

Taking Flight at the Irish Arts Center

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WAY back at the beginning of the year when I first got my hands on the spring catalog of programming at the New York City-based Irish Arts Center, which has come a long way from its humble but equally idealistic origins back in 1972, it really hit me what an incredibly motivated and vital venue it had become.

The cover image was a grabber, presaging one of the more adventurous and wholly suitable acts on the Irish arts scene called *This Is How We Fly*. The 48-page booklet told a much larger story of the very ambitious and imaginative place the IAC has become even before it takes up its grand new building around the corner in the not too distant future when their successful fundraising campaign meets its target.

It was hard to conceive that the intrepid team led by executive director Aidan Connolly and vice chair Pauline Turley, plus their programming director Rachael Gilkey, could manage to shoe-horn so many quality productions and events inside a six-month season, a challenge that many other cultural operations would find daunting for a full year.

Like Ireland itself when it comes to stimulating the cultural world's appetite for things Celtic, the Irish Arts Center punches well above its weight and plays a major role innovating and spawning a new landscape for the Irish arts in New York City. And it is savvy in seeking out programming that advances their cause while also developing an audience that is looking for fresh and unpredictable entertainment still based on a solid core of Irish sensibilities in the arts.

And so this latest production of *This Is How We Fly* that was in residence at the IAC last week for three sold-out performances encapsulates all those virtues in just one production.

From its outset the "Fly" team of fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, dancer Nic Gareiss, flutist Sean Mac Erlaine and percussionist Petter Berndalen

set out to create a new way of musicians and a dancer interacting with one another for a show for the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2010. The name they choose captured the self-confidence each of these individual artists brought to the table in creating a novel way to display their ample wares as individual performers, and the Dublin Fringe Festival got just what it was looking for.

Their unusual production rooted in the traditional musics of Ireland, Appalachia and Sweden took flight and evolved for four more years through a series of European festivals and concerts that included an Irish network tour supported by the Irish Arts Council after the Fringe debut. Their appearance at the Kilkenny Arts Festival last summer curated by Eugene Downes, formerly the director of Culture Ireland, the organization that fostered Irish Arts abroad as a brand, drew the interest of the Irish Arts Center which has a long and close relationship with Downes. An invitation was extended to bring the show to New York.

The intimacy of the space was sublime for experiencing the magic they perform together on stage through the melding of the music and Gareiss' intuitive yet reactive dance moves.

When I tell you that it would be hard to describe how their music flows together so amiably, it just has to be seen and heard to really appreciate how complementary and complimentary the four artists are to one another in recognizing the craftsmanship each of the four bring to the stage. They simply enjoy making their art happen in a



This is How We Fly featuring Sean Mac Erlaine, Nic Gareiss, Petter Berndalen and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh at the Irish Arts Center. (Photos by Amanda Gentile)

live setting and engaging an audience to come along with them in a way that one isn't entirely sure who is enjoying it more. At Saturday evening's performance I say it was a tie.

Part of the success of the show is that the four artists interact so innovatively all at the same time or in tandem or solos that give you a clearer picture of why it just meshes so finely. Gareiss is from Michigan and has performed around the country with other music acts, and is known as a classy interpreter of percussive dance taken from many genres. O Raghallaigh is familiar to many in the Irish scene for his early solo work and varied collaborative roles with Martin Hayes and the Gloaming, Brendan Begley, Peadar O'Riada and Mick O'Brien.

Mac Erlaine has an impressive jazz music background in his native Dublin whose paths have often crossed with his fellow Dubliner O Raghallaigh. The discovery of the very inventive and musical percussionist from Stockholm, Berndalen, was a revelation, and watching him provide a driving rhythm and percussive beat to his three mates was the glue that held the whole show together in my mind. His winsome smile and playfulness (he chanced lirting some diddle-eye music bringing in the crowd as well) brought this "drummer" more center stage than you are used to seeing elsewhere.

Featured throughout the show as a vital connective tissue is Gareiss, whose perpetual smile comes from his heart and soul knowing that he is loving what he is doing, and he gets to reinforce the fact that much of the world's folk music is meant to lift people off their feet and participate in their native culture.

He has honed his skills both academically and artistically blending both attributes into his mesmerizing and very reactive steps to the music he is sharing on stage and with the audience to whom he appears to be playing to in a very positive vein.

His demeanor is always joyful but there is considered depth in his every move. His duet with Berndalen was a riveting tour de force that equally displayed a subtlety and understanding of percussive dance that stands in sharp contrast to the now overdone rat a tat tat of *Riverdance*-type shows which served their own place at a time.

Each show last week featured a special guest, and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing harpist (and vocalist) Maeve Gilchrest join the foursome with whom she fit in very well. That was no surprise given the fact that she and Gareiss have formed a duet that recently did a two week stint in Ireland, but she gelled easily and pleasingly with the others, including a marvelous rendition of the Irish tune "The Rolling Wave" with O Raghallaigh. Reportedly similar appearances by multi-talented Cleek Schrey and Brittany Haas also went down well.

It was a most enjoyable evening at the Irish Arts Center doing what they do best in presenting talent who bring their A-game to the little theater with big ideas and a promising future.

And the future is now because from the wellspring of tradition comes the Ghost Trio for an engagement that grew out of a Masters in Collaboration production several years ago between uilleann piper Ivan Goff (Dublin) and sean nos singer Iarla O'Lionaird (Cork) at the IAC.

At that show Schrey (Virginia) provided not only a harmonium for O'Lionaird to enhance his superb singing, but some nifty fiddle work that proved successful enough to garner an Irish Music Network tour also. They will be appearing on Saturday, May 2 at the IAC for an 8 p.m. show.

The following day is the center's annual Irish dance festival offered for free at Riverside Park South Pier 1 from 1-7 p.m. with a number of local dance schools performing and teaching and live music.



Dancer Nic Gareiss in sync with percussionist Petter Berndalen.