

The silence of the hams

PIGTOWN sat at the verge of an estuary, squat and rain-soaked, a boisterous and sometimes violent place, peopled by a working class fabled for its subtle eccentricities. It was the bacon-making capital of Europe, famous for its pigs and for little else. It was a place that often seemed to exist at a tricky tangent to history and a place meagrely served by fiction. But it had its pigs...

"Ham and bacon. Rashers and sausages. Skirts, kidneys, livers, eyebones. Backbones, pig's heads, pig's toes, lard. Bladders for footballs, bristles for brushes, shift for roses. Nothing wasted but the squeal."

The entrail litany is Limerick writer Mike Finn's. It's taken from his play, *Pigtown*, which opens at the Belltable Arts Centre this week in an Island Theatre Company production. It's a hometown reminiscence with a broad sweep, telling the story of a man who is as old as the century. He's Tommy Clohessy, or Tommy Clocks, a retired pork butcher. As the play opens, it is New Year's Eve, 1999, the night of his 100th birthday and also of his funeral. His life unfolds in scattershot images as the play is spun along by episodic flashback.

"*Pigtown* is a rummage through his emotional attic," says Finn. "Things are coming at him from memory and from the past and as he conjures up all these stories, he's trying to put flesh on the bones of the city. And much of it frightens him, he's troubled by it."

Of the memories that flicker and come to life in Tommy's recall, some are familiar, others less so. There is the story of the Limerick Soviet, an act of antic radicalism in 1919, when the workers declared the city an entity unto itself and printed their own currency, their ardour stirred by word of the October Revolution. There's a sad lament for Elsa Reiniger, a Jew from Vienna who fled the Nazis and arrived in Limerick only to take her own life two weeks later in a lonesome hotel room on O'Connell Street. There's the tale of Europe's first pirate radio station, beaming out of Henry Street in the 1930s. We watch the All Blacks get thrashed at Thomond Park. We see young fellas kicking a ball in the back alleys, making like they're Georgie Best.

Pigtown's century is rendered in macro and micro both, dark and light stories vie for focus, and the narrative doesn't shy away from the often-bitter truth. "It touches on things that at one point wouldn't have been talked about," says the writer. "The Jewish ban in the city, for example, was never talked about. It's like that old saying about history being taught by the victors, and at school we were primarily given the Catholic nationalist history of the country."

Pigtown delves a little deeper. "Myself and the director, Terry Devlin, realised from an early draft that there was a danger the whole thing could be just too nostalgic. There was a danger of everyone being poor but happy, that old cliché: we had nothing but we went out and we had a few pints and we sang



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Photo-
graph:
David
Sleator

sprawl, with the Shannon industrial zone an annexe for its ambition. You can feel the heat of money about the place, it has become a city that is sleek and a-glimmer with capital sheen.

Culturally, it's been enriched too, and young talents are no longer so easily seduced to the metropolis of Dublin. In this regard, Island has played a leading role. Over the past 11 years, it has provided a base in the city for professional theatre, working with a rolling core of performers and technicians. *Pigtown* is its biggest production to date. It is costing £47,000, the Belltable is being gutted for the duration of its run, and it's to be staged in the promenade style, the audience moving around between eight stage areas, a cast of 10 taking on 22 roles.

"Mostly what this play does is it moves," says Terry Devlin. "The writing is very fluid, it moves very smoothly from segment to segment. Parts are poetic, part is a vivid realism, parts are hilarious. Essentially, I think it's all driven by a love for the city, and it's important for us because part and parcel of what a regional theatre company must do is play with the stories from the area."

PERHAPS the most attractive element of the script is the space and airing it allows the much-maligned Limerick accent. The dialogue bubbles at a rolling boil, and an unsung dialect is revealed in all its glory. It's a type of phrasing with great scope for the dramatic: it's full of impatience, rumbling through words at a fierce clip, flat as a pancake, the tone indignant and the wit caustic but loaded always with self-deprecatory inflections. It's very comical.

At rehearsals in Island's spectacularly Gothic base at the old St Michael's Church last week, the dialogue was being honed and refined as the cast babbled merrily through the script. The actors include Brendan Conroy (fresh from screen appearances in *The Butcher Boy* and *The General*), Island regular Myles Breen and Finn himself, playing a small but significant role.

Island seems confident that *Pigtown* will stretch to the span of its lofty ambition, and there are plans to tour the play after the Belltable run. "The difficult points in the story are honestly and deliberately met," says Devlin. "We've managed to avoid the sepia-toned glasses. There are screwball things and painful things."

Pigtown presents us with two cities. "A place can be a scar on your heart," goes the script, "a lump in your throat, a shadow that follows you to the grave."

But as the writer later notes, that place is always "dirty, noisy, warm, beautiful home".

● *Pigtown* opens tomorrow night at the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

CLARIFICATION: Tuesday's Arts interview with Norma Waterson and Martin Carthy was by Mic Moroney

Limerick's past is poor and dirty in the public imagination — and a new play chronicling 100 years of its history will change none of that. Limerick native

Kevin Barry talks to Mike Finn about *Pigtown*

songs. So there was a definite decision to bring out the other side of the place. This is a violent city but then every city is violent, and Limerick is no better or worse than anywhere else. But it is something that needs to be acknowledged."

Until relatively recently, that mightn't have been so easy. Even up to the 1980s, after a slew of "Stab City" headlines, Limerick was very prickly, a place acutely sensitive

to criticism. "But I think now we're at a point where there is an emotional and intellectual maturity," says Finn. "Things can be dealt with, people aren't so defensive, we can examine and debate issues."

It wasn't always conducive to debate, what with the Arctic chill emanating from the city's pulpits. "This might sound like a very old drum being beaten but it was a very conservative town and a very Catholic town. The

Confraternity here was the biggest in the world, and it actively went about trying to ensure that there wasn't any independent thought. They were policing cinemas, they were policing theatres. They sought to control people socially. This made Limerick a very stagnant place back in the 1940s and 1950s and 1960s, and a lot of talented people left."

That Limerick has slipped away with time, and *Pigtown* has gone too, but they are

cities not so long disappeared. Up until the early 1980s, walking through town in an adolescent stupor, you'd pass O'Meara's slaughterhouse on Thomas Street, then the funeral home, then Matterson's killing plant on Roches Street, morbidly raucous with high-pitched death squeals. They were streets with an air of final things.

Now, the slaughterhouses have gone and Limerick stands at the centre of a silicon