

# TWO DECADES OF MAKING ITS MARK

From the first Irish productions of modern classics to nurturing new work, Anne Clarke's Landmark Productions has had an outsize impact on Irish theatre over the past 20 years

## DEIRDRE FALVEY

It's obvious to say that within Anne Clarke's small frame is a colossus of Irish theatre, but there you go. Twenty years after she started Landmark Productions, the independent producer has had a powerful impact. Straddling commercial and art-led theatre, it has staged 46 productions, including 30 world premieres; formed alliances with actors, directors and writers; partnered theatres and festivals to make work that's more than the sum of its parts; won awards; presented 11 productions online; and toured internationally to acclaim.

Maybe you saw Cillian Murphy in an Enda Walsh play, such as *Misterman*, *Arlington* or *Ballyturk*, or caught a Ross O'Carroll-Kelly adaptation, or the musical *Once*, or one of Walsh's operas with Donna-cha Dennehy, or Louise O'Neill's *Asking for It*, or Gabriel Byrne in *Walking with Ghosts*.

Landmark's early art-led shows were modern classics that had never been staged here. Its first production, David Hare's *Skylight*, previewed at Project Arts Centre, in Dublin, on January 17th, 2004. "When I knew I could be a producer was not after *Skylight*, which I was very proud of, but when I did the second play, Edward Albee's *The Goat*, or *Who Is Sylvia?* I thought, it's not a flash in the pan – I can do it. That gave me great confidence."

The modern classics continued, and from early on Clarke produced commercially too, without public funding, starting in 2005 with Fiona Looney's *Dandelions*, and continuing in 2007 with the first of several Ross O'Carroll-Kelly stagings, *The Last Days of the Celtic Tiger*.

But *Skylight* nearly came a cropper before take-off, after Clarke didn't get Arts Council funding at the last minute. "I had actors contracted. The whole thing nearly went completely pear-shaped. I had kept saying to Jonathan" – her husband, Jonathan White – "They *have* to give me the money: it's David Hare, Cathy Belton, Owen Roe, Anne Clarke producing independently after 20 years at the Gate. They *have* to give me money.' They didn't

give me the money. Anyway. Jonathan has banned the phrase 'They have to give me the money'." Project was "hugely helpful", and "I ended up pulling it out of the bag. That was a staying awake in the night, I can tell you."

Producing Walsh's play *Misterman* in 2011 was a turning point. It was Landmark's first coproduction, with Paul Fahy of Galway International Arts Festival, for one thing, as well as the first time she worked with Walsh and with Cillian Murphy. It was "our first show that toured internationally, to London and New York". She recalls the thrill of walking into St Ann's Warehouse in New York, then waking up the first morning, "looking at the Brooklyn Bridge, and there was this huge interview in the New York Times with Cillian about *Misterman*. I remember thinking, Where did this all go right? It was like a fairy tale."

Projects are born in different ways. Sometimes "you have a relationship with the writer, or an actor wants to do a particular play". Clarke always wanted to work with Marina Carr, who wrote one of six intimate five-minute plays for Theatre for One in a booth in 2019. It returns to Cork Midsummer Festival next June as part of Landmark's 20th, with six additional playwrights. "If I'm being perfectly honest, I secretly hoped asking Marina to do a Theatre for One might result in working together on a full-length play down the line." That came to pass. "When she sent me *Audrey* or *Sorrow*, I nearly died. I think it's extraordinary. She is trusting me with this. Set in contemporary Ireland, it's a ghost story of sorts." Caitríona McLaughlin directs the world premiere in an Abbey Theatre coproduction next February.

In contrast, "a colleague asked if I'd read Gabriel Byrne's *Walking with Ghosts*, thinking I'd be way ahead of them. Like any good producer, I went straight home and listened to the audiobook and immediately saw how powerful it could be, adapted for stage. I emailed Gabriel's agent Teri Hayden, and within 24 hours I was on a Zoom with Gabriel. Things happened really quickly after that. Sometimes you can get a sort of unstoppable momentum. If you focus on something you can push quite far



down the road really quickly."

The *Book of Names*, a production with Anu set in Dublin Port, emerged through mutual admiration, and looking for a way to work together, which led in turn to their 18-month *Ulysses 2.2* project, along with Museum of Literature Ireland. *Misterman* happened after Murphy's then agent, Richard Cook, said he was interested in doing theatre, and Murphy, friends with Walsh since *Disco Pigs* days, suggested *Misterman*.

*Bedbound*, with Colm and Brenda Meaney playing another father and daughter in Walsh's play at this year's Galway International Arts Festival, "came about really quickly" after the director Marc Atkinson Borrull mentioned Brenda Meaney to Clarke. "I had one of those light bulb moments and immediately asked, 'Would she and Colm do *Bedbound*?' Literally six or seven months later we were opening in Galway. When something falls your way you have to go for it." The unexpected addition meant that, during one week in June, "we had *Bedbound* rehearsing in Dublin, *Happy Days* [with Siobhán McSweeney] touring to Birmingham, and [Deirdre Kinahan's] *The Saviour* in tech in New York."

Part of Clarke's story is jumping from the Gate Theatre, where she was deputy director, to dreaming up projects from "half of my spare room". Landmark is a lean set-up, with just two full-time staff: Clarke and her associate producer, Jack Farrell. But there's a highly regarded team working project to project.

Jonathan White's day job is as an actor and writer, "but behind the scenes, like, I wouldn't be doing any of it without him, both on the practical level but also sheer moral support". Unsurprisingly, perhaps, their two daughters went into theatre too: Eleanor is a dramaturge and Emily a playwright. They were reared on it. "I cannot conceive of not talking about work around the dinner table," Clarke says, laughing. "What else would you be talking about? You're working with amazing, immensely talented, creative people. I'm secretly delighted they love theatre, and plays, and playwriting in particular."



Landmark founder Anne Clarke. Left (from top): Stephen Rea in *Krapp's Last Tape* by Samuel Beckett; Brenda Meaney and Colm Meaney in *Bedbound* by Enda Walsh; Marie Mullen in *The Saviour* by Deirdre Kinahan. Photographs: Tom Honan; Patricio Cassinoni; Marcin Lewandowski; Carol Rosegg

Clarke, who is from Cork, worked first at Dublin Theatre Festival, where Michael Colgan was director, then moved to the Gate after he took over there. She climbed to deputy director over 19 years. From that lofty position to her spare room – Landmark still doesn't use an office – was a leap of faith. "I'd hit a big birthday, and I thought, Either I'll have to go now or I'll be here for the next 20 years. I wanted to be the person with ultimate responsibility for producing the work. Maybe I also wanted to prove to myself I could do it without a safety net. I thought I might do this for a couple of years."

At the Gate "there were tremendous opportunities, like working with Harold Pinter, and doing work at a very high level". Colgan didn't want her to leave, but he was helpful, particularly in strategising when *Skylight* was threatened. "I think he was glad to see Landmark doing well."

She isn't comfortable talking about Colgan, whom she has not seen for some time, in part because "I owe a lot to him, and he was very supportive when I set up



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Landmark", and in part "because I am keenly aware that things were very difficult for many people who worked in or at the Gate, and I don't want to diminish that." In 2017 allegations were made about Colgan's behaviour while director. It was "clearly a very difficult working environment". But "it wasn't always difficult. It was often fun, and stimulating. I learned loads from him and at the Gate, in terms of work ethic, and never settling for something that's just good enough. Michael was touring internationally when nobody else was. I learned there's a world beyond these shores. I also learned I wanted to do things myself."

The goal is "always to get the show on, on the right stage, to a paying audience who are having a good time". Productions have a journey, sometimes with "lots of detours. We were originally going to do *Misterman* two years earlier, when Cillian got the phone call from Christopher Nolan, which led to *Inception*. And now he is giving the most extraordinary performance in *Oppenheimer*. We got *Misterman* onstage when the time was right. Then Cillian did *Ballyturk*. Timing really is everything."

Things don't always go to plan. She didn't get funding for Mark O'Rowe's play *Howie the Rookie* in 2013. Tom Vaughan-Lawlor was already learning the script. "One

of the designers said a wonderful thing: 'We'll make the magic happen anyway.' And we did make the magic happen, and it was fantastic. *Love/Hate* was at its height. People were going to see Tom Vaughan-Lawlor from *Love/Hate*, an extraordinary performance in this extraordinary play." Touring it to Edinburgh didn't go brilliantly, "but out of that came engagements in the Barbican and Brooklyn Academy of Music. I remember thinking, That's a good producing arc."

Producing gets easier the more you do it, Clarke says. "You just have to work hard. I do work hard. Because I like it. It's such a thrill. I'm going to leave you now and go to the rehearsal room, and watch Stephen Rea and [the director] Vicky Featherstone work on a masterpiece." She is beaming. "I know. I'm very lucky." This is her new production of Krapp's Last Tape, which opens at Project Arts Centre in January, 20 years to the day since *Skylight*. "I love the play."



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Stephen has a large relationship with Beckett. He played Clov in *Endgame* at the Royal Court, and Beckett was around in the rehearsal room. I wrote to Stephen, and he emailed me straight back, something like, 'I hate to say it, but yes, I'm interested, but also terrified.'

Landmark appears to have a magic touch. "Not at all. Theatre producing is riddled with risk. Some risks are going to pay off and some are not. You just have to try and mitigate it, by working with good people," she says. "Nobody wants to be awake all night, every night." What keeps her awake at night is not being in control. "I think every producer, if they're honest, is a control freak. Everything is really on a knife edge all the time."

Arts Council and Culture Ireland investment is crucial for making and touring the work. She appreciates Landmark's strong State funding – "a shout-out to the Arts Council, because I proposed this massive programme for the 20th anniversary" and got €515,000 funding. "But they're getting a lot of value for money." She smiles. "Five full or co-productions" plus plans for later in 2024, still under wraps.

She also praises the Department of Arts for its support during the pandemic. "It was difficult for everybody, but for Landmark Covid was like an existential crisis, because there literally was no money coming in." She recalls the strangeness of watching a screen from outside Project as McSweeney did a single live-stream of Beckett's *Happy Days*, buried onstage, to an empty theatre. That production and another Covid live-stream, *The Saviour*, reached real-life audiences this year, and both are now touring internationally.

Investors are critical for Landmark's commercial shows, such as *Walking with Ghosts* or the Ross O'Carroll-Kelly plays. "Some investors have been with me from the beginning, and I am hugely grateful. There are individuals or companies who understand the risks, and the potential rewards. They want to support theatre or support Landmark. The returns have been very good."

Landmark produced the musical *Once* three summers in a row, "a massive undertaking. It was a replica of the Broadway production, with an Irish cast. That was a proud moment. It has an incredibly complex sound design that cost eye-watering sums each week." Clarke had been "slightly thinking" it might become like *Riverdance*'s annual summer runs at the Gaiety. "God, that was the law of diminishing returns. Anyway." She laughs ruefully. "Musicals are so crazily expensive that it just about broke even after 11 weeks, with two days to go." So they didn't manage to do a *Riverdance* on it.

Is there one that got away? She thinks. "No. There are decisions I would make differently now. But there isn't a play I wish I produced, or that I was about to produce but didn't happen, or a writer I wanted to work with that hasn't yet come to pass. So, no. That's good, isn't it? Yeah." ●

*Audrey or Sorrow*, by Marina Carr, is at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, from Friday, February 23rd, to Saturday, March 23rd, 2024



Above: portrait session, 1977. Right: Bruce Springsteen on stage in 1978. Photographs © Lynn Goldsmith



## ELLEN O'DONOGHUE

Lynn Goldsmith entered Bruce Springsteen's life when he was recording *Darkness on the Edge of Town* with the E Street Band. It was New York in the late 1970s, and Springsteen was making his fourth studio album. He was still "ambitious, young, wild and innocent", but after three years without a record – he had released *Born to Run* in 1975 – the press, he says, considered him a "hyped-up one-hit wonder".

So when he went on the road to promote his new songs, he "came out on stage with everything to prove every night". And Goldsmith – whom he calls "a lovely New York apparition who appeared in the studio

one evening shooting photos of the band" – was there to capture it on camera.

The result is *Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band: Darkness on the Edge of Town*, a deluxe book of photographs she took as they moved from small-town theatre to small-town theatre during a tour that helped the singer and his band build the reputation that still means they sell out stadiums – as they did just this month, when the tickets for two of their four Irish dates next year were gone within 90 minutes.

Their success "is very much, I think, due to how hard they work, not just the God-given talents that they have", Goldsmith says.

Some of the photographs in the book show the band on stage; others are studio portraits that Goldsmith hoped would help get publicity for the album. "Bruce was clear that he didn't want 'smiley' photos as