

BROADCASTER, Cathal O'Shannon, once described Limerick city as the country's "best kept secret".

And while we've been renowned nationally for our rugby, lace, bacon—and, unfortunately, even crime in the past—we've never gained the reputation as a centre of arts culture.

It was Galway that basked in the spotlight as the heartbeat of the West.

But within the last year, and even the last week, Limerick has defied all the odds and has finally brought its "best kept secret"—its healthy arts culture—to the attention of the nation.

It started with Limerick School of Art and Design students walking away with all three awards in the Smirnoff Awards, and Corbally's Alan Kelly winning the prestigious £15,000 Taispeántas prize.

It continued with the University of Limerick being chosen as a campus for Ireland's first performing arts school.

And the party is only beginning for Island, the city's professional theatre company, who this week were nominated for a six "stage Oscars" in the ESB / Irish Times theatre awards.

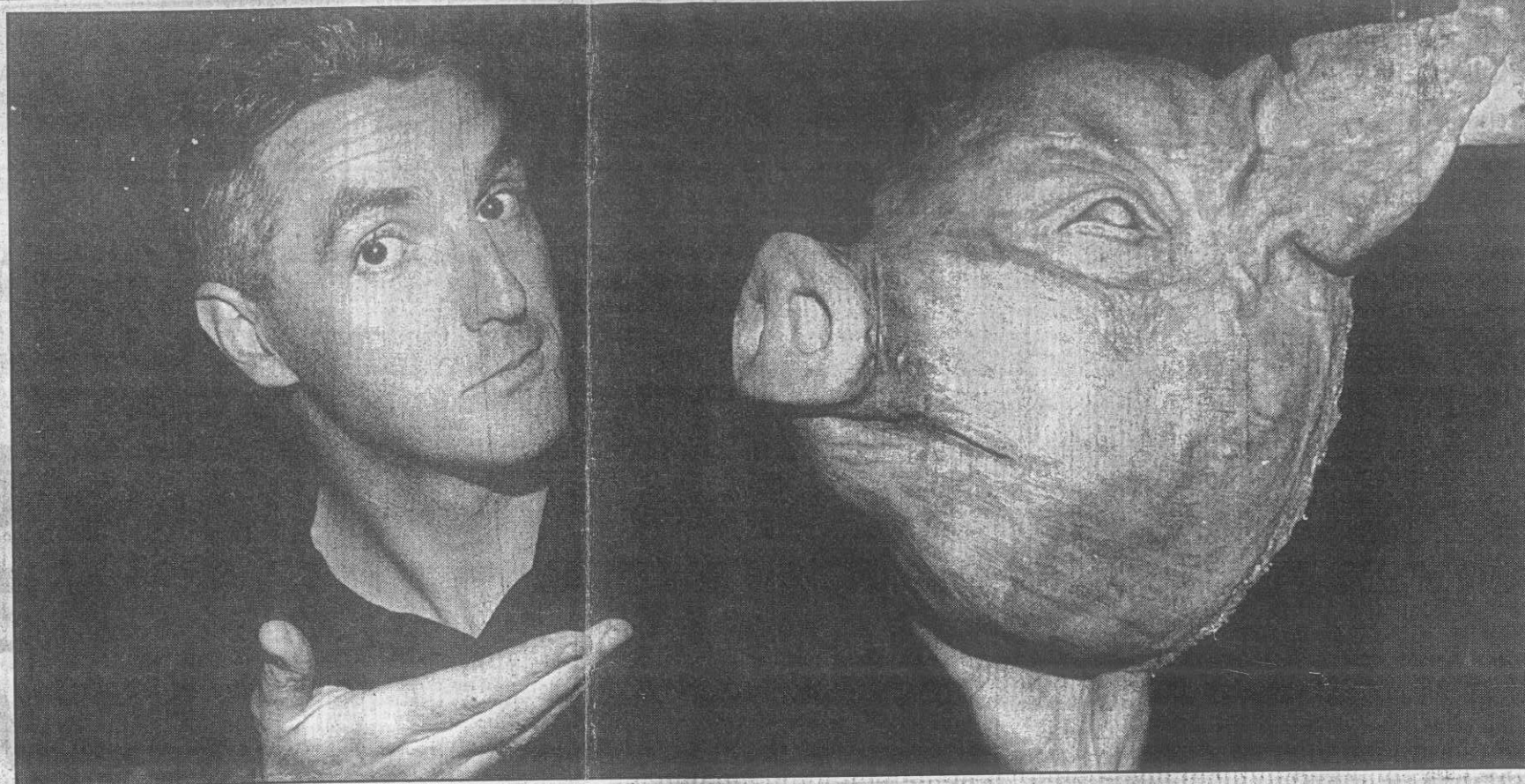
But is it that Limerick never promoted itself as a centre of arts culture or is it a new refreshing aspect of Limerick life that is currently being brought to the fore?

Local actor and awards nominee Mike Finn, who enjoyed phenomenal success with Pigtown, believes it is becoming "fashionable" to like the Treaty City of 2000 and that we're finally saying an overdue goodbye to Limerick bashing.

"The only difference about this year from any other year is that Limerick is finally being recognised nationally as a city of arts culture," he said.

"We all knew it for years! It's been a centre of excellence for all sorts of things in the past, but Dublin is finally taking notice with the recognition of Island in the theatre awards and similarly with the World Music Centre. It's partly because places get labelled by the media, and Limerick got landed with extra baggage. Galway was Party Town; we were Stab City.

There has been excellent work going on, particularly in the last 10 to 15 years when the creative activity in the city has been phenomenal. The rest of the country is beginning to discover what Limerick people knew all along: what a rich vibrant place the city is.



Actor and playwright, Mike Finn: we're finally saying an overdue goodbye to Limerick bashing

Limerick art world on the pig's back

Limerick ISSUE

By LAURA RYAN



It was Limerick's contemporary EV+A exhibition that first brought the city international acclaim in the arts world.

Now Ireland's premier annual exhibition of contemporary art, it offers a wideranging programme of events that integrate local, national and international communities in the celebration of contemporary arts and culture.

Limerick Corporation speeded up the process by copperfastening its commitment to the arts by establishing a municipal art gallery, the only

one of its kind outside of Dublin.

This week, city arts officer, Sheila Deegan said she believes the current flourishing arts culture and popularity of "all things Limerick" has matured and developed in conjunction with the growth of the city.

"The people who have made Limerick their home, or who moved here to work in the Revenue or Dell want culture, they want to be part of something," she said.

"Even the LSAD students don't have to go to Dublin to work anymore. They can stay here if they want to. They whole

centre versus periphery debate is on-going in the art world, but art can be anywhere, not just in Dublin."

The Belltable Arts Centre has been a catalyst for the growth of many city based organisations such as Daghdha dance company, the Umbrella Project, Limerick Youth Theatre and the Real Arts Project.

Until Frank McCourt came along, Kate O'Brien was the only international literary figure the city was renowned for. Up to that, it had to rely on lending its name to the Limerick and the Bard of Thomond

Michael Hogan's, Drunken Thady.

And the Hunt Museum, which rejuvenated the Customs House has shown that Limerick can display some of Ireland's most valuable treasures in an unfussy and accessible way.

But the news that the city is to get its own performing arts school in an ambitious new £35m plan is the jewel in the city's arts crown.

The Academy of Performing Arts will incorporate and be located at the existing IrishmoO

World Music Centre (IWMOC) in the University of Limerick. It will be developed over five years.

The centre's Ellen Byrne pointed out that Limerick had a long tradition of support for and participation in the arts and this was increasingly being acknowledged at national level.

"On the UL campus alone, there is the Irish Chamber Orchestra whose success and profile is now international, Daghdha, and, of course, our centre," she said.

"Mike Finn's nomination for Pigtown is particularly special, it's a wonderful achievement by him and very gratifying for Limerick that this home grown talent has been recognised in such a high-profile way. The city is current and newsworthy and I think the city should capitalise on the attention."

In a report issued by the Department of Arts, Heritage, the Gaeltacht and the Islands, the UL-based centre was referred to as a "vibrant, organic learning environment which offers an integrated interactive tapestry of study in music and dance at postgraduate level...this visionary centre links closely into the work of the professional arts community."

Its motto of "finding your own voice" emphasises placing the students own artistic journey at the heart of the educational experience.

Limerick has to wait until the evening of February 13 before the ESB / Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards for 2000 are announced.

In 1999, Island received a well-deserved nomination for John Anthony Murphy's performance in Borrowed Robes.

This year, nominations include three for Mike Finn's hit play, Pigtown including best production; best new play and best set design.

John Breen's play, Alone it Stands—featuring the historic occasion when Munster beat the All-blacks—earned two nominations for best director and best new play.

Island was also nominated for best theatre company—as many nominations as Dublin's Abbey and Peacock theatres combined.

While an award gracing the mantelpiece of the King's Island-based company would be wonderful for the city, it is not necessary to show how the arts culture in Limerick has developed.

Because Island, as the then emerging Druid company did in the Seventies, has broken the Dublin view of theatre and has shown that there is artistic life outside the Pale.