Nobis a laureate in storytelling

Once Upon a Barstool, written and performed by Felix Nobis, La Mama, Carlton. Original direction by Thomas Conway.

Reviewed by Brenda Addie

Once Upon A Barstool is much, much more than a delightful piece of theatre. In the dark and ancient ambience of La Mama, Felix Nobis, supreme artist, keen intellectual and masterful writer presented a one-man show that kept us spellbound from his first utterance.

What a rarity it is to be seduced by the sound of the human voice and the beauty and rhythm of the spoken word: a rarity that Nobis carries through a series of characters as he takes us on an once-upon-a-time epic journey of Irish Australian immigration.

With nothing but a barstool and a Craven A cigarette tin, Nobis presents a style of poor man’s theatre with the honesty and sacrifice that Grotowski intended.

Nothing could separate the artist from the audience and the audience from the artist as we become complicit travellers in the three-generation patrilineal pilgrimage between Cork, Ireland, and Eden, NSW, and back to Cork again.

For each character, just as in real life, there is a departure and an arrival and a pile of sorrow and fleeting happiness in between and after. And it is in the construction of this narrative that Nobis reveals his scholarship in medieval literature and, in particular, his engagement with Beowulf and the epic themes of Old English, while his use of the poetic form became a balm to the spirit in precisely the manner one would expect of bards in days gone by.

But outstanding is the way in which Nobis sails through the choppy seas of three generations depicting the times and attitudes of each with distinctive voices and imagery.

My companion remarked on the echo in the play to the song Kilkelly Ireland while my own observation brought C J Dennis’ The Sentimental Bloke to mind. For surely it is sentiment that makes us curious travellers in life and in this production male sentimentality was unashamedly revealed, revered and respected via the aching beauty of a bundle of letters housed in the cigarette tin.

Sadly we have seen the last of this current production in Melbourne but it is my earnest wish that Nobis can remount it some time in the not too distant future where more theatre-goers can avail themselves of the beauty of this monologue.

With Once Upon a Barstool, Felix Nobis becomes a powerful and significant contributor to the Irish theatrical diaspora. He offers us the opportunity to experience the type of theatre espoused by Peter Brook where “ideas and images collide through words and images and are strengthened by the audiences’ emotions”. O

• Felix Nobis will be touring Victoria with Once Upon a Barstool. Details: <fnobis@yahoo.co.uk>.

1760-1800: books about ancient Ireland used to justify native or settler politics


Reviewed by Pamela O’Neill

Surfing the net these days, one finds many sites purporting to recite various aspects of Irish history. Most contain personal opinion, political or religious bias, misquoted authorities, and misinterpreted sources. Many are seeking to further a sectarian agenda. We might consider this a recent phenomenon, but we would be wrong. It is only the medium, not the mode of writing, that is recent. Clare O’Halloran’s Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations makes this abundantly clear.

In this book, O’Halloran, now at University College Cork, surveys the writing of antiquaries in the second half of the eighteenth century, to reveal the hidden and not-so-hidden agendas behind their work.

Antiquaries wrote books about ancient Ireland. These gentlemen, and an occasional lady, published material that, while the product of considerable research, was also constructed of opinion plus mistranslated Old Irish source material. The motivation for publication of many antiquaries was an urge to justify the religious or political position of the author’s circle.

Eighteenth-century antiquaries were very much a product of Ireland’s colonial history, the period from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries that had been Ireland invaded by the English, and subsequent bouts of civil unrest. Fresh in the minds of the antiquaries were the events of 1641. As the defeat of the Catholic uprising of that year was commemorated annually by order of an Act of Parliament, it could hardly have been forgotten.

The antiquarian debate of the late 1700s was played out against a background of continuing concerns about Catholic penal laws. In those years, some Presbyterians of Scottish background wrote about Ireland’s history but on the whole the debate seems to have been between Catholics of Gaelic descent and Church of Ireland members of English background. Members of each group were concerned with justifying their presence in Ireland, and with establishing suitable roots for their communities in that country.

Conquest a problem for antiquarians

The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the twelfth century caused problems for eighteenth-century antiquaries of both persuasions. For Protestants, it was difficult to explain away the English reliance on a papal bull, while for Catholics, the existence of that bull implied impropriety by the twelfth-century Pope and the Irish Catholic church.

The papal bull (or edict) in question was Laudabiliter, whereby the English Pope Adrian IV (1154-9) gave approval to the conquest of Ireland by Henry II, leader of the Anglo-Normans. For both Catholics and members of the Church of Ireland, myths concerning the 1100s became central to attempts at self-justification. These myths or legends were primarily those recorded in the eleventh-century compilation Leabhar Gabhala, concern-
English writers were to attack Bréhon law as a threat to the order of the English system. In particular, the practices of tanistry and gavelkind, whereby succession was by nomination and land ownership was by a kin group rather than an individual, were singled out for attack. Even Catholic antiquarians did little to defend these charges.

Scotland and McPherson play major part

Scotland plays a major part in this book. In the 1760s James McPherson produced books of enormous impact but little authenticity about a third-century Scottish king, Fingal, which purported to be translations of ancient Gaelic manuscripts written by Ossian, a son of Fingal. McPherson espoused the idea of the noble savage, and admired the simplicity of primitive cultures.

Irish antiquaries objected to Macpherson’s work on two counts. First, they were not happy with Macpherson’s appropriation of their early Irish source material as Scottish. Second, the Irish had expended considerable effort painting the early Irish as civilised, literate, and in the midst of a Golden Age. They did not welcome a work which attempted to interpret their sources as showing a primitive, savage culture.

Many of the English were of the view that Irish culture and society were still in a primitive state, and so the Irish did not indulge in the English nostalgia for a perceived age of savage innocence. Visitors to the remote parts of Ireland were still reporting similarities between the local Irish and the “savages” of Tahiti.

The writings of eighteenth-century antiquaries have formed the basis for much modern scholarship on early Ireland. Thus, this book is a valuable tool in understanding the development of the study of Irish history. It presents a wealth of information and analysis, ably assisted by extensive notes, a clear up-to-the-minute bibliography, and a helpful index. The author shows an extremely impressive familiarity with rare and archival sources. There is a tendency to jump back and forth between individuals and between time periods, together with some repetition. O’Halloran uses the spelling “Gaelic” for Scottish Gaelic, a spelling which had some currency in the period under discussion, but which is not standard today. Despite these minor irritations, this book is of major importance to anyone seeking a clear understanding of Irish history and culture.

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