Irish Arts Center Keeps on Rising

The Big Apple was abuzz on St. Patrick's Day, and not for the reasons you usually associate with the oldest St. Patrick's Day parade in America and all the attendid issues that go along with it. What captivated most people who associate their Irishness with a cultural heritage that is steeped in the arts was the stunning news that came to a worldwide community through The New York Times about the future of the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan.

To the amazement of all, many of whom already knew of the hopes and aspirations but were still curious how and when it would come about, readers of the new building around the corner from the old and present day tenement headquarters were impressively displayed in the Times and last week's Irish Voice.

The center's executive director Aidan Connolly also previewed the good news to a packed audience at Symphony Space the Friday before at the Celtic Appalachian Show with Irish Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton on hand.

The Irish government's impresario was established, with a St. Patrick's Day visit by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny for a full briefing on the plans, with many principal supporters in the house including Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and City Councilman Corey Johnson and Patrick's Day at the Irish Arts Center.

On the music side of things, Dr. Mick Moloney found a very willing partner in Connolly for a much more concrete performance agenda that would set new standards and innovation around town.

On the Friday before March 17 the center took over that Upper West Side cultural bastion, Symphony Space, to celebrate the Irish arts through the time-tested prism of Moloney's Green Fields of America ensemble meeting up with its Blue Grass cousins led by Eddie Bland from Virginia and the Blue Ridge Mountain areas populated by the Scotch Irish who also learned a thing or two about African culture.

As he has done in so many shows for the center and throughout his career, Moloney once again entertained us while educating us to the roots that were sown and cross-fermented in this country as only he can do so vividly.

The entire show was a well-paced auction, but I must single out the appearance of the multi-instrumentalist Michelle Mulcahy, whose harp solo was mesmerizing and indicative of her musical talent that courses through her veins like that of her older sister Louis and father Mick, whom Moloney first brought to these shores a number of years ago.

On Sunday night another musical cavalcade came into town, this time under the moniker of Masters of Tradition, an ensemble that Martin Hayes put together about four years ago for his Banty-festive festival of the same name and then took on the road to the Sydney Opera House at the behest and sponsorship of Cultúre Irela, which also brought it to New York City in 2011 as part of its Imagine Ireland Initiative.

It proved itself a most worthy touring show featuring Hayes and longtime partner Denis Cahill, sean nios along Larry O'Leary, piper David Power, and trio Cathal Hayden, Mairtin O'Connor and Seamus O'Dowd.

They are huge talents who managed to squeeze their concert hall show into the friendly confines of the Dogmary Theatre for a privileged 100 people or so before resuming their 10-day tour which will take them to Maryland and Massachusetts.

Yet it is smaller projects that often reveal a larger tate about what the Irish Arts Center is accomplishing like the initiative defining the Masters of Collaboration (IV) taking place this week.

Two exceptional young and very accomplished fiddlers in their own right from different traditions in America and Ireland, Creek Shroy (Virginia) and Caomhín Ó Raghallaigh (Dublin), will spend a week together to see what they can create musically together without much advance preparation.

Shows on Friday and Saturday nights (9 p.m.) will produce the unexpected and given their past track records. To catch a glimpse of what may be store or simply to get an idea of what to expect, find out more about them, Moloney will interview them on Wednesday, March 26 at 7 p.m.

It is all happening at the Irish Arts Center, and if it any wonder that the fruits from their urban vineyard are flourishing beyond belief these days. Find out more at irishartscenter.org.

Concert Watch

While the Irish harp appears on the cover of the Irish Album, many consider the Irish uilleann pipes to be the most appropriate instrument serving as a barometer of the health of traditional Irish music with tunes and song airs being preserved over the centuries. But in the early part of the 20th century it was in danger of dying out due to too few practitioners and more importantly, too few makers.

Seamus Egan and Leo Rowsome led the effort to preserve and pass on the pipes, and Willie Clancy, alongside his cousin from West Clare up to the folk revival of the 1970s and who brings pipes emerged in Liam Ó Fiadhon, who starred in Flannery, and Paddy Keenan, who brought them to the Boil Hall. They made the pipes cool in an era when rock and roll dominated the culture and they were the most exciting musicians playing the uilleann pipes.

For over 40 years Keenan has been in the vanguard of Irish music, but the number in the thousands today all over the world while simultaneously boosting the respect for traditional musicians who came out of the traveling people. She'll be appearing at the Blarney Star Concert Series at Glucksman Irela Land House at 8 p.m. along with accompanist John Walsh on gui- tar. It is a rare opportunity to see him in an intimate setting. www.blarneystar.com.

Scottish Archie Fisher is one of the great folk singers performing today. He is touring here and has teamed up with a marvelous fellow traveling folk singer, Garnet Rogers (brother of the late Stevie Rogers), for a Sunday show at 3 p.m. on March 30 at the Turning Point Café in Plimouth, Massachusetts.

The Hudson River town just north of the Jersey Palisades goes bowling, and the Turning Point has a fine menu. Check out turningpoint- cafe.com for further details.