit **The Project Arts Centre**

For further information on Annie Ryan and The Corn Exchange visit **The Corn Exchange**

Chris O'Rourke
Theatre Examiner